James Alster Séminaire: Anthropologie de la communication

Fake News, Truth, and Honesty

The current prominence of the term 'fake news' dates back to an article published by Craig Silverman on 16th November 2016 (Silverman 2016). Silverman reported that false online information, created by Macedonian teenagers in search of advertising revenue and presented as news, had had an appreciable impact on American political debate during the recently completed presidential election campaign. Although fake news' political impact has been debated (Benkler et al. 2018), it seems clear that, at the least, such false news stories are not only widespread on the internet but also widely shared (Vosoughi et al. 2018). The term 'fake news' has since been mobilised by a variety of actors in public debate to denounce items of news or other information, to such an extent that some studies feel that its meaning has become too contested, and prefer to avoid it entirely (Benkler et al. 2018, 9). But here it is the very use of the term 'fake news' that I propose to study.

'Fake news' is a concept with two parts. On the one hand, it is false information that masquerades as news. The information has been formatted to resemble a conventional news article. This distinguishes it from rumour, gossip, and other forms of false information spread. On the other hand, 'fake' is not simply 'false'. The item of fake news has been deliberately fashioned by an actor who intends to pass it off as real news. The concept therefore implies ulterior motives or interests, be they financial, political, or otherwise.

In the wake of the publication of Silverman's article, the term 'fake news' was mobilised first by 'mainstream' media organisations (e.g the *New York Times, The Guardian, the Washington Post)*: those of relatively longer standing, with established newspaper and/or TV outlets in addition to their online presence. They took up the term, treating it first as an objective phenomenon, and later as a problem which required solution: an intrusion of false content with ulterior motive into a news media system whose content should normatively neither be false nor have ulterior motives. The mainstream media's reaction can be seen as a classic case of the construction of social problems, studied extensively since Spector and Kitsuse (1977; Citton 2014, 2). Soon after, Trump-supporting media organisations, identified by Benkler et al. as the "right-wing media ecosystem" (Benkler et al. 2018, 13), took up the term themselves. They used it to critique articles published by the mainstream media organisations, thereby accusing them in turn of disseminating false information with ulterior motives. This took on a greater impetus after President-Elect Trump himself took up the term, tweeting "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!" on January 11th 2017,[1] and following it up with a succession of mentions throughout the month. There is a symmetry here: media actors critique others' content as 'fake news'. Of course, there is great variety in the actual factual accuracy of the content thus critiqued, with the balance being mostly against the right-wing media ecosystem (Benkler et al. 2018). But the rhetoric seems no less parallel for that.

Here, I wish to investigate this rhetoric further. On the one hand, media actors use the term 'fake

1 https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/818990655418617856, accessed 27/04/2020.

news' to critique other actors' *content* in a rhetorically symmetrical manner. But, I shall argue, the way in which they critique the other actors *themselves*, for carrying that false content, is asymmetrical. There is a symmetry in how the media talk about news, but an asymmetry in how they talk about the media. We will therefore be analysing the media's 'meta-discourse', how the media talks about itself, following the route taken by Pinson (2012) in a historical context. The 'mainstream' media define news media as organisations that communicate the truth. Fake news is principally about truth and falsity, and the 'sin' of media who spread it is that they spread false information instead of true. Meanwhile, the right-wing media ecosystem do not deny this perspective, but focus less on truth/falsity and more on honesty/dishonesty. For them, fake news is characteristic of a dishonest media organisation, which hides its true motives. The implication is that a media organisation's principal responsibility is to be honest, and media reporting becomes assimilated to political debate.

In what follows I shall first develop this distinction using the theoretical work of Niklas Luhmann. Secondly, the criteria developed by fact-checking media organisations will be used to illustrate the mainstream media's self-defining code of factual accuracy. Thirdly, a detailed analysis will be done of the coverage of the first press conference given by Trump's press secretary Sean Spicer on 21st Jan 2017, which shows this code in action as well as the response of the right-wing media ecosystem, which is based not so much on 'truth' as on 'honesty'. Finally, the picture thus drawn will be supported by statistical analysis of a larger dataset of articles from the period late 2016 through early 2017.

Luhmann: the Media as System

For Luhmann in *The Reality of the Mass Media*, the media is a system which distinguishes itself from its environment by treating only certain kinds of communication. The 'code' that determines which communications it can deal with is the division 'information / non-information' (Luhmann 2000, 16-18). 'Information' is what is selected as newsworthy, informative, according to certain more specific criteria defined differently for each area of news (e.g the criteria for selecting what stories qualify as sports news is not the same as for politics). Non-information is defined by opposition: it is simply everything that is not information. The code is applied self-consciously, in the process of selecting which stories are newsworthy. The division information / non-information maps onto the division true / false in that only acts that are true (more precisely, that are deemed true by the media itself) can be information. On the other hand, not all true facts are information, but only ones selected as newsworthy (Luhmann 2000, ch. 5).

Separate from this idea of an 'information code' that defines the media system is Luhmann's concept of 'manipulation'. For Luhmann, the media's reporting is the observation of a (constructed) external reality and then the representation of that reality in a media communication. All representation operates by signs, which are by definition not equivalent to the thing they represent. This opens a conceptual 'gap' for a hidden motive, be it financial, political, psychological or otherwise, to be suspected of interfering in the representation, or of manipulating it. In the case of the news media, the manipulation may operate either by the selection of news stories to cover, or at

a lower-level, in the choice of words to present these stories. And because signs are not equivalent to what they represent, there is no way to prove or disprove manipulation, but the suspicion of manipulation always remains (Luhmann 2000, 38-39). Therefore all representation, including media reporting, has to live with the 'suspicion of manipulation': the suspicion that reality is not being represented 'as it is' but is being somehow distorted by its representation.

The crucial point for a discussion of fake news comes when Luhmann brings together the information / non-information code and the suspicion of manipulation. "It is in the suspicion of manipulation that the code values of information and non-information return to being a unity" (Luhmann 2000, 40). The idea of manipulation sees all content as neither true nor false, but as 'distorted' or 'selected' in the process of abstracting reality in signs. Manipulation is thus the unity of the true/false dichotomy, that is, a concept that leaves no room for reporting to be true or false. Everything would just be manipulated. For this reason, the media cannot dispel the suspicion of manipulation, because the media's very identity as a system depends on the true/false dichotomy. News is true, and things that are false are not news. But if nothing is true nor false, how to decide what is newsworthy and what is not? In a world where everything is manipulated, nothing qualifies as 'news'.

Accordingly, the media can respond to an accusation of untruthfulness by proving the factual accuracy of its content, or correcting its error. It simply re-applies the true / false code to the accused content. When it corrects its own reporting, it is still operating as media, in deciding whether something is truthful news or not. It can also report that it is suspected of manipulation, because the existence of a suspicion is a fact that is true or false. But it cannot respond to a suspicion of manipulation, because that would involve deciding not whether the accused content was true or false, but asking in what way it was manipulated. In so doing, the media would no longer be acting as media (Luhmann 2000, 40-41). The media's distinct identity relies on maintaining the true/false distinction as regards their own content; to admit that the information they contain may be neither true nor false would be to implicitly admit that they are no longer 'media' in the accepted sense of the term.

Returning to the truth / honesty distinction: when the mainstream media report fake news, they focus on its falsity. They fact-check, scrutinise, and establish its truthfulness or lack of. But when the right-wing media ecosystem discusses fake news, it does not focus so much on the falsity of the fake news, as to what the fake news implies about the media who spread it, in particular how they deliberately select certain stories while neglecting others. "It is not the truth that is the problem, but rather the unavoidable yet intended and regulated selectivity" (Luhmann 2000, 26-27). They focus on how the media distort, on how the media push a certain line, tell a certain story. They discuss fake news in order to level the suspicion of manipulation at the mainstream media. Moreover, while truthfulness is the cardinal virtue in discussions of truth and falsity, in discussions of manipulation it becomes honesty. Honest, faithful reporting, that tells it like it is. The notion of 'honesty' is far from well defined – I return to this below.

Two notes: the media organisations that push the virtue of 'honesty' do still also maintain allegiance to a truth/false ideal, because their own legitimacy as media depends on paying at least

lip-service to it. They therefore waste no time in decrying blatant factual errors, where they can find them. The difference between the two groups is a question of emphasis. Secondly, both of these positions are compatible with the idea that fake news is disseminated with purpose. The critique in terms of truth/falsity asserts that actors intentionally spread false information to fulfil partisan or financial motives; the critique in terms of honesty/dishonesty asserts that actors manipulate and select the information they spread because of those same motives. The difference is in the kind of distortion produced because of the motive.

The Fact Code

Perhaps the most significant component of the media's response to what they see as the phenomenon of fake news has been to 'fact-check' more often, more frequently and more prominently. Fact-checking websites made their first appearance in the late 2000s, and have their origins in 'truth-squadding' the press conferences of Reagan (Bigot 2018). It is a process applied to published articles, normally from other news sources, that evaluates those articles' factual accuracy in a separate article. Three characteristics are important for the present argument: the association of factual accuracy with truth and definition of these two as the media's proper purview; the post-hoc nature of the correction; and the media's collective realisation in the wake of Trump's election of their role as guardians of fact and truth. Here I examine examples of published criteria by two of the most influential fact-checking sites, *Politifact* (Nolan 2018) and *NewsGuard* (NewsGuard 2020).

Both sets of criteria define their own proper purview as factual statements. These statements are evaluated in terms of truth and falsity: *Politifact* has a scale running from 'True' through 'False' to 'Pants on Fire', while *NewsGuard*'s most significant weighting criterion on its points system is that a site "does not repeatedly publish false content". The evidence on the basis of which facts are verified is sources. The idea that news should be sourced is very widespread – even purveyors of fake news cite sources – so both sites impose a hierarchy of sourcing. *Politifact*: "We emphasize primary sources and original documentation. We seek direct access to government reports, academic studies and other data.". Moreover, both sites distinguish such factual statements from 'opinion': *Newsguard* poorly scores sites who do not "handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly". The difference between facts and opinions is that facts have a relationship to evidence. *Politifact* asks: "Is the statement rooted in a fact that is verifiable? We don't check opinions".

The two sets of criteria therefore define truth as based on properly sourced facts; and define their own proper role as media actors to be treating this kind of information, keeping opinion, to which this standard of truth does not apply, separate. This is their application of a 'code', determining what information is true or false, and by extension potentially suitable as news.[2]

Secondly, both sites correct after publication, not before. Bigot (2018) draws a contrast between

2 It should be said, however, that although the global emphasis of *Politifact*'s site is very much distinguishing truth from falsity, their rating scale allows for instances where the particular fact is true in itself, but can be misunderstood without background facts. This is part of the selection of news information, that is, Luhmann's 'manipulation'.

correction of articles before publication, the dominant practice in early C20 journalism, and the post-hoc correction that has predominated since the 1990s. The practice has only grown with the importance of the internet, indeed might be said to be characteristic of the very nature of internet publication (Cardon 2010, 39). Post-hoc checking does not prove that all content on a platform is accurate, only the content actually checked, although it creates the impression that the platform cares about accuracy and therefore increases trust in the rest.

What is significant is that such post-hoc correction is seen as *enough,* despite higher standards being possible. Media organisations that respect truth are allowed to make factual mistakes, so long as these are the exception and are quickly corrected. *NewsGuard* rates highly a site that "regularly corrects or clarifies errors", while *PolitiFact* says of itself: "Mistakes happen. PolitiFact corrects errors as quickly as possible". The practice of fact-checking, like the practice of issuing corrections, constantly refers to past reporting, and each new news article holds the promise of future correction if necessary. Luhmann (2000, 10-12) argues that it is by this constant referring to their own reporting that the media re-establish the distinction between themselves and the reality they report, and therefore the very possibility that their reporting is accurate. The truthfulness of the media lies not in an actual correspondence to reality, but in their practice of constantly re-checking that correspondence by reapplying a truth-false distinction – in this case, via fact-checking.

Thirdly, these criteria are no hidden editorial guidelines but have been consciously published. Bonhomme has written that media are capable of "a linguistic dilution of responsibility" when reporting rumour, leaving quotes hanging and withholding journalistic judgement as to the truth of a report (Bonhomme 2015, 100). But in response to the perceived spread of false information during the American presidential election of 2016, the media reacted in the opposite fashion. They realised their role as gatekeepers of public information (Wainsbord et al. 2018), and they vigorously and self-consciously tried to maintain a division between fact and opinion that was deemed to be in danger (Carpini 2018). They consciously began to articulate judgements of truth and falsity, for example accusing even the president of 'lying', something previously avoided (Russell 2018). The media's maintenance of their own self-image was such that journalists making even small mistakes quickly found themselves out of a job (Benkler et al. 2018, 215-221). We can see here the process of forming a reflexive theory of the media's own influence on events, something lacking for Luhmann writing in the 1990s (Luhmann 2000, 7-8). The media consciously theorised their own role as guardians of truth, and applied it in their writing.

These fact-checking criteria are, therefore, the embodiment of Luhmann's idea of the news media as a system that self defines via treating truthful information. We have a media consciously self-defining their own proper purview in terms of distinguishing fact from opinion and true facts from false. This self-definition operates not necessarily through actual truthfulness, but rather through a constant post-hoc checking of facts; it is the visible operation of checking which counts, the constant application of a 'code' of truth and falsity. Now it is time to see the code in action.

"The largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period"

On 21st Jan 2017, the day after President Trump's inauguration, his press secretary Sean Spicer briefly addressed the media, without taking questions.[3] He criticised the media's coverage of the inauguration, in particular in regard to the size of the crowd. "Photographs of the inaugural proceedings", he said, "were intentionally framed in a way...to minimize the enormous support that had gathered on the national mall." In fact, he continued, the audience appeared small due to white floor coverings and security measures, and while no hard numbers were available, it was nevertheless "the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe." Spicer's presentation was accompanied by questionable usage of statistics, and audience photos taken from a far more favourable angle.

However, fact-checking quickly established that, whatever the precise figures, the audience had not been "the largest audience ever". The UK newspaper *The Guardian* ran an article the next day, titled "Trump's inauguration crowd: Sean Spicer's claims versus the evidence" (Hunt 2017). A large number of photos were mobilised to demolish Spicer's claims about crowd size, alongside discussion of the uncertainty of the available figures. Conclusion: Spicer's claims "do not stack up" because they are "flatly contradicted" by the available evidence. On Monday 23rd, two days later, Spicer held a full press conference, where he stood by his statements on the inauguration audience, while taking a less confrontational tone and focusing on other subjects.[4] *The Guardian* ran a report the same day titled 'Sean Spicer defends inauguration claim: "Sometimes we can disagree with facts"', whose byline made clear Spicer's statement had been 'false' (Smith 2017). Again, the newspaper focused on factual inaccuracies, in particular those relating to Spicer's previous statement, sorting true statements from false. The quote in the title, "sometimes we can disagree with facts", presented Spicer as someone who had no regard for the importance of factual accuracy, to the point of incoherence.

The Guardian's coverage of Spicer's statements focused precisely on the factual assertions he made, and engaged explicitly and in detail with the evidence, sorting true facts from false. The reporting focused almost exclusively on inaccurate statements of fact. This is *The Guardian* imposing a true/false distinction to sort what should be said at a White House press conference from what should not. But it was not simply a fact-check, for which one paragraph would have sufficed. The quantity and emphasis of *The Guardian*'s reporting reinforces the very idea that media actors – even political media actors like Spicer who only provide 'input', without publishing – should have, or at least pretend to have, more regard for the use of factual evidence than Spicer did. *The Guardian* was not only correcting falsehood, it was fighting for the idea that truth is important.

The factual inaccuracy of Spicer's address, delivered from the White House lectern, was perhaps not unprecedented. Certainly not unusual was its use of such a prestigious official platform to make a political point, however insignificant. Instead, what the media including *The Guardian* responded to so vigorously was how badly, how visually, and how blatantly Spicer used evidence to establish the 'facts'. The statement was perceived as a threat to the convention that media statements should

3 Full video at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3c8Fh8FdGI, accessed 28/04/2020
4 Full video at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vu1tU5_JMSE, accessed on 28/04/2020

at least pretend to correspond with observed facts – not because it didn't correspond to the facts, but because it barely pretended to do so. As in the case of the fact-checking criteria, what defines acceptable media statements is not so much their truth as in the promise, implied by the visible use of sourcing and evidence, that they have been checked. Spicer's evidence was so bad that he did not make that promise.

The Guardian focused much less on other aspects of Spicer's first press conference. The factual claim that Trump's audience had been the largest ever was not the only statement Spicer made. He had introduced the topic by saying: "Yesterday at a time when our nation and the world was watching the peaceful transition of power...some members of the media were engaged in deliberately false reporting." Spicer's main point was about the media's emphasis. The media's reporting was false, but more than that, its purpose was to distract from the real political import of events. His first example of this false reporting was not the inauguration crowd, but a tweet about Trump removing a bust of Martin Luther King from the Oval Office, later admitted to be inaccurate by the journalist concerned.[5] Only after making his point on this more clear-cut case, which was reported much less prominently by *The Guardian,* did he move on to the inauguration. And there his factual claim was not made in isolation. He had a point to make:

> *"That's what you guys should be writing and covering, that this – instead of sowing division about tweets and false narratives. The president is committed to unifying our country, and that was the focus of his inaugural address. This kind of dishonesty in the media..."*

There were two parts to Spicer's argument. The first was that the media were reporting false information. But that was simply evidence for the second part, that the media were not appropriately communicating the political import of the inauguration. Spicer was implying that the media had chosen to focus on the crowd size, rather than Trump's "unifying" speech. This selection led to distortion of the political content of events, and was "dishonest". Spicer's words are an example of a particular rhetorical form of exposé, beloved of the right-wing media ecosystem: the exposure of factual error in turn exposes the dishonesty of the speaker (cf. Copeman 2018, 74-77). In that press conference, Spicer was accusing the media of selecting and therefore manipulating coverage. He was not only saying that the coverage was false *per se*, he was also saying that the media's operation of selection led to a distortion of the reality of the inauguration. This is an example of what Luhmann terms the 'suspicion of manipulation'.

The term Spicer uses to characterise that manipulation is 'dishonest'. What did he mean by that? What would determine 'honest' reporting? When all media reporting is seen as necessarily selected, 'honesty' is established as the virtue which defines appropriate selection, in the place of 'truth' defining permissible factual statements. The media should be honest. Factual errors are important in that they show dishonesty, but honesty can excuse them. As Spicer said in the second press conference, admitting he may have not been right to use metro statistics to establish crowd size:

5 Tweet at: https://twitter.com/ZekeJMiller/status/822620050653937664, accessed 28/04/2020

"It's an honor to do this, and yes, I believe that we have to be honest with the American people. I think sometimes we can disagree with the facts. There are certain things that we may not fully understand when we come out, but our intention is never to lie to you."

Spicer's definition of his own role as a media actor was that he is honest, he does not lie, in contrast to the media who do. Like the media's emphasis on factual accuracy as a defining characteristic of a media actor, this is an instance of the sociological process of definition of self via definition of the other. The media's self-identity as a system is traditionally that it treats newsworthy material, what Luhmann terms 'information'. Spicer's argument here is trying to shift that, by claiming that the media should normatively be 'honest'. If the societal definition were eventually to shift, then the media would become the system defined by its 'honest' selection of information. However, honesty is already the self-definition of a different system: public political speech. Citizens' political speech implicitly supposes that it is an honest opinion about the public good, and does not serve other interests. This is arguably what defines citizens' contribution to democratic political debate. In Luhmann's concept of 'system', the system is defined by its self-definition of the kind of information it processes, and so, on his view, Spicer's line of argument would be trying to assimilate the system of media reporting to the system of political speech of individual citizens.

This point provides us with an explanation of how 'honest' selection is determined. 'Honest' selection is done according to the political interests of a media actor, insofar as they are a political actor. Media actors are supposed to honestly avow these interests, and then authentically implement them in selection of material. Spicer will 'honestly' represent the facts as the Trump administration, a political actor, sees them. The media, who are supposed to have no particular interests other than the public good, should not dishonestly represent the interests of the liberal elite. At the least, they should avow their own partisan affiliation. How to establish what might actually be in the public good, and therefore what information an ideal media should select, is not specified.

As we would predict, following Luhmann, *The Guardian* does not respond to Spicer's 'suspicion of manipulation'. It reports it, quoting Spicer on honesty when reporting the second press conference. But *The Guardian* cannot assert, against Spicer's claim of dishonesty, that it is in fact 'honest'. Were it to do that, it would be implicitly admitting that its own role as a media organisation is not to report the truth, but to report honestly. It would be defining its own activity as part of the system of personal political speech, and therefore would be doing away with itself as a media organisation. Imagine: *The Guardian* write that Spicer was wrong because they honestly selected their photo of the crowd according to a left-of-center political view of Trump's presidency. *The Guardian* would not write that, as it would shatter the image of their news page that they normally present: a truthful reflection of events. In their opinion section, they sometimes carry such content, but their news reporting rigorously affirms the apolitical value of factual accuracy. Therefore, *The Guardian* instead focused specifically on Spicer's accusation of factual inaccuracy. They could respond to this according to their normal ways of operating as a media organisation, by establishing that the media's reporting had been factually accurate, or by issuing a correction in the event that it had not. So they did so, in the process reaffirming that the media's role is to treat information that is factually true or false.

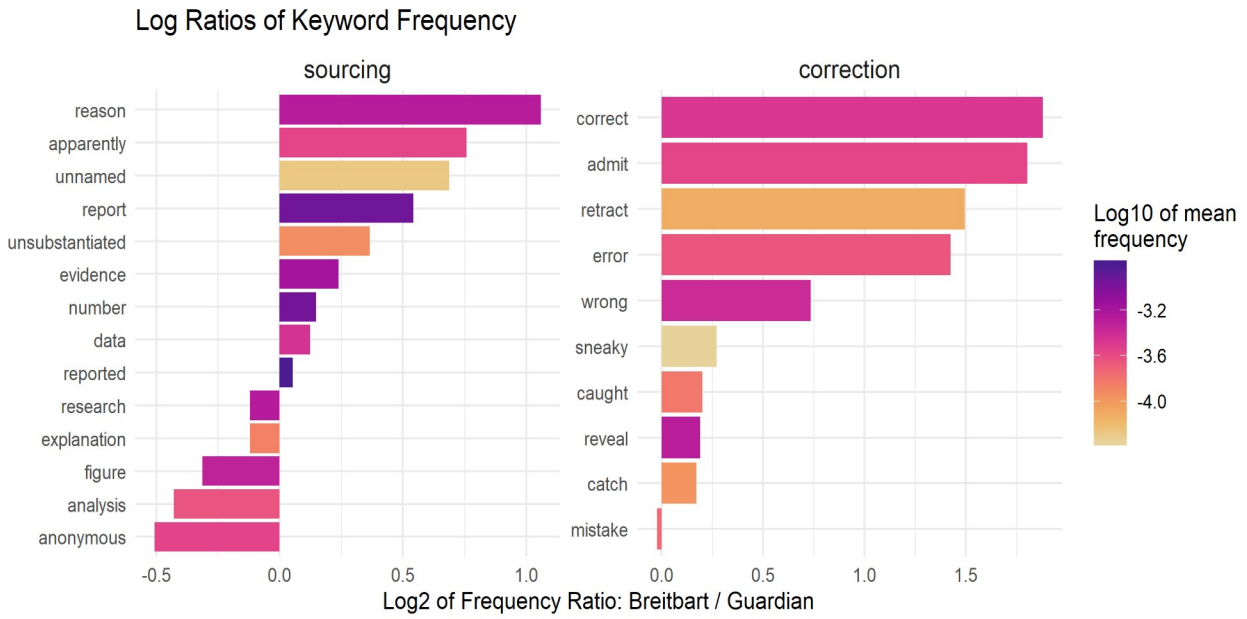
That is possibly why Spicer's statement received such a quantity of press coverage. Accusations of mainstream media dishonesty were and are still very common in the right-wing media ecosystem. Trump had been making them since the start of his campaign. However, what was so special about Spicer's press conference was how much weight he placed on the factual part of his argument. As he said: "we do know a few things, so let's go through the facts". The use of photos, and the discussion of statistics, were at once a much more detailed and a much worse use of factual evidence compared to usual. The mainstream media responded with such volume therefore, at least in part because his factual, visual argument made such an easy and convenient target for media actors who self-define based on factual accuracy.

Keywords of Truth and Honesty

I now wish to argue that this single instance of media debate over facts is characteristic of wider media debate around fake news in late 2016 and early 2017, through the analysis of a corpus of published articles from *The Guardian* and *Breitbart*. Although originally a UK publication, *The Guardian*'s website has international reach and influence in many English-speaking countries, including the USA. *Breitbart*, meanwhile, was and remains a central player in the US right-wing media ecosystem, and its executive was hired to run Trump's election campaign in August 2016. A study of only these two sources cannot claim to be representative of the entire media conversation, as any estimation of the statistical significance of the sample would be rendered irrelevant by differences in editorial policy between publications. Accordingly the analysis here hopes to be indicative of global trends, but its general representativity is only provisional on the analysis of a larger dataset.

The websites of *The Guardian* and *Breitbart* are arranged by topic, and then by date. All articles from the period 1st Nov 2016 though 31st Mar 2017 were collected, under the topics 'us-news' and 'media' for *The Guardian,* and 'politics' and 'media' for *Breitbart.* Only articles containing the text string 'fake news' were then retained, giving n = 201 for *The Guardian* and n = 293 for *Breitbart.* To avoid the noise of quotations, and retain the publication's own perspective (for example, a keyword search on the whole text of *The Guardian*'s article on Spicer's press conference would throw up almost as many words characteristic of Spicer's language as of *The Guardian*'s), sentences containing verbs of saying and quotation marks were removed. The texts were then searched for the occurrence of 80 keywords chosen as characteristic in various ways of the debate outlined in the previous section. The keywords were matched by regular expressions constructed to match certain near-synonyms, so that for example 'fact' would match the text strings 'fact', 'facts' and 'factual' but not 'factory'.[6] The log ratio of the per-word frequencies in the two publications was then found, following the methodology of Hardie (2014), as well as the mean per-word frequency across the two publications.

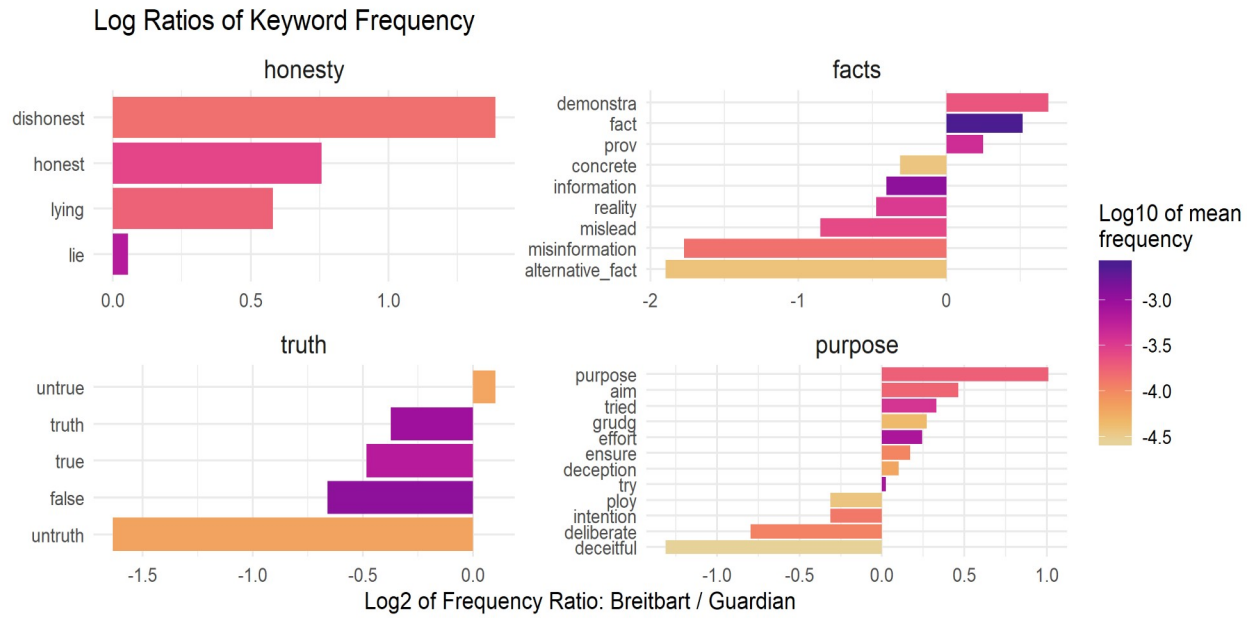
6 In this case, for example, the regular expression was 'fact(s|u|$)'.



The graph is read as follows. Positive values (to the right) indicate that the word is more frequent in *Breitbart* as opposed to *The Guardian*, negative values vice-versa, and a darker colour indicates that a word is more frequent relative to other words across the two publications. Scales are logarithmic. So for example, in the left panel, from its bar 'reason' occurs $2^1 = 2$ times more frequently in the *Breitbart* than in *The Guardian*, while from its colour it occurs about one in every $10^3 = 1000$ words, averaged between the two publications. Meanwhile 'anonymous' occurs $2^{0.5} \approx 1.4$ times more frequently in *The Guardian* than in *Breitbart*, and occurs about one in every $10^{3.5} \approx 3100$ words.

The panel 'sourcing' testifies to the importance of the code of truth and facts, epitomised above by the criteria of *Politifact* and *NewsGuard.* Providing sourced information and being seen to back up factual statements with evidence is crucial for the legitimacy of any media source; it is part of what it means to produce news. Accordingly, almost all of the keywords here are very frequent over both publications, and occur with similar frequency in each. *Breitbart* is more critical, using more frequently both 'unsubstantiated' and 'unnamed', and perhaps also wonders more frequently about the 'reasons' which explain the evidence, although *The Guardian* also looks for 'explanation'.

Although it is important that the media on the one hand promise to correct their own information, on the other they must not give the impression that errors are so frequent that corrections are the norm. The panel 'correction' shows *Breitbart* trying to delegitimise other media organisations by repeatedly highlighting their corrections and retractions, while *The Guardian* does this relatively much less. In *Breitbart*'s articles, the volume of the media's corrections become not proof of the accuracy of the rest of their content, but proof that the majority of their content needs correcting. The frequent vocabulary of correction also forms part of the rhetoric of exposé along the lines of Spicer's press conference: the media were caught publishing false information, therefore they are dishonest.

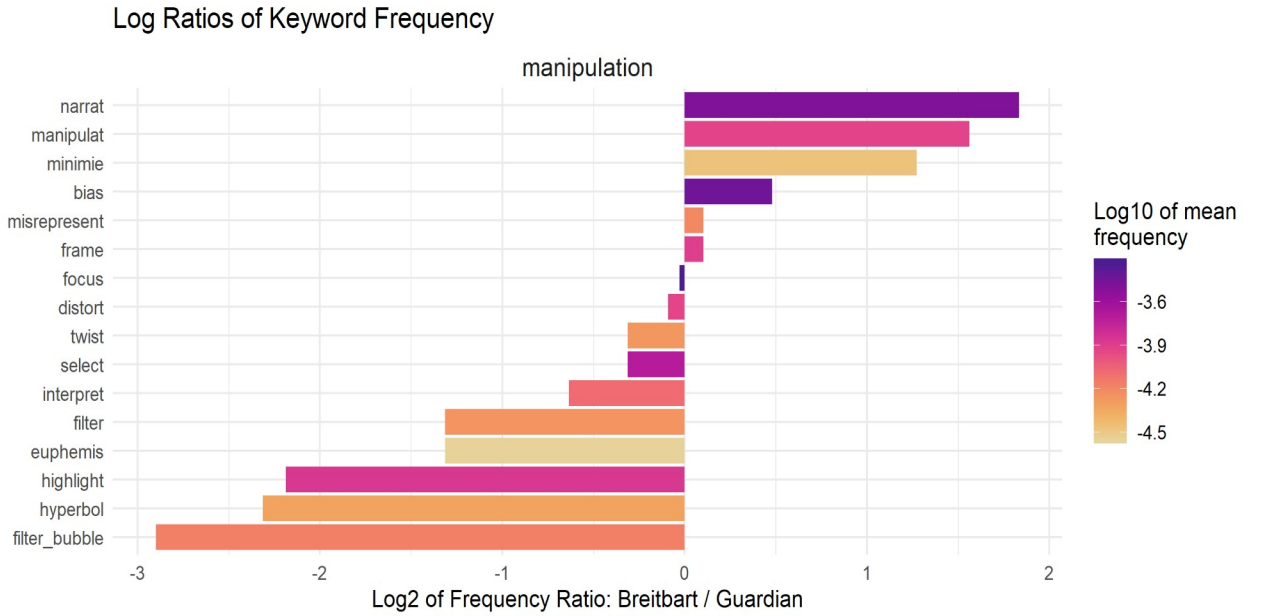


In this second graphic we have the statistical evidence for the distinction between *The Guardian*'s facts-based critique where the virtue is truth and *Breitbart*'s, following Spicer's, manipulation-based critique where the virtue is honesty. The top right panel shows that 'honest' and 'dishonest' are relatively frequent across the corpus as a whole, but occur more often in the *Breitbart* than in *The Guardian*. This is the result of *Breitbart* levelling the accusation of 'dishonesty', but *The Guardian* not responding to it. 'Lying' also occurs more frequently in *Breitbart*, while 'lie' shows no difference. 'Lie', however, implies knowingly telling a falsehood, and not necessarily the dishonesty criticised by *Breitbart* which implies manipulation. Meanwhile words associated with truth occur more frequently in *The Guardian* than in *Breitbart*. The difference is less marked, because all media organisations have to at least partly subscribe to a true/false division of facts to claim the status of reporters news. (Untruth's prominence in *The Guardian* is probably due to the Breitbart's style guide.)

The picture for words of factual accuracy is less clear. As for 'truth', many of these words form part of the standard repertoire of all news organisations. *The Guardian* loves the oxymoron 'alternative fact' that starkly shows the incoherence of, as Spicer said, 'disagreeing with the facts'. The nature of facts is that they are true for everyone. It also uses more words that refer to true or false information, such as 'misinformation'. *Breitbart*'s relatively greater use of 'demonstrate' and 'prove' perhaps indicate a more argumentative prose style, and play a part in its rhetoric of exposé.

The panel 'purpose' shows how both publications also attribute motives to the motives of other media actors. *Breitbart* does more of this; it attributes 'aim' and 'purpose' more frequently. 'Trying' words such as 'effort' could refer to either an attempt to mislead or an attempt to report accurately, which explains their high overall frequency and the small difference between the publications. *The Guardian* also places some emphasis on purpose, favouring 'intention' and 'deliberate'. But the attribution of purpose is not the crucial point in the argument above. *The Guardian* would say that Spicer deliberately presented falsehood as truth, while Spicer would say they deliberately manipulated their coverage. The crucial difference for the argument here is in the

emphasis placed on honesty, and avowing one's own motives.



Finally, however, I would like to note some data that belies a clean division between *Breitbart* and *The Guardian*. This graph shows words that refer to different ways of distorting or abstracting reality in a presentation, the key concept behind Luhmann's 'manipulation'. In line with my main argument, the most common words on average, 'bias', 'manipulat*' and 'narrat*' are all more common in *Breitbart*, the last two very much so. 'Narrat*' is almost four times as common in *Breitbart*, and occurs very frequently, slightly less than 1 in 1000 words. It refers to the presentation of reality as part of a story, and is thus highly suggestive of the idea that language is never clearly true or false, that there can be many ways to see reality. However many other such words, for example 'frame', and 'distort', are equally common in both *Breitbart* and *The Guardian*. While the words in this category used more by *The Guardian* are less frequent on the whole than those used by *Breitbart*, they cannot be written off. 'Filter' refers more to social media and users' selection of their own news via the 'filter bubble', a term much loved by *The Guardian*. But 'highlight', a word suggesting selectivity, and which does not imply a clear distinction of truth/falsity at all, cannot be explained away like this. Some of the longer words used mostly in *The Guardian* are perhaps due to the effect of *Breitbart*'s style guide. Nevertheless, more analysis certainly remains to be done on how *The Guardian* processes the idea of selection of news by media organisations in its own articles.

Conclusion

Fake news is a topic that raises the question of the news media's relationship with truth. This question was much discussed in the media during and after the American presidential election of 2016, and led to a rise in consciousness of the media's role as gatekeepers of truth in national political debate. What Luhmann theorises as a 'code' which selects as 'news' facts that are both true

and newsworthy, a code which constitutes the media's own self-definition, became more explicit as the media took it upon themselves to police factual accuracy. Fact-checking sites such as *Politifact* and *NewsGuard* are the most prominent examples of this tendency.

On the other hand the right-wing media ecosystem, while paying at least lip-service to the dominant media culture of factual accuracy, levelled a different critique at mainstream media organisations. The rhetoric of this critique takes factual inaccuracy as its starting point, but moves on to the media's selection of information and ends by accusing the media of dishonesty. The news media's dishonesty is that they, unlike political media actors, do not avow their elitist political affiliation that is leading them to select the news. They must be honest – although how they should do that is not said, and it is perhaps implied that no neutrality is possible. This critique, Luhmann's 'suspicion of manipulation', is the news media's kryptonite. They can report the fact that the critique was made, but they cannot respond to it, because to do so would involve accepting the premise that all reporting is a selection of reality, and therefore neither true nor false. But if there is no true nor false, then how to decide what is news? Accordingly, the news media respond by insisting on their ability to distinguish true from false, and by mostly ignoring parts of the critique that involve honesty. This characterisation of the media debate around fake news has been borne out by the exploratory examination of news articles on the subject published in *The Guardian* and *Breitbart* around the beginning of Trump's presidency.

Because media organisations do not respond to the 'suspicion of manipulation', they respond principally to media communications that most strongly engage with truth, facts, and evidence, but that do it badly in a way that allows an easy critique to demonstrate the critiquing organisation's own truthful virtue. Spicer's first press conference is a prime example. Arguably, what was at stake was ultimately whether the administration would be able to 'get away with' making such statements. Not false statements as such, but statements that on the one hand showed blatant disregard for credible evidence, and on the other threatened the truth/false dichotomy by asserting that 'honesty', in terms of the expression of political interests, was more important. If such claims were to consistently go unchallenged, the truth/false distinction could eventually cease to define media communication, and news media would become assimilated to political debate. The media as a distinctly defined system, on Luhmann's terms, would cease to exist. This is arguably the case in Russia, where viewers not only see state media as the government's mouthpiece, but also often assert that it normatively *should* be that way (Aliukov 2017; Yurchak 2018, 96).

The media's construction of social problems, such as the problem of 'fake news', is much criticised (Citton 2014) but has the advantage that it at least creates a common world to serve as the reference point of public debate, which otherwise would not be possible at all (Roudakova 2017, ch. 4). In a way, the media's construction of the phenomenon of 'fake news' allows them to meet the threat to their own truth-based identity which is posed by the Trump campaign's use of facts, by re-integrating it as a regular news item: the news about fake news. But the flip-side of this engagement with fake news in strictly factual terms is that they cannot respond to the 'suspicion of manipulation', because that response would involve acknowledging news to be not so much true or false but continually selected.

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