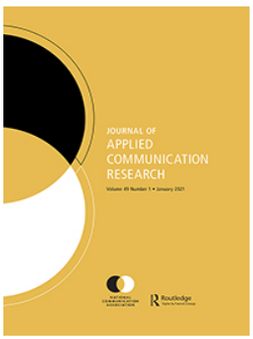

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Post-truth propaganda: heuristic processing of political fake news on Facebook during the 2016 U.S. presidential election

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ABSTRACT

During the 2016 United States presidential election, social media was a popular source of political news. In the three months preceding the election day, there was an exponential increase in the propagation of fake political news stories on social media. Using propaganda theory as the situating framework, this study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of 18 of the most popular of these fake news stories. The results reveal how propagandist elements were used to mislead readers, likely activating heuristic rather than systematic psychological information processing. We propose for further testing a theoretical model of heuristic processing of political fake news that may help explain how such news compels belief.

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Fake news; heuristic-systematic model of information processing; propaganda; social media; U.S. presidential election

Introduction

The 2016 United States (U.S.) presidential election saw Republican nominee and political novice Donald Trump unexpectedly triumph over the politically seasoned Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election build up, social media played an influential role: it was the second most used information gathering medium after cable television news (Gottfried et al., 2016). Recent survey data (Matsa & Shearer, 2018) found two-thirds of U.S. adults now acquire news on social media.

In the last three, and arguably most critical, months of the presidential campaign, the popularity of political fake news stories rose steeply on social media, garnering more likes, comments, and shares on Facebook than mainstream news stories from outlets such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, Huffington Post, and others (Silverman, 2016). As such, fake news headlines circulated more widely on Facebook than real news headlines. Based on visits to source websites or pages, some studies have noted the limited reach of fake news sources in terms of audience size and demographics, especially as compared to regular news sources (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). However, these studies exclude visits to websites accessed via Facebook using mobile browsing, which is problematic given that the majority of users access Facebook exclusively through mobile devices (Statista, 2019).

Even if fake news was consumed by a smaller and more niche audience, social media sharing may have accentuated its effect because sharing implicitly endorses the content

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(Lazer et al., 2018). As such, the election results have heralded what many call a post-truth era, where so called 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' compete with reputable news sources for audience attention and are important in shaping public opinion (Birkinshaw, 2017). The World Economic Forum has termed the spread of false content 'digital wildfires' and identified it as a significant threat to society at large (World Economic Forum, 2013).

This study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of the most popular fake news stories on Facebook during the election to determine the key tropes that may have influenced readers' cognitive beliefs and led to their mass propagation. We chose Facebook for this study due to its widespread use: in early 2018, 68% of U.S. adults reported using this social media platform (Smith & Anderson, 2018). In addition, Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform for news, with 43% of Americans accessing news from the platform (Matsa & Shearer, 2018).

This article is divided into five main sections. In the first, we briefly discuss fake news on social media and lay out the propaganda theoretical framework underpinning this study. Next, we describe our qualitative methodology and sample of fake news stories. The third section explores six propaganda features identified in the textual analysis of the fake news story samples. In the final two sections we consider the heuristic psychological processing of fake news in relation to propaganda narrative tactics and propose a theoretical model for future research (Figure 1).

Literature review

Fake news on social media

Recent research suggests that social media news may significantly influence political attitudes and behavior. One survey found that 17% of social media users reported changing their views regarding a political candidate, and 20% changed their position on a particular political or social issue, due to information they viewed on social media (Anderson, 2016). Similarly, Bond et al. (2012) conducted a randomized controlled experiment of 61 million Facebook users, testing the effect of exposure to a political message on voter turnout during the congressional elections. The study showed that Facebook political messages had a direct real-world effect on the voting behavior of millions of users and their social networks (Bond et al., 2012).

However, online news stories are subject to fewer quality controls than traditional mass media stories, where reporting is more carefully vetted and subject to industry/government standards (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). These relaxed credibility standards create an environment ripe for the manufacture and propagation of misleading and/or false information - or 'fake news.' For this study's purposes, fake news is defined as 'fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent' (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). Although this definition includes news stories that originate from satirical websites that could be mistaken as real, it rules out inadvertent reporting mistakes, rumors that do not stem from a particular news article, conspiracy theories, and satire and reports that are slanted but not entirely false (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). As Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) point out, the fabrication of news may be ideologically motivated in politics to advance favored candidates.

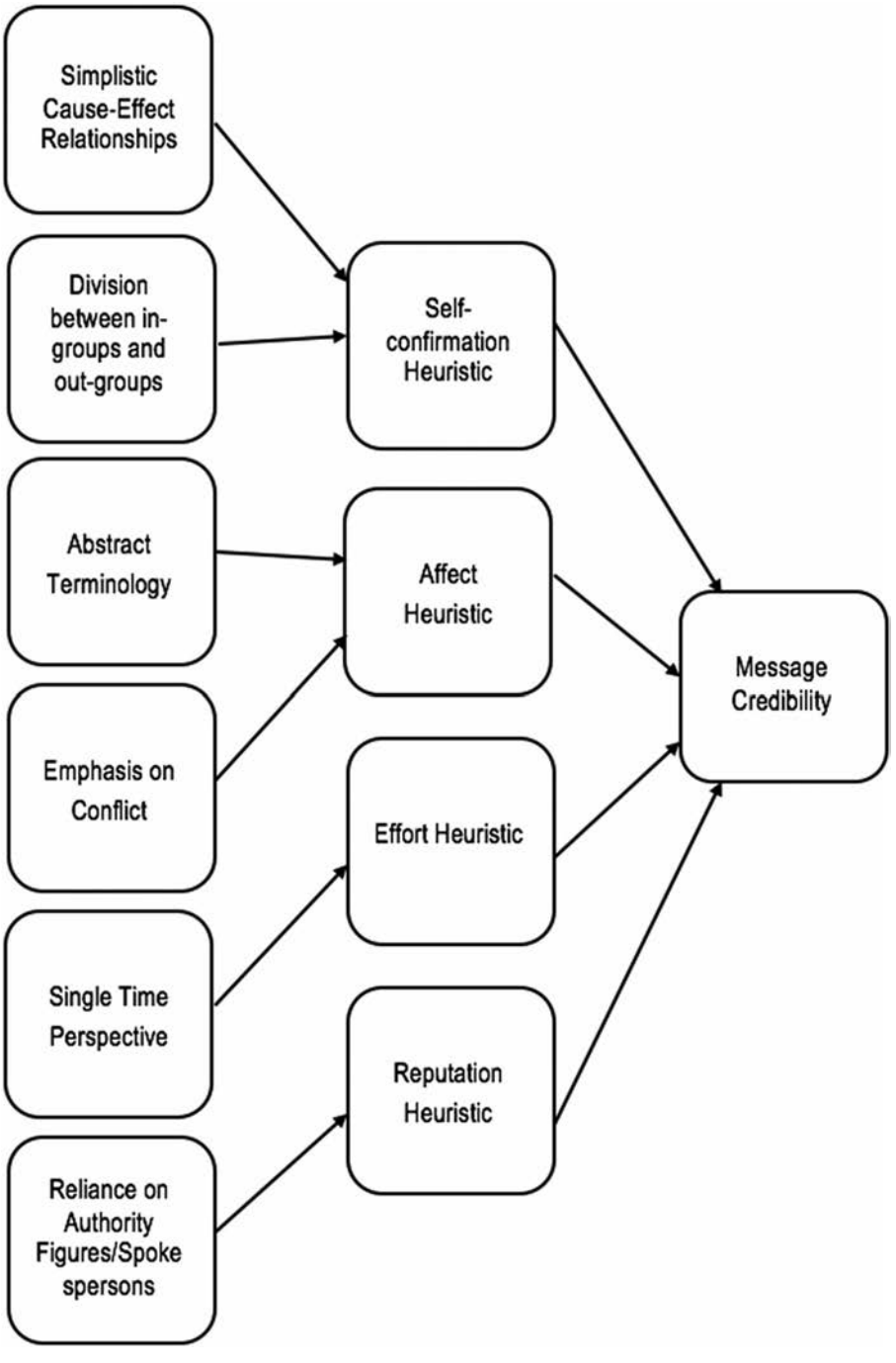

Figure 1. Theoretical model of heuristic processing of fake news propaganda.

A small body of research has started to formally quantify the impact of online fake news on the attitudes and beliefs of readers. In one survey of U.S. adult Internet users, two-thirds (64%) of respondents claimed that fake news caused a great deal of confusion

over facts, issues, and events (Mitchell et al., 2016). Recent studies have also shown that people are likely to believe fake news when they see it, which is especially problematic as many report such encounters regularly online (Mitchell et al., 2016; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). In addition, Internet and social media users are likely to encounter the same message multiple times, and research has shown that even a single prior exposure can increase the believability of fake news (Pennycook et al., 2018). Research has also shown that false information is 70% more likely to be shared than true information, and that falsehood diffuses faster than the truth online (Vosoughi et al., 2018), further exacerbating the impact of fake news. Moreover, corrective practices to reduce the influence of such news and information are often ineffective and can even backfire by reinforcing the ill-founded beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Propaganda theory

The current study employed propaganda as the theoretical framework in which to situate the textual analysis of fake news. Propaganda is defined as 'the dissemination of biased ideas and opinions, often through the use of lies and deception' (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001, p. 11). Such bias promotes a particular desired point of view to the recipient and attempts to shield them from opposing facts and opinions, separating propaganda from the concepts of neutrality, balance and fairness, and commitment to truth which underlie the chief principle of objectivity in traditional journalism (Bard, 2017). Thus, unlike traditional journalism whose goal is to provide the audience with accurate and reliable information to aid decision-making (American Press Association, n.d.), the goal of propagandist communication is to manipulate its targets into accepting a one-sided appeal as though it were their own point of view (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001, p. 11). Propaganda may be particularly effective at achieving this as it often uses techniques to skillfully exploit 'an audience's beliefs or values or group norms in such a way as to fan the fires of prejudice or self-interest' (Jowett & O'donnell, 2018, p. 39).

When comparing propaganda and traditional persuasion, it is important to note that although both intend to influence attitudes or behavior, they differ significantly in terms of the transparency of the message's persuasive intentions or purpose (Jowett & O'donnell, 2018). Whereas propaganda attempts to deliberately mislead and deceive, persuasion promotes a mutual understanding between the two parties by being outspoken about the intentions of the persuader (Jowett & O'donnell, 2018; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). Propaganda's covert nature may make it more effective than traditional persuasion attempts, as prior research has shown that decreased perception of a message's persuasive intent can promote attitude or behavior change by reducing reactance or resistance to persuasion (Benoit, 1998).

Since intent behind communication is hard to determine without the author's self-report, an alternative way to identify propagandist communication is through critical analysis of the text itself (Black, 2001; Tilley, 2005). Therefore, propaganda is understood in this study as a form of strategic communication that uses rhetorical devices and cognitive heuristics to bypass the need for evidence when making claims, and that extends generalizations from those claims (Tilley, 2005). In order to conduct our textual analysis, we used a typology of six propaganda characteristics, developed by Black (2001). Black proposed his typology after synthesizing 'insights from propaganda analysts, media

critics, social psychologists, and semanticists' (Black, 2001, p. 132). Similar to Van Dijk (2017), we shall briefly summarize the elements of the typology here, and elaborate on our findings using this typology in the analysis portion of the study. Specifically, rather than empirical validation to establish conclusions, the typology predicts reliance on the following elements in a propagandist message: (1) reduction of complex situations into simplistic cause and effect relations, (2) use of abstract language and physical representations, (3) a heavy reliance on authority figures or spokespersons, (4) a finalistic or fixed view of in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies), (5) a time focus with an under or overemphasis on the past, present, or future, (6) a greater emphasis on conflict rather than on cooperation (Black, 2001).

Using Black's propaganda framework, this study set out to determine the underlying strategic and tactical themes used in fake news stories that may have influenced readers' cognitive beliefs. The scope of the study did not extend to examining the relationships between the thematic elements and overall social or political implications. As such, the current study aimed to answer the following research question:

> RQ: What are the propagandist features of fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

Method

Textual analysis is a type of qualitative analysis which delves beyond the manifest content of communication, to uncover latent meaning and implicit patterns by paying attention to the underlying cultural and ideological assumptions of the text (Fursich, 2009). In a broader sense, 'text' is understood as any cultural practice or object that can be 'read,' and more specifically, it is understood as a complex collection of discursive strategies situated in a particular cultural context (Fursich, 2009). Although there are a variety of approaches to textual analysis, a semiotic approach to textual analysis allows for an investigation into how people interpret the world in order to make sense of it (Fairclough, 2003; McKee, 2003). The current study adopted this approach to textual analysis, using educated assumptions to predict how readers would interpret the text (McKee, 2003). Since a researcher may approach a text from one of many theoretical perspectives, filtering possible multiple actualities of the same text depending on what social issues, social theory, or discourse theory, lens is used (Fairclough, 2003), this process is inherently selective as the perspective employed guides the analysis (in this case, propaganda theory), rather than possible others (Fairclough, 2003). Such an approach 'typically results in a strategic selection and presentation of analyzed text as the evidence for the overall argument' (Fursich, 2009, p. 240).

Sample

Defining the 'text,' which is the unit of analysis in a textual analysis, is the first step in undertaking such a study. This study took Silverman's (2016) list of the top fake news stories that circulated in the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election as its starting point. Since the highest propagation of fake news stories occurred in the three months immediately prior to the election (August – Election Day), this study focuses

on news stories from that time, of which there were 20 in total (Silverman, 2016). A number of them had been taken down from their original websites, however we were able to find all but two of them on alternate websites, archives, forums, and blogs. We used these 18 available fake news stories for our analysis.

Analysis

Each news item was read by both of the authors, which involved a 'long preliminary soak' (Hall, 1975, p. 15) in the texts (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999). It was noted that all of the stories came from either fake news organizations or hyper partisan websites, and all but two of the stories were overtly anti-Clinton in their theme (Silverman, 2016). The authors then engaged in Hall's (1975) 'close reading' of the texts to identify discursive strategies (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999). Each author noted their findings, including those regarding narrative structure, use of metaphors, stylistic intensification, tone, and omissions, on separate analysis sheets (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999). Through the analysis sheets, recurrent patterns were identified in the texts (Feldstein & Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). Conceptual saturation, which is when no new patterns are observed in the data, was reached by the authors after refining the patterns as they developed (Guest et al., 2006). The final stage of the analysis involved interpreting the findings using the propaganda theoretical framework (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999); any disagreements over interpretation between authors were resolved through discussion.

Results

In the following subsections, we elaborate on our findings using the previously mentioned facets of Black's (2001) propaganda typology.

Simplistic cause–effect relationships

Reducing complex situations to simple cause and effect models readily leads readers to form opinions and reach conclusions without proper consideration of other relevant facts. Simplistically presented cause–effect relationships may be even more readily accepted when they confirm existing attitudes and beliefs, making the public more receptive to unquestioningly believe a news story's claim.

One fake news story that worked in this way was the widely shared story about Khizr Khan, the father of a decorated U.S. Army Captain who was killed in the 2004 Iraq war. Khizr Khan rose to fame with a speech in the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC), in which he challenged Trump's divisive rhetoric, while invoking his son's service to the country. The fake news story aimed to discredit Khan by claiming that he was 'financially and legally tied deeply to the government of Saudi Arabia and to the Clintons themselves,' through his former employer:

> Khan, according to Intelius as also reported by Walid Shoebat, used to work at the law firm Hogan Lovells, LLP, a major D.C. law firm that has been on retainer as the law firm representing the government of Saudi Arabia in the United States for years. […] The government of Saudi Arabia, of course, has donated heavily to the Clinton Foundation. […] The firm also handles Hillary Clinton's taxes … (Boyle, 2016)

At first glance, it seems plausible enough that a Muslim American would have ties with a Muslim country strategically linked to the U.S. and could have had a previously unknown about relationship with Hillary Clinton; after all, he was handpicked by the Democratic party to speak at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in 2016 during Clinton's presidential campaign, where he condemned Donald Trump's divisive comments about Muslims, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. Without further probing, this simple cause–effect standpoint which implied that because this law firm has links to the Saudi Government and to Hillary Clinton, and because Khan worked for the firm also, he too had these links may convince readers to accept the new story's claims as true.

Deeper scrutiny into the claims, however, reveals that the relationships portrayed did not exist. According to Snopes (2016), the independent fact-checking website, Khan never worked for Hogan Lovells. He worked for its predecessor Hogan & Hartson for seven years. This important fact is misrepresented in the fake news story. Hogan & Hartson was one of Washington D.C.'s largest law companies, and it is true that one or a few of its hundreds, if not thousands, of lawyers had prepared taxes for Clinton. However, Khan himself was not working at the firm as a lawyer, he was the manager of litigation technology, an IT-based job far removed from providing tax advice. It was not until three years after he left the job that the firm merged with British firm Lovells, forming a new company (Snopes, 2016). It was this British firm, Lovells, a company that Khan had no employment with, that had offices in Saudi Arabia, a fact the news story conveniently leaves out. Hence, if we reassess the claim based on the facts mentioned, we see that there is no evidence that 'Khan had deep legal and financial connection to Saudis and Clinton.' Rather, the fake news story misrepresented and selectively presented information to lead readers to make incorrect connections.

Similarly, another story claimed that FBI director James Comey and Hillary Clinton had prior financial ties. The FBI at the time was investigating Hillary Clinton's illegal use of a private server for her official emails in her capacity as Secretary of State. The story claimed:

> These concerns focus on millions of dollars that Comey accepted from a Clinton Foundation defense contractor, Comey's former membership on a Clinton Foundation corporate partner's board, and his surprising financial relationship with his brother Peter Comey, who works at the law firm that does the Clinton Foundation's taxes. (Ending the Fed, 2016a)

At the time this news story appeared, speculations were swirling that James Comey may have broken Justice Department and FBI protocol while handling the 2016 investigation of Hillary Clinton's email scandal. This made the fake news story's claims especially palatable as they offered a simplistic explanation for a current 'scandal'; reported financial gain appeared a plausible reason for the FBI Director to break protocol. Furthermore, with public trust in U.S. government organizations at near historic all-time lows (Pew Research Center, 2017), the public was primed to believe in Government official misdemeanors. Hence, without further cognitive elaboration, this simple cause–effect standpoint may have been enough to accept the claim made by the news story.

The story, however, did not offer any actual evidence for its claims, relying instead on tenuously overlapping connections to develop a simplistic causal path that implied a direct link. For instance, the story connected Comey's brother to a global law firm that once performed an audit of the Clinton Foundation. The story did not provide evidence

that he himself was part of the audit, in fact, his position in the company as 'Senior Director of Real Estate Operations for the Americas' hardly suggests that he would be involved in the audit of a charitable foundation (Palma, 2016). The story then pivoted to listing all the firms that had donated to the Clinton Foundation and had also hired James Comey's services at some point in his career. This is offered as 'proof' of James Comey's collusion with Hillary Clinton, despite the lack of actual evidence of such a link (Palma, 2016). Selectively avoiding any elaboration on how exactly James Comey in the present would benefit from past dealings with firms that have donated to the Clinton Foundation, the story completed a simple causal loop by presenting them as the cause for Comey's current missteps in the email investigation.

Thus, the fake news story seemed to persuade readers to easily accept claims, which likely aligned with their pre-existing beliefs, by omitting relevant facts and reducing the complexity of the claims.

Reliance on authority figures or spokespersons

A number of the fake news stories used a well-known authority figure to serve as the narrative's spokesperson. These spokespersons seemed selected along liberal-conservative political ideology lines. In particular, we noticed that anti-Trump stories were more likely to quote authority figures that would appeal to liberals, while anti-Clinton stories seemed to employ spokespersons that would appeal to conservatives. Party and ideology are tightly aligned in today's electorate, with most liberals sorting into the Democratic party and conservatives falling into the Republican party (Levendusky, 2009).

As such, in the anti-Clinton stories, these authority figures were prominent religious persons. For example, the Pope was said to have endorsed Donald Trump for president in the pre-election build-up (Ending the Fed, 2016b). Similarly, in another story, Billy Graham, an ordained Southern Baptist minister and well-known evangelical Christian figure, was also quoted as supporting Donald Trump (World Politic US, 2016). These choices seemed to be strategic, as religiousness has been found to be associated with greater political conservatism, hence, these particular authority figures would likely carry more weight with the conservative electorate (Hirsh et al., 2013).

Meanwhile, in an anti-Trump story, the authority figure was transgender celebrity RuPaul, who allegedly reported that Donald Trump groped him at a party in 1995 (World News Daily Report, 2016). This also seemed a strategic choice, as Democrats and liberals are more in favor of new civil rights laws to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people (McCarthy, 2017). In addition, members of the LGBT community are more liberal and more Democratic (Pew Research Center, 2013). Thus, such a spokesperson would be likely to carry more weight with the liberal electorate.

Overall, the fake news stories appeared to select authority figures and spokespersons that would appeal to readers of a particular political party, and hence establish credibility for claims without the provision of actual evidence.

Use of abstract terminology

Many of the stories in our sample employed the use of unverified and possibly unverifiable terminology to emphasize their point. Such terminology was used for emotive effect,

distracting readers from the lack of evidence for the stories' claims and making it easier for them to accept the information simply based on the feelings aroused.

For example, one fake news story used exaggerated language like 'most devastating leak' and 'entire campaign' to imply that its claims were of the highest importance, and to establish the gravity of the allegation against Clinton by telling readers how they should feel from the outset. The story likened Clinton's alleged actions to treason to indicate the severity of her supposed crimes, but presented no technical explanation or legal grounding for this claim:

> Today WikiLeaks released what is, by far, the most devastating leak of the entire campaign. […] This is nothing short of TREASON. Hillary must be sent to trial and held accountable for crimes against humanity and Treason against the United States of America. (Ending the Fed, 2016c)

In another story, the narrative included terms like 'clearly mistook,' 'real woman' and 'very sexy,' to justify Trump mistaking RuPaul for a woman and acting in the alleged way. Without such a 'normalizing' emphasis, readers may have been more likely to examine the substantive claim of Trump sexually harassing a transgender celebrity:

> The artist was wearing his full drag queen apparel at the time and says Trump clearly mistook him for a real woman. […] Rupaul says he was dressed 'very sexy' for the party and is convinced that Trump thought he was a woman. (World News Daily Report, 2016)

Bold language such as 'said categorically,' 'not standing down' and 'firm response' was used in another story to reinforce the assertion that President Obama might not leave the White House should Trump be elected President and to make the story appear plausible. Such assertive language masks the unusual nature of the claim by ramping up the surety of Obama undertaking such an action while bypassing any elaboration about how it could possibly happen:

> 'As president, I must do what I feel is in the best interests of our nation,' he explained. 'If the American people elected "the Donald" then I will be forced to take whatever actions I deem necessary.' When asked by the CNN anchor if he would remain in charge, Obama's response was firm. 'I am not standing down as president if it means four years of President Trump,' he said categorically. (Burrard Street Journal, 2016)

Hence, the fake news stories seemed to employ abstract/exaggerated terminology to make the arguments appear more persuasive and mask the lack of actual empirical validation behind their claims.

Division between in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies)

A number of the fake news stories played into the pre-existing biases of their target readership to link Hillary Clinton and certain unfavorable entities such as ISIS. Connecting Hillary Clinton with a critically viewed entity allowed readers to transpose the negativity associated with the entity onto Clinton. The entities brought up repeatedly over various stories were the mass media (press), ISIS and certain Muslim countries.

Throughout his campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly characterized the news media (press) as an adversary of both his administration and the entire body politic, labeling them the 'enemy of the American people,' 'dishonest,' and 'partisan' (Edsall, 2018). In

fact Trump attributed his use of social media as a push back against the reporting of the 'unfair' and 'fake' news media (Edsall, 2018). Such rhetoric is reflected in the views of the Republican electorate, with only 14% of Republicans believing that news media gets facts straight, compared to 62% of Democrats (Dugan & Auter, 2017). The following example demonstrates how fake news stories pointedly try to align the mass media with Hillary Clinton:

> Even though when Trump called Hillary the 'founder' of ISIS he was telling the truth and 100% accurate, the media has never stopped ripping him apart over it. […] Today the media is forced to eat their hats because the newest batch of leaked emails show Hillary, in her own words, admitting to doing just that, funding and running ISIS. […]
>
> We know the media will do all in their power to bury this story so it is up to us to use social media to make sure every voter in America knows this before they cast their vote for president on Nov 8th. (Ending the Fed, 2016c)

The stories also aimed to firm up links between Hillary, ISIS and Saudi Arabia. With ISIS named as a top threat in the United States, and Saudi Arabia viewed unfavorably by a majority of U.S. Americans (Poushter & Manevich, 2017; Stokes, 2013), these stories were intended to do reputational damage as in the following example:

> Maybe it has something to do with the fact that The Saudi's brag about funding 20% of Hillary's Presidential campaign, and along with Qatar, are among the largest donors to the CLINTON FOUNDATION. […] Is it any mystery now why ISIS has flourished under the Obama/Clinton administration? […] The email proves Hillary knew and was complicit in the funding and arming of ISIS by our 'allies' Saudi Arabia and Qatar! (Ending the Fed, 2016c)

Hence, such stories established division between an overall out-group of Hillary and the above-mentioned entities, while creating an in-group of Trump supporters.

Focus on a single time perspective

A number of the stories focused on just one particular point in time and failed to mention past and future events that were critical to the narrative. As such, these stories were misleading or false based on their lack of comprehensiveness. Notably, these stories also used heavy technical and legal jargon, possibly to deflect from the narrow time focus.

For example, one story was based on a statement by Michael Mukasey, former U.S. Attorney General, to a well-known news outlet. The news story recounted Mukasey's interview, in which he stated that Hillary Clinton was not eligible to hold presidential office due to her use of a private e-mail server during her tenure as Secretary of State (LaCapria, 2016a). However, the news story failed to mention that Mukasey admitted making a mistake and recanted his statement only a few days later, after legal experts formed a consensus that his assertion was not plausible (LaCapria, 2016a). By focusing only on Mukasey's interview and omitting the later retraction, the article missed out crucial information that rendered the story misleading at the very least. The article quoted the U.S. Code Title 18, Section 2071 at length so that readers could 'see' for themselves – and be persuaded by – the so-called legal basis of disqualification put forward by Mukasey, regardless of other legal opinion to the contrary.

Another story claimed that Hillary Clinton was about to be indicted for money laundering and bribery, among other charges, under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act (LaCapria, 2016b). The story maintained that the Federal Bureau of Investigation would recommend the indictment of Hillary Clinton, based on these charges, to Attorney General Loretta Lynch (LaCapria, 2016b). However, the story narrowly focused on the supposed impending indictment, and completely omitted crucial background information to support these claims, namely, the source of the information (the article's author did not elaborate on how they learned of the alleged impending indictment) (LaCapria, 2016b). Instead, the article engaged in an obscure legal argument involving RICO section 1503, 1510, and 1511, to try and establish credibility for its claim and deflect from this narrow time focus. The article then went on to allege that 'the FBI will be able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt' that the Clinton Foundation facilitated bribery around 'business deals, such as the uranium-mining deal in Kazakhstan.'

Hence, the fake news stories employed a misleading narrow time focus by omitting crucial past and future events while using heavy technical and legal jargon to possibly deflect attention from this and persuade readers to accept their claims.

Emphasis on conflict rather than cooperation

The twenty-first century has heralded in political polarization of unprecedented proportions in the United States (Doherty, 2014). Over the last two decades, the Democratic and Republican parties have increasingly found themselves on polar opposites of most issues, making ideological overlaps and bi-partisan support a rare occurrence (Doherty, 2014). The resulting effect on the electorate has been just as extreme: the number of Americans with median political ideology has been diminishing, and at the same time, the number of people who consistently identify as conservative or liberal has doubled (Doherty, 2014). In addition, a growing number of Americans hold highly negative opinions of those who do not align with their political views, considering the opposing view to be a threat to the nation (Doherty, 2014).

Many stories emphasized this polarization, for example, in this story readers were presented with stridently cast claims about what Obama would do to challenge Trump's move to the White House, and then asked to choose a 'side':

> The president was asked what exact lengths he would go to, to prevent the billionaire from being sworn in on January, 20th, 2017. 'I am prepared to file a motion of "no confidence" in our citizens thereby taking their vote away from them,' he confessed.' […] Obama even suggested he will barricade himself and his family inside the White House if it means stopping the Trump family from taking up residency there. […] Which side are you on … Team Obama or Team Trump? (Burrard Street Journal, 2016)

Another story quoted Republican Vice President Nominee Mike Pence attacking First Lady Michelle Obama with venom for speaking out against Donald Trump's inappropriate sexual remarks regarding women:

> If we had anyone else serving as the first lady, they would pretend like they hadn't heard it and would be going about their business in a normal fashion. But no, Michelle Obama is so vulgar she's not only being vocal about it, but she's also convinced that her job title will add

> weight and significance to her words. […] She can't fool me, just like she can't fool Donald Trump or any other conservative American who has the guts to think for himself. (USA Newsflash, 2016)

Other stories presented conflict between the two political parties more indirectly, engaging in 'foul play' narratives, in which one party is allegedly involved in a scandal or wrongdoing against the other party, thus indirectly arousing feelings of hostility. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

> For months now, rumors have circulated the Internet that individuals were being paid to protest at rallies held by presidential hopeful Donald Trump. Today a man from Trump's rally in Fountain Hills, Arizona back in March has come forward to say that he was paid to protest the event. (Rustling, 2016)

Thus, many of the fake news stories that we analyzed capitalized on political party division by presenting stories that embodied hostility and aggression towards the opposite political party.

Discussion

Susceptibility to fake news, in terms of readers believing and spreading such content, has been recognized as a global concern in various contexts, not least in politics (Lazer et al., 2018). The findings from our study corroborate the prevalence of the propaganda features identified in Black's (2001) typology in fake political news stories. We would now like to explain how the presence of these features may have increased the perception of message credibility of political fake news stories on social media through a discussion on heuristics. Message credibility can be defined as 'an individual's judgment of the veracity of the content of communication' (Appelman & Sundar, 2016, p. 63). Dual processing theories, such as the heuristic systematic model, state that people process messages in two different ways: heuristically or systematically (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Systematic processing is more thoughtful and effortful, and makes use of critical reasoning faculties, while heuristic processing is more simple and efficient, and is typically engaged when motivation and cognitive resources or capacity for effortful processing is low (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994).

Propaganda itself uses techniques to appeal to heuristic processing (DiFonzo, 2010), and inasmuch as it is effective, propaganda becomes an extremely powerful instrument as most people are susceptible to its influence. Such an appeal to heuristic processing may be especially effective in the online social media environment, where information is abundant and people are exposed to a constant and countless barrage of information. In such an environment, it is impractical in terms of time and mental resources to judge everything carefully (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Two information processing theories, the limited capacity model and bounded rationality theory, suggest that Internet information seekers are likely to minimize the cognitive effort and time they invest in online information evaluation tasks (Metzger et al., 2010). Specifically, bounded rationality (Simon, 1955) argues that people are unable to act perfectly rationally due to human mind and external condition limitations (e.g. noninfinite computational resources and time), while the limited capacity model of message processing (Lang, 2000) specifies that people utilize only a few salient message features for encoding, storage, and retrieval

due to the lack of unlimited cognitive capacity to process all aspects of messages (Metzger et al., 2010).

To compensate for these limitations, many may rely on message cues that trigger the activation of certain heuristics (or 'mental shortcuts' which reduce the complexity of cognitive tasks) to assess information (Bellur & Sundar, 2014). However, focusing only on a few key contextual features while ignoring the rest, instead of employing deep analysis, may end up in biased or irrational decision-making (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). As such, in light of our results, we now discuss the specific heuristics that may have been activated by propagandist message cues/features to consider why some people believe fake news.

As already discussed, a number of the fake news stories analyzed in this study featured a prominent, well-known public-figure as the central narrator or source of information on which the news story was based. Such news stories may contain authority/spokesperson cues which activate the 'reputation heuristic.' In other words, when recognition of, or familiarity with, the source of online information is higher, it allows viewers to engage in less effortful processing, by automatically conferring perceived credibility onto the source and subsequently accepting the information presented as fact (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Such perceived source credibility refers to 'judgments made by a perceiver … concerning the believability of a communicator' (O'Keefe, 1990, p. 181). Indeed, research shows how familiarity with a source is important, and that regardless of message and argument quality, sources which are more familiar are perceived as higher in credibility (e.g. O'Keefe, 1990). Most relevant to the study at hand, the reputation heuristic was identified as a frequently used heuristic across different topics in a study assessing online information credibility evaluation (Metzger et al., 2010). Taken together, fake news stories frequently leverage the human tendency to believe the accounts of well-known and appealing individuals, with little inspection or understanding of the news story's actual content.

The results also showed that the fake news stories used in – and out – group narratives to capitalize on the political divide between Democratic liberals and Republican conservatives, and to further foster an 'us versus them' partisan ideology. Other stories adopted simple cause and effect relationships to explain a claim, assuming that readers' pre-existing beliefs would enable them to readily make the required linkages while ignoring other relevant facts. Such fake news stories contain cues that activate the 'self-confirmation heuristic,' which leads people to accept information as credible if it concurs with and confirms their existing attitudes and beliefs, and to reject information that is contrary to existing opinions (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This happens regardless of how 'well-argued, duly researched, appropriately sourced' the information is (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 430). Such a tendency for people to view and evaluate information that is concurrent with their own thinking is a cognitive bias that serves as an ego-protection mechanism. In a study by Metzger et al. (2010), it was discovered that people used the self-confirmation heuristic when searching for information online, stopping at and viewing information that was consistent with their values and beliefs, while avoiding information that was not. Overall, it seems that fake news stories may leverage pre-existing biases to lend credibility to their claims; for example, the stories that persistently linked Hillary Clinton with Muslims countries and terrorist groups assumed that people would easily accept such a link as it fell within the purview of current Republican conservative attitudes and beliefs.

Our analysis showed that a number of fake news stories selectively chose moments in time to discuss their claims, and omitted or disregarded facts and arguments that would shed a different light on the issue. Several stories with a narrow time perspective presented technical legal information, thus creating the impression that the story's claim had in fact been duly researched. This single time perspective may activate the 'effort heuristic,' which leads people to evaluate things that they think took more time and effort to produce more positively, regardless of actual quality (Kruger et al., 2004). Research also shows that people are more likely to use the effort heuristic when quality is difficult to ascertain (Kruger et al., 2004). Since fake news outlets have little to no established reputation among the masses, presenting arguments that appear well-researched may activate the effort heuristic in readers, and lend the appearance of credibility to an argument with a narrow time focus.

Lastly, most of the fake news stories reviewed for this study contained direct or indirect references to conflict, particularly between Democratic liberals and Republican conservatives. Most of the articles depicting conflict also contained abstract terminology to provoke certain feelings in readers about a claim to increase its likely acceptance. In particular, it seemed that this propagandist message cue emphasizing conflict was intended to arouse negative emotions, such as fear and anger, among readers. Previous research has shown that news stories that present content in a negative tone are more likely to be perceived as credible (Hilbig, 2009). Such emotionally charged narratives may thus activate the 'affect heuristic.' The affect heuristic is posited to impact attitudes and decision-making based on overall feelings of 'goodness' or 'badness,' with little or no other cognitive effort required (Finucane et al., 2000). In other words, the use of this heuristic is an intuitive and instinctive reaction and thus leads to an affective rather than an analytical and logical decision (Slovic & Peters, 2006).

Implications for theory

When more than one theory, framework, or model can be applied to a given problem, constructing an integrated overarching model or framework to understand how they work in conjunction with one another can be of significant value (Slater & Gleason, 2012). Based on our findings and discussion on propaganda (Black, 2001) and heuristics (Metzger et al., 2010; Slovic et al., 2007), we have developed an overall theoretical model that may help explain why people find fake news on social media to be believable and credible. In Figure 1 we map the propagandist message cues/features from Black's (2001) typology found in our fake news story sample onto the heuristics that they may activate, which in turn leads to increased message credibility. This model makes the following propositions:

Proposition 1: Political fake news which relies on authority figures in the narrative will (a) activate the reputation heuristic in readers, which will in turn (b) increase message credibility.

Proposition 2: Political fake news which emphasizes the division between in-groups and out-groups will (a) activate the self-confirmation heuristic in readers, which will in turn(b) increase message credibility.

Proposition 3: Political fake news which employs simple cause–effect relationships will (a) activate the self-confirmation heuristic in readers, which will in turn (b) increase message credibility.

Proposition 4: Political fake news which focuses on a single time perspective will (a) activate the effort heuristic in readers, which will in turn (b) increase message credibility.

Proposition 5: Political fake news which uses negative abstract terminology will (a) activate the affect heuristic in readers, which will in turn (b) increase message credibility.

Proposition 6: Political fake news which depicts conflict between groups will (a) activate the affect heuristic in readers, which will in turn (b) increase message credibility.

Implications for practice

Our findings have practical implications that may help future media literacy education and other intervention efforts to combat fake news. Media literacy is gaining traction as a useful tool to counter the increasing incidence of fake news. It promotes reader vigilance to ensure that they are not victims of such news (Rosenwald, 2017). In particular, media literacy refers to readers' ability to critically and analytically evaluate all forms of media (Atkins, 2017). News literacy is a subset of media literacy, and is defined as 'the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports, whether they come via print, television or the Internet' (Atkins, 2017; Center for News Literacy, n.d.).

Previous research has found that individuals who have taken media literacy courses are better able to discern the accuracy of true and false assertions compared to individuals who lack such education (Rosenwald, 2017). Media literacy skills are usually taught in the form of best-case practices that seem to be informed from prior research, experiences, and anecdotes (Center for News Literacy, n.d.; Hennesey, n.d.; Rosenstiel, 2013). Based on the results of our study and our theoretical model, we would suggest that media literacy programs should promote the following five self-checks to help online news and information consumers detect fake news:

(1) Did I arrive at conclusions myself based on facts reported, or did the information make those conclusions for me? Were they the only possible conclusions? (*Simplistic cause–effect relationships*)
(2) Do I feel the information was reliable because they quoted someone famous as saying so? Does the story quote other supporting sources or just that person, and did that person actually say it? (*Abstract terminology*)
(3) Do I feel that those who oppose my views are not 'one of us' after reading the information? Did the information make an effort to make me feel this way? (*Division between in and out groups*)
(4) Do I feel 'I am right and those opposing are wrong' more strongly after reading this information? Did the information overtly try to make me this way? (*Emphasis on conflict rather than cooperation*)
(5) Do I know what happened before or after the incident being reported? Does the story contain this information? (*Focus on a single time perspective*)

Conclusion

In this study, we found evidence of propagandist message features/cues in fake news on social media, which likely activated the affect, self-confirmation, effort and reputation/authority heuristics in the target audience. Our findings and subsequent discussion reveal that propaganda may succeed in deception if people rely on heuristic thinking (mental shortcuts) rather than strategic reasoning to assess the information that they encounter (Franke & Van Rooij, 2015). Moreover, if propagandists are aware of their target audience's cognitive biases, they may exploit them by designing messages that appeal to and encourage the use of heuristic processing (Franke & Van Rooij, 2015).

We hope these findings will help future research efforts to recognize, and create interventions to combat, propaganda in similar contexts. However, further research into the mechanics and psychology of such communication is needed before response mechanisms devoted to counteracting propaganda can be effectively formulated. To extend the current findings, future research should include a larger quantitative study of propagandist techniques used by political fake news stories to enable generalizability of results. In addition, we recommend that future empirical research derive testable hypotheses from the theoretical propositions in the discussion section for quantitative experimental testing. We would also suggest doing a comparison of real and fake news using the same methodology employed in this paper to better understand how fake news stories can be more persuasive than their real counterparts. Finally, since political fake news is a global concern, future research should build on the current exploratory case study of fake news in the United States through investigations in other countries as well.

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