

Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective

EXPLORING KNOWLEDGE AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

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The Trouble With 'Fake News', David Coady

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There is a growing body of literature, both popular and academic—including Alfano and Klein and Meyer's contributions to this special issue—that holds that the world (or at least the Western World) is facing a new and growing problem that goes by the name 'fake news'. I argue that this all wrong. It's true that the world (and especially the Western World) is facing a new and growing problem, but the problem is not fake news, it is the term 'fake news'. ... [please read below the rest of the article].



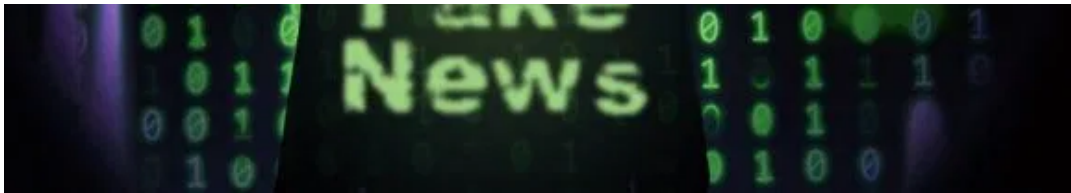


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There is a growing body of literature, both popular and academic—including Alfano and Klein and Meyer's contributions to this special issue—that holds that the world (or at least the Western World) is facing a new and growing problem that goes by the name 'fake news'. I argue that this all wrong. It's true

that the world (and especially the Western World) is facing a new and growing problem, but the problem is not fake news, it is the term 'fake news'.

This term has been deployed by governments and other powerful institutions (especially technology companies) to restrict the dissemination of claims they find objectionable, and, in the process, to restrict basic freedoms, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I argue that although the term "fake news" has no fixed meaning it does have a fixed function, that of restricting permissible public speech and opinion in ways that serve the interests of powerful people and institutions. A recent survey by Gallup/Knight Foundation found that the majority of Americans consider fake news to be a very serious threat to democracy.^[1] They are right that there is a serious threat to democracy, but the threat is not fake news; the threat is the term "fake news".

I will not be adding my own definition of the term "fake news" to the plethora of, often contradictory, definitions to be found in the burgeoning literature. That is because I don't think there is a correct (or even a good) definition of this term. I am committed to the normative thesis that, for both ethical and epistemic reasons, we should refrain from using the term "fake news" or any of the neologisms associated with it (such as "post-truth") altogether.

The term "fake news" can be compared to the somewhat older term, "conspiracy theory" (another term without a fixed meaning), and both terms can be compared with the far older word "heresy". All three terms have functioned to narrow the range of acceptable opinion and restrict the terms of acceptable debate. They are, in effect, policing devices, for the enforcement of orthodoxies, for herding opinion in ways that conform to the agendas of powerful people and institutions. The label "heresy" was once used of anyone who said anything that challenged the power of the church. In a similar way, the label "fake news" is now used of anyone who says anything that challenges the most powerful institutions of our age: nation-states and international corporations.

The epistemic panic over the putative phenomenon of fake news is very

recent. Though it's not clear who first used the term (it was used in an article in *Harper's Magazine* as early as 1925), it only seriously entered public consciousness in the aftermath of the American Presidential election at the end of 2016. It was the *Collins Dictionary* word of the year in 2017 and though, strictly speaking, it is not a word (it is two words), it will be convenient for me to follow Collins's lead in calling it a word for the purposes of this paper.

Although Donald Trump has claimed that he coined the word, it actually appears to have first gained traction amongst opponents of Trump, as a way of referring to certain pro-Trump news-sites originating in Macedonia.^[2] Since then, of course, Trump has used the term repeatedly to refer to virtually any claim made by virtually anyone whom he doesn't like. Many of his critics take exception, not to the term itself, but to his alleged misuse of it, implying that the term has a legitimate meaning, a meaning that he has distorted and "weaponised". This is sometimes followed by an attempt to specify what that meaning is. Although there is a widespread consensus that Trump has misunderstood the term or is intentionally misusing it, there is no consensus at all about how it should be understood or used. If my analysis of the situation is right, this is not the first time that the emergence of a new word has been mistaken for the emergence of a new phenomenon, which is the supposed referent of that word (it's a kind use-mention error).

In what follows, I will discuss some of the ways in which several nation-states and international technology/media corporations have used the term "fake news" to narrow debate and marginalize opinions that challenge their power. I will then turn to the ways it has been deployed by academics (especially social scientists) to illegitimately marginalize and pathologise the views of people they disagree with.

Pernicious Uses of the Term "Fake News" by Nation-States and Global Corporations

On January 9 last year, the official Twitter account of Brazil's

Federal Police made the following announcement:

The Federal Police will begin in the next few days, in Brasilia, the work of a special group to combat false news during the election process. The program has the objective to identify and punish authors of “fake news” for or against candidates.

This is an extremely worrying development. What do the police mean by the term “fake news”? The communication treats “fake news” as a synonym for “false news”. So the Brazilian state is, in effect, claiming for itself the right to censor any news it deems to be false, and punish anyone (apparently without recourse to the judicial system) whom they judge to be responsible for it. The absence of any law that would authorize this censorship regime is no deterrent, as a top police official, Federal Police Director of Investigation and Organized Crime Eugênio Ricas, has said that if no new law is enacted to authorize it, they will invoke the archaic Law of National Security, from the former military dictatorship, which made it a felony to “spread rumours that cause panic”. Eugênio Ricas went on to say that this law was too lenient because it only imposes penalties of a few months imprisonment, which he called a “very low punishment”. This is a very alarming development in the world’s fifth most populous nation, all the more so given that political opponents of the current regime have recently been imprisoned and, in at least one case, assassinated with serious suspicions of police collusion.[3]

Malaysia has gone one step further than Brazil, actually passing a “fake news law” that bans “any news, information, data and reports which are wholly or partly false”. Anyone who falls foul of this law faces up to 6 years in jail or fines that can exceed 100,000 American dollars.[4] Even though the principal purpose of the law was to prevent Mahathir Mohamad from becoming prime minister again, Mahathir

Mohamed is now prime minister again and one of his first acts as prime minister was to announce that he would not be honouring his pledge to repeal this law.^[5] People have already been jailed as a result of this law, and at least one of them was jailed for insulting Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed.^{[6],[7]} This is a salutary reminder of the unforeseen consequences of censorship regimes, and, in particular, of the way in which they can be used to turn the tables on their authors.

In April last year the Indian Government's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced that it would penalize journalists who spread "fake news", a term that it did not define. Fortunately, the government backed down later that same day after widespread outrage from India's Fourth Estate. In the last few months, at least three African countries, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, have passed laws criminalising the spreading of "fake news". In each case there are lengthy prison terms for offenders.

Lest you think this is only a problem in the developing world, where basic rights such as freedom of the press and freedom of speech are particularly vulnerable, I'll turn my attention to the three most powerful European countries, which are each at various stages in the process of trying to censor political speech under the pretext of stopping so-called "fake news."

The first such attempt occurred in Germany, which in June 2017 passed the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (Network Enforcement Act) which compels social media platforms to remove certain postings deemed to be either "hate speech" (another dubious term of art) or "fake news". As a result of this new law, Twitter has suspended the account of a satirical magazine for making fun of a racist politician, Facebook has suspended the

account of a Jewish group for posting a video of a man receiving anti-Semitic abuse, and YouTube has removed a Project Syndicate video examining the revival of Holocaust denial.

The man behind this particular censorship regime is Heiko Maas, Germany's former justice minister (and now foreign minister), who rushed it into law so that it would be in place for the most recent German election. This has meant that it has (fortunately) been ill-thought out and that many of its consequences to date have been more farcical than tragic. For example, Twitter deleted one of Maas's own tweets after people complained about him calling an anti-immigrant author an "idiot". Having one's tweet's deleted or one's social media account suspended are of course fairly mild punishments, compared to imprisonment, but these examples highlight once more the fact that the best-intentioned censorship regimes (and this one does seem to be well-intentioned, despite being objectionably paternalistic) always result in harms that the authors of those regimes did not foresee, and often (as I noted earlier) come back to haunt them.

Developments in France are much more worrying. France has now introduced a law banning so-called "fake news" on the internet during French election campaigns. President Macron described the purpose of the law as follows:

For fake news published during election seasons an emergency legal action could allow authorities to remove that content or even block the website. If we want to protect liberal democracies, we must be

strong and have clear rules.[8]

It is no exaggeration to say that Macron is advocating that we abandon liberal democracy in order to protect it. This is a particularly worrying development, because of Macron's record of hostility to attempts by members of the French press to do their job.[9] But this isn't really the most important point. Even if you are naïve enough to trust Macron or the French judiciary with this power, is it a power you would trust future leaders with? Is it a power you would trust Marine Le Pen to use responsibly?

In the UK, a spokesman for prime minister Theresa May in 2018 announced plans to set up a new National Security Communications Unit to counter the growth of what he called "fake news".[10] Details are sketchy, but it appears to be modelled on the Foreign Office's Cold War Information Research Department (IRD), which, like the proposed Fake News Unit, was set up in response to a perceived threat of Russian disinformation. The IRD's history of targeting dissenting voices, as all secretive state-run organisations charged with controlling "information quality" do, has been well-documented.[11]

It's not only governments that have moved to control free speech and publication in the name of stopping this allegedly new (or, at any rate, allegedly growing) problem of fake news. Major corporations, especially media/technology giants have also exploited this emerging epistemic panic. Google,

arguably the most powerful organisation in the world, not excluding nation-states, has recently changed its search algorithm, a change that it justifies in the name of stopping the spread of “fake news”. Since this is a recent development and the details of the new algorithm are secret, it’s hard to assess its impact. However, there is evidence that, not surprisingly, it favours institutions over individuals and large institutions over smaller institutions. More particularly, the change appears to have dramatically lowered the flow of traffic to independent outlets (i.e. outlets that are independent of nation states and global corporations), such as *Alternet*, *Truthout*, *Consortium News*, and the *World Socialist Web Site*.^[12], ^[13] This appears to be a clear attack on the democratic and egalitarian ideals of the World Wide Web and of the internet itself.

Facebook, the largest social media corporation in the world, has also jumped on board this latest epistemic panic. It has responded to the “fake news” hysteria by making it harder for its two billion or so users to see any news at all. According to the *New York Times*, this has helped the spread, at least in some countries, of fake news as users find it harder to check claims they encounter online (though it is worth noting the *New York Times* does not say what it means by “Fake News” in this article).

My final example of the harms caused by the neologism “fake news” comes from the revered *Washington Post*. It’s true that the *Post* is not itself an international corporation like *Google* or *Facebook*, but it is owned by Jeff Bezos, who is the founder, chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of *Amazon*. On November 24 2016 the *Washington Post* published an article by Craig Timberg headlined “Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say”.^[14]

The “experts” referred to in the title are a group of unnamed people, who run a shadowy website called *PropOrNot*. This website has compiled a list of over 200 allegedly fake news websites. Well-known websites that make the list include Wikileaks and the Drudge Report, left-wing websites, such as *Truthout*, *Black Agenda Report*, *Truthdig*, and *Naked Capitalism*, and libertarian websites, such as *Antiwar.com* and the *Ron Paul Institute*. The putative experts who have identified these sites as purveyors of “fake news” are not named by the *Post*, and we are told nothing about them except that they are “a collection of researchers with foreign policy, military and technology backgrounds”.

What does *PropOrNot*, or the *Washington Post* for that matter, mean by “fake news”? They don’t say, though *PropOrNot* make it clear that the only kind of so-called “fake news” that concerns them is that which helps Vladimir Putin’s propaganda efforts by being critical of NATO expansion or US foreign policy. It describes its criteria for inclusion on its fake news blacklist as “behavioural” and “motivation agnostic”. In other words, you don’t have to be engaged in intentional Russian Propaganda to make the list. It is enough if you are one of Putin’s “useful idiots”.

What is a reader to make of this? Are we really expected to accept the authority of the *Washington Post* that virtually every popular internet news source in the English-speaking world that challenges the foreign policy orthodoxies of the Washington Beltway can safely be dismissed as fake news, on the basis of claims by putative experts who refuse to be identified? It is worth remembering that this is the same newspaper, now leading the campaign against so-called

"fake news", that published an article in September 2016 that seriously considered the possibility that Hillary Clinton collapsed on 9/11 day because she had been poisoned by Putin, and has more recently published a number of sensationalist and false stories about alleged Russian attacks on the American way of life. [15], [16]

Do these false stories mean that the *Washington Post* is itself fake news (or at any rate a fake news source)? This of course depends in part on how one defines "fake news". Some definitions, such as that by philosopher Lee McIntyre, require fake news to be not merely false but intentionally false.[17] Others, such as *PropOrNot* and (at least implicitly) the *Washington Post* do not. As we have seen, their position is that whether or not a report is "fake news" has nothing to do with the

intentions behind it.
It's all about
behaviour (i.e. what
gets reported).

If, for the sake of
argument, we adopt
a definition that
requires a fake
news story to be
deliberately false,
and we also grant,
for the sake of
argument, that the
Post was being
recklessly careless
with respect to the
truth of these news
items, rather than
actually engaging in
deliberate
deception, would
that really mark an
important
distinction between
this kind of
bullshitting and
outright lies?

If you're an
epistemic
consequentialist,
you will see no
important
distinction here.
Whatever the
motives, the effects

of these false
stories are
virtually
indistinguishable
from those of
whatever one
regards as
'Fake News'.

The false
claims travel
widely across
the internet,
and are
believed by
large numbers
of people. The
propagators of
the falsehoods
profit from
this, and there
is no
accountability
of a kind that
would give
them an
incentive not
to repeat the
behavior.

It's true that
the *Post*
ultimately
corrected
some of the
falsehoods in
question, but
its retractions

were not
given
anything
like the
prominence
of the
articles
themselves,
and were
certainly
seen by
many
fewer
people
than saw
the
original
stories.
What is
more,
these
retractions
do not
distinguish
the Post
from the
kind of
news
sources it
characterizes
as fake
news,
which
also
sometimes
retract

false
stories.
The
Denver
Guardian,
for
example,
which
became
one
of
the
paradigms
of a
fake
news
source
after
it
published
a
notorious
false
story
entitled
"FBI
agent
Suspected
In
Hillary
Email
Leaks
Found
Dead
In
Apparent

Murder-
Suicide",
ended
up
retracting
the
story.[18]

Even
if
you're
not
an
epistemic
consequentialist
and
you
see
an
important
distinction
between
(what
we
are
supposing)
is
the
Post's
repeated
recklessness
with
regard
to
the
truth
and

what
is
presumably
the
straight-
out
lie
of
the
Denver
Guardian,
it's
not
necessarily
a
distinction
that
works
in
the
Post's
favour.
If
the
Post
is
guilty
of
bullshitting
(i.e
being
indifferent
to
the
truth
of

its
reports)
rather
than
actual
lying,
Harry
Frankfurt
at
least
would
say
that
is
worse:

Someone
who
lies
and
someone
who
tells
the
truth
are
playing
on
opposite
sides,
so
to
speak,
in
the
same
game.

Each
responds
to
the
facts
as
he
understands
them,
although
the
response
of
the
one
is
guided
by
the
authority
of
the
truth,
while
the
response
of
the
other
defies
that
authority
and
refuses
to
meet

its
demands.
The
bullshitter
ignores
these
demands
altogether.
He
does
not
reject
the
authority
of
the
truth
as
the
liar
does,
and
oppose
himself
to
it.
He
pays
no
attention
to
it
at
all.
By
virtue

of
this,
bullshit
is
a
greater
enemy
of
truth
than
lies
are.[19]

I
think
it
may
be
useful
to
think
of
lying
(like
terrorism)
as
a
weapon
of
the
weak.
Those
working
in
the
establishment
media

often
don't
have
to
lie,
they
simply
push
responsibility
for
false
reporting
back
to
their
sources.
Judith
Miller,
for
example,
who
published
numerous
stories
making
false
claims
about
Iraqi
Weapons
of
Mass
Destruction
in
2002
and

2003,
notoriously
had
this
to
say
about
her
role
morality:

My
job
isn't
to
assess
the
government's
information
and
be
an
independent
intelligence
analyst
myself.

My
job
is
to
tell
readers
of
The
New
York
Times

what
the
government
thought
about
Iraq's
arsenal.[20]

It
seems
to
me
that
this
kind
of
reprehensible
indifference
to
the
truth
is
at
least
as
bad
as
lying.
The
smaller
outlets
that
are
more
likely
to
be

labeled
fake
news
don't
have
access
to
insider
sources
that
establishment
media
has,
so
they
don't
have
the
luxury
of
being
able
to
shift
responsibility
for
false
reporting
on
to
them.

An Objection

At
this

point
I
want
to
anticipate
an
objection
to
my
overall
argument.
It's
all
very
well,
the
objection
goes,
to
point
out
various
ways
in
which
the
term
"fake
news"
has
been
put
to
pernicious
ends,
but

this
doesn't
show
that
we
should
abandon
the
term.
Rather
it
shows
that
we
need
to
find
an
unambiguous,
precise,
and
rationally
justifiable
definition
of
the
term.
In
support
of
this
position,
the
objector
might
point

to
terms,
such
as
“terrorism”
and
“propaganda”,
both
of
which
have
been
used
to
advance
objectionable
causes,
but
which
arguably
can
also
be
used
in
legitimate
ways.
The
fact
that
these
words
have
a
history
of

being
abused,
the
objection
goes,
is
no
reason
for
abandoning
them.

Indeed
the
fact
that
a
word
has
been
abused
entails
that
there
is
a
correct
way
to
use
it,
and
that
we
should
rise
to

the
challenge
of
trying
to
identify
it.
This
is
essentially
the
line
that
a
prominent
group
of
more
than
a
dozen
social
scientists
and
legal
scholars,
the
best
known
of
whom
is
Cass
Sunstein,
took
recently

in
a
letter
published
in
the
prestigious
scientific
journal
Science
entitled
"The
Science
of
Fake
News",
in
which
they
claim
that
the
term
"fake
news"
should
be
retained,
despite
Trump's
alleged
misuse
of
it.
According
to

them
“we
can’t
shy
away
from
phrases
because
they’ve
somehow
been
weaponized.
We
have
to
stick
to
our
guns
and
say
there
is
a
real
phenomenon
here”;
they
go
on
to
call
upon
their
profession
to

“help
fix
democracy
by
studying
the
crisis
of
fake
news”.[21]

I
respond
to
this
objection
in
four
ways.
First,
I’m
not
convinced
that
either
of
the
words
mentioned
above
(i.e.
“terrorism”
and
“propaganda”)
have
any
legitimate

use,
though
it
would
be
too
much
of
a
digression
to
pursue
those
matters
here.
Second,
because
the
term
“fake
news”
has
only
been
in
popular
use
a
short
time
and
has
not
yet
become
deeply

entrenched,
the
goal
of
consigning
it
to
the
dust-
bins
of
history
is
much
more
realistic.
Third,
none
of
the
existing
definitions
that
I
am
aware
of
are
satisfactory.
And
fourth,
as
I
hope
to
make

clear,
the
unsatisfactory
nature
of
extant
definitions
is
not
mere
happenstance;
there
are
criteria
that
any
adequate
definition
would
have
to
meet,
which
there
is
good
reason
to
believe
no
definition
can
meet.

**The
"Science"
of**

Fake News

This
is
the
definition
of
“fake
news”
that
appears
in
Sunstein
et
al.’s
letter:

We
define
“fake
news”
to
be
fabricated
information
that
mimics
news
media
content
in
form
but
not
in
organizational

process
or
intent.
Fake-
news
outlets,
in
turn,
lack
the
news
media's
editorial
norms
and
processes
for
ensuring
the
accuracy
and
credibility
of
information.[22]

What
are
the
“editorial
norms
and
processes”
that
are
said
to
characterise

the
(presumably
real)
media?
The
authors
deliver
a
brief
history
lesson
about
this,
according
to
which
journalistic
norms
of
“objectivity
and
balance”
developed
after
the
First
World
War
as
a
backlash
against
the
widespread
use
of

propaganda
(including
by
the
journalists
who
later
embraced
these
norms)
and
the
rise
of
corporate
public
relations
in
the
1920s.
These
norms,
they
go
on
to
say,
were
sustained
by
the
local
and
national
oligopolies
that

dominated
the
20th
century
technologies
of
information
distribution
(print
and
broadcast).
Now
in
the
21st
century,
we
are
warned,
these
norms
are
being
undermined
by
internet
driven
“fake
news”.

**Objectivity
and
Balance**

What
do
Sunstein

et
al.
mean
by
the
norms
of
"objectivity
and
balance"?
They
don't
tell
us.
Yet
neither
of
these
terms
exactly
wears
its
meaning
on
its
sleeve,
and
the
word
"objectivity"
is
one
which
has
particularly
bedeviled

philosophy.
Sometimes
the
term
is
simply
used
as
a
synonym
for
"truth",
but
that
obviously
isn't
what
it
means
here.
It
simply
wouldn't
be
credible
to
maintain
that
the
norm
of
truth
only
gained
traction
in

the
media
after
the
First
World
War.

A
nice
illustration
of
why
the
norm
of
"objectivity
and
balance",
as
it
is
interpreted
by
corporate
and
state
run
media,
should
not
be
regarded
as
a
means
of

acquiring
truth
can
be
seen
in
its
reaction
to
a
2016
column
by
National
Public
Radio
journalist
Cokie
Roberts
warning
of
the
dangers
of
a
Trump
presidency
(Trump
was
at
the
time
still
running
for
the

Republican
nomination).[\[23\]](#)

This
led
NPR
vice
president
Michael
Oreskes
to
write
an
internal
memo
to
staff
warning
them
not
to
criticize
Trump,
and,
in
an
interview
that
Oreskes
directed
Roberts
to
do
with
Morning
Edition
about

the
matter,
the
host
David
Greene
chastised
Roberts
for
expressing
negative
views
of
Trump
in
the
following
terms:

[24]

Objectivity
is
so
fundamental
to
what
we
do.
Can
you
blame
people
like
me
for
being
a

little
disappointed
to
hear
you
come
out
and
take
a
personal
position
on
something
like
this
in
a
campaign?[25]

This
abdication
of
the
fundamental
principle
of
journalism
that
one
should
speak
the
truth,
especially
in
the

face
of
power,
for
the
sake
of
“objectivity”
understood
here
as
political
neutrality
between
the
major
parties,
is
not
new
(though,
as
we
will
see,
it
is
not
nearly
as
old
as
Sunstein
et
al.
think).

It
was
particularly
evident
during
the
Bush
presidency
when
every
large
media
outlet
in
America
(and
many
outside
America)
suppressed
criticism
of
torture
and
other
well-
documented
war
crimes
in
the
name
of
objectivity.

Particularly
infamous

were
the
explicit
policies
of
outlets
including
NPR,
the
Washington
Post,
and
the
New
York
Times,
not
to
use
the
word
“torture”
for
practices
that
had
long
been
universally
recognised
as
such,
and
which
they
continued

to
describe
as
torture
when
used
by
governments
other
than
the
United
States
and
its
close
allies.^[26]
All
of
this
was
justified
in
the
name
of
“objectivity”
and
“balance”,
which
are
understood
to
mean
being
non-

partisan,
which
in
turn
is
understood
as
not
taking
sides
in
disputes
between
leaders
of
the
major
political
parties.
In
2009,
Alicia
C.
Shepard,
the
NPR
ombudsman,
defended
NPR's
policy
of
refusing
to
report
that
the

Bush
administration
were
practicing
torture
in
the
following
terms:

It's
a
no-
win
case
for
journalists.
If
journalists
use
the
words
"harsh
interrogation
techniques,"
they
can
be
seen
as
siding
with
the
White
House
and
the

language
that
some
US
officials,
particularly
in
the
Bush
administration,
prefer.
If
journalists
use
the
word
“torture,”
then
they
can
be
accused
of
siding
with
those
who
are
particularly
and
visibly
still
angry
at
the
previous

administration.[27](#)

This
is
indeed
a
no-
win
situation
for
journalists
if
winning
consists
in
keeping
everyone
(or
everyone
who
matters)
happy.
However,
it
is
not
a
no-
win
situation
for
journalists
whose
goal
is
to
report

the
truth.

It's
true
that
there
have
been
some
recent
signs
of
a
shift
in
attitude
about
this
issue.
Since
Trump
was
elected,
The
New
York
Times,
and
some
other
conventional
media
outlets,
have
taken
to

calling
out
some
of
Trump's
lies.[28]
But
the
habit
of
thinking
that
it's
not
their
place
to
call
politicians
liars
remains
deeply
ingrained.

Contrary
to
what
Sunstein
et
al.,
and
the
oligopoly-
controlled
media
itself,
would

have
us
believe,
the
norm
of
objectivity
or
balance,
understood
as
neutrality
between
the
leaders
of
the
major
parties
is
not
a
long-
standing
tradition.
In
the
US,
the
UK,
and
Australia
at
any
rate,
it

appears
to
date
back
to
the
beginning
of
the
1980s
when
deregulation
of
media
laws
led
to
the
consolidation
of
family
owned
media
outlets
into
conglomerates
owned
by
major
(often
international)
corporations.

Such
corporations
dislike
taking

controversial
stands,
because
it
alienates
customers,
and
they
particularly
hate
offending
those
who
have
(or
might
soon
have)
political
power,
because
it's
bad
for
business.
As
a
result,
the
political
journalist's
role
as
a
truth-
speaker

has
often
been
neutered
in
the
name
of
“objectivity
and
balance”,
and,
those
employed
in
the
corporate
media,
have
been
often
been
reduced
to
little
more
than
stenographers
giving
equal
time
and
space
to
the
assertions

of
each
side
of
the
political
duopoly.
This
trend
was
exacerbated
by
the
transformation
of
the
concept
of
journalism
itself,
at
around
the
same
time,
from
being
'a
trade'
to
being
'a
profession',
accompanied
by
professional

codes
of
ethics
that
reinforce
the
idea
that
political
neutrality
is
part
of
their
role
morality.
All
of
this,
it
needs
to
be
emphasised,
pre-
dated
the
internet.

The
fact
that
"objectivity"
or
"balance",
understood
as

neutrality,
is
not
the
long-
standing
tradition
its
advocates
like
to
pretend
is
detailed
(at
least
for
American
journalism)
in
a
book
called
*Muckraking:
The
Journalism
that
Changed
America*
by
Judith
and
William
Serrin.
That
openly

and
proudly
partisan
journalism
in
mainstream
media
outlets
thrived
well
past
the
middle
of
the
twentieth
century
is
evident
from
the
fact
that
the
most
honoured
American
journalists
of
the
20th
century,
Edward
R.
Murrow
and

Walter
Cronkite,
are
best
known
for
their
most
openly
partisan
work:
Murrow
for
denouncing
Senator
Joseph
McCarthy,
and
Cronkite
for
denouncing
the
Vietnam
War.
There
can
be
little
doubt
that
they
would
be
fired
for
such

acts
if
they
were
working
in
today's
corporate
or
publicly
owned
media.

Fact Checking

So
much
for
the
media
norms
that
Sunstein
et
al.
favour.
What
do
they
mean
by
the
"practices"
of
media
that

fake
news
is
allegedly
undermining?
The
only
practice
they
mention
is
fact-
checking.
Now
it
is
certainly
true
that
the
kind
of
small
independent
news
sources
that
are
most
likely
to
be
labelled
“fake
news”
are

usually
unable
to
employ
specialised
fact
checkers.

But
it
would
be
too
hasty
to
conclude
from
this
that
reports
of
the
latter
are
more
likely
to
be
true.

In
the
first
place,
corporate
and
state
media

have
always
exaggerated
the
role
fact
checkers
play
in
their
reporting.

The
long-
standing
“Guidelines
on
Integrity”
for
the
New
York
Times,
for
example,
state
that
“writers
at
the
Times
are
their
own
principal
fact
checkers

and
often
their
only
ones".
It's
certainly
true
that
competition
from
the
internet
has
led
several
large
media
companies
to
lay
off
fact-
checkers
along
with
other
staff.
But
this
does
not
mean
that
fact-
checking

has
gone
away.
On
the
contrary,
it
is
enjoying
a
remarkable
renaissance.
A
number
of
organisations,
such
as
PolitiFact
and
Snopes
in
the
United
States,
have
emerged
in
recent
years
and
similar
organisations
have
since
appeared

in
the
UK
and
Australia.

This
new
form
of
fact
checking
differs
from
the
old
in
at
least
two
ways.
First,
the
old
fact
checkers
evaluated
information
in
their
own
publications.
The
grand
tradition
of
big

media
fact
checking
was
actually
less
about
an
ethical
commitment
to
the
truth
than
it
was
about
minimizing
the
dangers
of
expensive
defamation
suits
and
negative
publicity.
By
contrast,
the
new
fact
checkers
are
assessing
the

claims
of
others,
usually
politicians.
Second,
the
old
fact
checkers
were
working
behind
the
scenes
prior
to
publication.
The
public
would
only
be
aware
of
their
work
if
they
made
a
glaring
mistake.
The
new
fact

checkers
by
contrast
are
working
in
the
public
arena,
and
the
public
has
the
opportunity
to
see
their
work
and
evaluate
it
for
themselves.

What
we
should
expect
to
find
in
the
new
media
landscape
therefore

is
what
in
fact,
it
seems
to
me,
we
do
find.
There
are
more
false
statements
in
the
news
(however
you
define
it)
than
ever
before,
but
this
is
not
having
the
kind
of
adverse
effects

on
the
public's
epistemic
states
that
the
promoters
of
the
fake
news
panic
would
have
us
believe.
False
stories
are
only
a
problem
to
the
extent
that
they
are
believed,
and
thanks
to
the
research
and

outreach
afforded
to
citizens
by
the
internet,
they
are
in
a
much
better
position
to
evaluate
the
merits
of
reports
they
come
across
in
dialogue
with
other
citizens.

**Resisting
the
Epistemic
Panic**

The
epistemic
panic

about
so-
called
fake
news
is
the
latest
manifestation
of
a
broader
epistemic
panic
that
has
been
going
on,
principally
amongst
older
professional
men,
since
the
emergence
of
the
internet.
Behind
it,
there
is
a
misguided

nostalgia
for
the
days
of
broadsheet
newspapers
with
their
solemn
pronouncements,
designed
to
be
read
by
the
head
of
a
household
before
going
off
to
work.
In
those
days
there
was
such
a
thing
as
“the

news”
(with
a
very
definite
definite
article),
both
the
accuracy
and
completeness
of
which
was
simply
assumed.
As
Lee
McIntyre
laments,
now
things
are
different:

There
are
so
many
“news”
sources
these
days
that
is
nearly

impossible
to
tell
which
of
them
are
reliable
and
which
are
not
without
some
careful
vetting.[29]

The
implication
that
we
shouldn't
have
to
carefully
vet
what
we
are
told
is
telling.
A
great
American
once
said

“eternal
vigilance
is
the
price
of
liberty”.
The
current
epistemic
panic
over
“fake
news”,
“post-
truth”
etc.
is,
above
all,
the
panic
of
a
managerial
class
horrified
by
the
prospect
of
the
great
unwashed
being
able

to
exercise
vigilance
over
what
they
are
told.

Elsewhere
I
have
compared
this
epistemic
panic
with
the
one
that
gripped
many
ecclesiastical
and
worldly
authority
figures
in
Europe
when
printing
technology
first
emerged.[30]
Suddenly
people
had

access
to
a
great
deal
more
information
(including
of
course
false
information),
and
as
a
result
people
were
less
likely
to
believe
what
authority
figures
told
them
and,
as
a
result,
less
likely
to
do
what

they
were
told
to
do.

There
is
no
doubt
that
people
now
have
access
to
more
false
statements
presented
as
news
than
they
ever
have
in
the
past.
But
for
two
reasons
I
see
no
need

to
panic
about
this.
First,
as
I
have
already
indicated,
people
now
have
more
resources
available
to
them
to
evaluate
the
veracity
of
information
they
come
across.
The
merchants
of
panic
talk
as
if
people
are

entirely
passive
in
the
face
of
what
they
are
told.
This
is
what
makes
Sunstein
et
al.'s
agenda
of
(in
their
own
words)
"making
structural
changes
aimed
at
preventing
exposure
of
individuals
to
fake
news"
so

profoundly
authoritarian
and
sinister.
It
presupposes
that
“we”
(i.e.
whoever
is
making
the
structural
changes
in
question)
already
know
which
reports
are
true
and
which
are
false,
regardless
of
the
subject
matter
of
those
reports.
If

there
really
were
a
group
of
people
with
this
form
of
universal
expertise
whom
we
could
trust
to
determine
on
our
behalf
which
news
is
real
and
which
is
fake,
then
we
would
have
no
need

to
rationally
inquire
into
the
facts
ourselves
or
debate
them
amongst
ourselves.
Indeed
we
would
have
no
need
to
vote
ourselves.
We
could
leave
all
of
these
activities
to
these
god-
like
figures.

The
second
reason

I'm
not
panicking
about
the
indisputable
fact
there
are
now
more
false
news
reports
than
ever
before
is
that
avoiding
falsehood
(whether
it
be
false
reports
or
false
beliefs
resulting
from
those
reports)
is
not
the

only
value
we
should
be
concerned
about.
Suppose
for
the
sake
of
argument
that
on
average
people
now
believe
more
falsehoods
about
politics
than
in
the
past.
This
sounds
alarming,
but
arguably
it
is
an
inevitable

consequence
of
them
having
more
information,
and
in
the
process
gaining
more
knowledge,
than
they
did
in
the
past.
The
acquisition
of
false
beliefs
is
an
inevitable
consequence
of
the
enterprise
of
knowledge
acquisition.
If
all

we
were
concerned
about
were
avoiding
false
beliefs,
we'd
stay
at
home
with
our
heads
under
our
pillows
trying
to
avoid
acquiring
any
beliefs
at
all.
William
James
famously
ridiculed
philosophers
who
were
obsessively
concerned
with

avoiding
false
beliefs,
in
the
following
terms:

It
is
like
a
general
informing
his
soldiers
that
it
is
better
to
keep
out
of
battle
forever
than
to
risk
a
single
wound.
Not
so
are
victories
either

over
enemies
or
over
nature
gained.
Our
errors
are
surely
not
such
awfully
solemn
things.
In
a
world
where
we
are
so
certain
to
incur
them
in
spite
of
all
our
caution,
a
certain
lightness
of

heart
seems
healthier
than
this
excessive
nervousness
on
their
behalf.^[31]

We
have
more
knowledge
than
our
ancestors,
both
collectively
and
as
individuals.
An
inevitable
corollary
of
this
is
that
we
now
(almost
certainly)
have
more
false

beliefs
than
they.
The
expansion
of
our
knowledge
is,
in
part,
a
result
of
us
not
being
overly
concerned
about
false
beliefs.
That's
part
of
the
price
we
pay,
and
it
seems
to
me
that
it's

been
a
price
worth
paying.

Conclusion

Almost
all
of
the
pernicious
uses
of
the
term
“fake
news”
I
have
been
discussing
have
been
driven
by
fears
of
the
Russian
state
using
the
internet
to
interfere

with
Western
political
systems.
This
is
usually
driven
by
people
who
blame
Putin
for
Trump's
rise
to
power,
and
seem
to
regard
Trump
as
some
sort
of
Manchurian
Candidate,
even
though
Trump
has
demonstrably
had
a

much
more
anti-
Russian
foreign
policy
than
Obama.
It
is
worth
remembering
in
the
midst
of
all
this
hysteria
that
only
a
very
small
percentage
of
American
adults
get
their
news
from
social
media.**[32]**
And
most

Americans,
especially
the
older
ones
who
are
more
likely
to
vote
for
Trump,
get
their
news
from
television
where
they're
exposed
to
a
much
older
and
entirely
homegrown
brand
of
disinformation.[33]

Since
Trump
was
elected,
establishment

Democrats
in
the
US
and
their
allies
around
the
world
have
used
the
fake
news
scare
(along
with
the
"Post-
Truth"
and
"Russia-
Gate"
scares)
as
a
distraction
from
the
disastrous
Democratic
election
campaign,
and
as

a
way
to
avoiding
dealing
with
their
own
role
in
the
profound
degeneration
of
the
American
polity
that
allowed
a
demagogue
like
Trump
to
rise
to
power.
The
establishment
Democrats
abandonment
of
their
base
over
the

last
25
years
gave
the
world
Donald
Trump
as
surely
as
the
Blairite
Labour
Party's
abandonment
of
its
base
over
roughly
the
same
period
gave
the
world
Brexit.
At
bottom,
the
fake
news
scare
is
yet

another
distraction
from
our
desperate
need
for
a
radical
rejection
of
the
political
and
media
establishment
that
got
us
into
this
mess.

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**[1]
[https://knightfoundation.org
/reports](https://knightfoundation.org/reports)**

/american-
views-
trust-
media-
and-
democracy.

[2]
[https://www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN88-pb2dFo&feature=youtu.be)
[/watch?v=xN88-](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN88-pb2dFo&feature=youtu.be)
[pb2dFo&](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN88-pb2dFo&feature=youtu.be)
[feature=youtu.be.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN88-pb2dFo&feature=youtu.be)

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