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What is Fake News? A Foundational Question for Developing Effective Critical News Literacy Education

Nolan Higdon

Since the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, policy makers, scholars, and critics have increasingly warned about the dangers associated with fake news. In response, they have proposed numerous solutions to fake news, media literacy being one frequently mentioned. However, there is currently no agreed upon definition of fake news or its origins and practices. Scholars cannot develop effective pedagogy to address fake news without a deep understanding and firm definition of fake news. As a result, this study employs a critical-historical lens of a media ecosystem framework to define fake news. The data for this study came from three areas; an extensive review of scholarship in the Communication, History, Media Studies, and Media Education disciplines; newspaper and congressional archives; and news stories. My methodology identified the producers of fake news; the purpose behind the production of false or misleading content; the themes found in fake news content; and the consequences associated with the consumption of false and misleading information. The findings of this study serve as a foundational basis for the development of a critical news literacy program.

Keywords: critical media literacy, news literacy, fake news, journalism, democracy, pedagogy, education, liberation, satirical news, propaganda, partisanship

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When U.S. President-elect Donald Trump shouted “I’m not going to give you a question. You are fake news!” at Jim Acosta of CNN in January 2017, “fake news” became an ever-present expression in American discourses. In fact, during his first year in office, Trump used the phrase over 400 times (Stelter, 2018). It became a cultural phenomenon, often appearing in entertainment media such as the one-hour *Comedy Central* program *The Fake News Hour*, hosted by Ted Nelms, played by actor Ed Helms (Ramos, 2017); *The Fake News Show*, a British comedy game show where participants competed to determine the veracity of false news story from a real one (“British Comedy Guide,” n.d.); and the season premiere of the 2018 reboot of the journalism sitcom *Murphy Brown* show which focused on fake news (“Murphy Brown,” n.d.).

Scholarly discourse on fake news has warned that it is an epistemological threat to American democracy (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Broniatowski, Jamison, & Qi, 2018; Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017). They have credited the threat of fake news to politicians such as President Trump, whose fake news stories included the tale of a caravan of terrorists heading toward the U.S. (BBC, 2018); foreign nations such as Russia (Jamieson, 2018; Macleod, 2018); television news personalities who spread false stories on their programs such as Sean Hannity of Fox News Channel (Kristiansen & Kaussler, 2018); electronic technologies such as television (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017); digital technologies and platforms such as Facebook (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; McNamee, 2019; Ovadya, 2018; Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017); and online news outlets such as *Info Wars* (Wendling, 2018). In response to the perceived threat posed by fake news, a litany of solutions have been offered to alleviate its influence, including industry and government imposed regulations (Goldberg, 2017); legal action against individuals (Schneider, 2018) nations (Lee, 2018) known to engage in the production and dissemination of fake news; and the adoption of media literacy education in American schools (Hobbs, 2017).

Much of the scholarship investigating effective approaches for ameliorating fake news argue for the adoption of a media literacy component in American schooling (Hobbs, 2017; Goldberg, 2017; Williams, 2018). The U.S. National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), one of the biggest media literacy organizations in the United States, defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (Mihailidis, 2018). Outside of the United States, nations such as Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and several Asian countries began offering media education to their own students several decades ago (Cheung, 2009; Hobbs & Frost, 2003), but not the U.S. Only after the post-2016 fear of fake news did half of U.S. states pass legislation encouraging media literacy (Higdon & Boyington, 2019). Proponents of media literacy argue that the news literacy component of media literacy education would provide students with the tools and perspectives to mitigate the negative influences of fake news (Beckett, 2017; Mihailidis, & Viotty, 2017).

Critical media literacy scholars contend that media literacy education will be ineffective at producing effective news literacies because it lacks a critical framework (Bulger & Davison, 2018). A critical approach to media understands that power dynamics are embedded within the presentation of content, and therefore, meaningful analysis of media content interrogates “the ways media tend to position viewers, users, and audiences to read and negotiate meanings about race, class, gender, and the multiple identity markers that privilege dominant groups” (Funk,

Kellner, & Share, 2016). A critical analysis not only accounts for the power inequities of media content, but explores pathways to liberation through self-actualization and democracy (Kellner & Share, 2007). Although they advocate for a critical framework to be applied to news literacy pedagogy (Tambini, 2017; Williams, 2018), critical media literacy scholars have yet to conceptualize a comprehensive critical news literacy pedagogy (Flemming, 2014).

The creation of effective media literacy, whether critical or acritical, is hamstrung by the lack of consensus about what constitutes fake news. Despite the phrase's ubiquity, scholars contend that fake news is difficult to define (Hobbs, Seyferth-Zapf, & Grafe, 2018). Tandoc, Lim, and Ling's (2018) analysis of fake news concludes that "there is no agreed upon definition of the term 'fake news.'" In fact, in 2017 Merriam-Webster argued that it "sees no need to even consider it for entry in the dictionary as a separate term" because it is "self-explanatory and straightforward" (Goldberg, 2017). However, fake news is anything but self-explanatory. It extends far beyond news itself, and exists in numerous formats such as rumors, lies, hoaxes, bunk, satire, parody, misleading content, impostor content, fabricated content, and manipulated content (Barclay, 2018; Young, 2017).

It is impossible to develop a media literacy approach, critical or non-critical, to mitigate the influence of fake news without a comprehensive understanding of the producers, themes, purposes, and influence of fake news. This study employs a critical-historical lens of media ecosystems to identify and analyze the structure of content that comprises fake news. My concept of "fake news" resulted from a review of the scholarship on "news." News is disseminated through spoken, written, printed, electronic, and digital communication (Stephens, 1988). False or misleading content presented as news and communicated in any of these formats is fake news. The goal of this research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the definition, producers, themes, purposes, and influence of fake news that will serve as the foundation of effective critical news literacy pedagogy.

Literature Review

The taxonomy of fake news is complicated by a century of varying definitions and applications. From a historical perspective, the expression was invoked semi-regularly starting in the 1890s, appearing in newspapers such as an 1891 edition of *The Buffalo Commercial* in Buffalo, New York (Fallon, 2017) and across the continent in an 1899 edition of *The San Francisco Call* in San Francisco, California (*San Francisco Call*, 1899). Newspapers were employing the phrase, as it would come to be used for a century, to denounce false stories packaged and sold as legitimate news content. By 1992, the phrase appeared again; this time in a *TV Guide* cover story by David Lieberman that rebuked content providers for releasing video news releases (VNRs). Lieberman referred to VNRs as "fake news" because they were public relations content presented to the public as objective journalism (Lieberman, 1992). A decade after VNRs, the phrase appeared consistently in academic studies analyzing satire news programs such as the *Daily Show* (Amarasingam, 2011; Baym, 2005). In the early 21st century, critics began using the phrase to denounce news programming that acted as propaganda (Farsetta & Price, 2006; Hobbs et al., 2018).

Much of the scholarship on fake news focuses on narrow forms of news communication, such as print and broadcast media, while ignoring the other ways in which fake news is communicated such as oral transformation and online videos. Lazer, Baum, Benkler, et al. (2018) defined fake

news as any “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.” Yet, this ignores the long tradition of news dissemination via oral communication (Stephens, 1988), which is not media but can be false news. Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) defined fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers.” However, fake news content exists in formats beyond articles such as oral communication (Young, 2017); online videos (Rozvar, 2010), or through broadcast news media (Guo & Vargo, 2018).

Other scholars have looked at the intended purpose of content as a determining factor in whether or not to categorize it as a form of fake news (Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., et al., 2018). Gillian Bolsover (2018) of the Computational Propaganda Research Project argues that “fake news is propaganda.” In fact, scholars, such as Renee Hobbs (2018), have used the terms interchangeably writing “Often, the true funder of fake news or propaganda is disguised or hidden ...” Much of the scholarship on falsified news content focuses on how it acts as propaganda (Bernhard, 2003; Wu, 2017). However, other forms of fake news are not propaganda such as Internet April Fools’ pranks about beach towns prohibiting surfing or journalists who either misreport in error or purposely fabricate stories to further their career (Samuels, 2017; Wu, 2017).

Although scholars disagree on a definition of fake news, they tend to agree that fake news poses an existential threat to democracy. Most of the scholarship agrees that fake news is dangerous only when it is optimized (Levitin, 2016; Barclay, 2018; Bartlett, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Stephens-Davidowitz & Pabon, 2017). Media optimization refers to “finding the right type and amount of information that ought to be presented over the end-to-end system path” (Metso, Koivisto, & Sauvola, 1998). Scholarship on the optimization of fake news focuses on how it is produced and disseminated in a manner that weakens democracies (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017) by limiting citizens’ political agency (McIntyre, 2018) and promoting totalitarian regimes (Fuchs, 2018). Citizens cannot actualize their own societal visions without accurate information; ultimately, media manipulation prevents meaningful participation. Despite the litany of studies on fake news, scholars have yet to synthesize the various elements into a comprehensive understanding of fake news. If educators do not possess a comprehensive understanding of fake news, they cannot teach students responsible habits for consuming fake news.

Methodology

This study employs a critical-historical lens of a media ecosystem framework to analyze fake news. Like any other message, fake news is given power and meaning through the communicative process (Blumer, 1969). Media ecology theory (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1979; Strate, 2004) argues that we can understand that process through an examination of the relationship between technology, communication, media and its impact on the human environment. Media ecology scholars value “networks of relations (ecosystems) rather than individual essences and processes rather than entities” (Stephens, 2014). This study examines the network of relations and processes by which fake news is produced, disseminated, and legitimized. Media ecology scholars argue that the complex and changing relationships and processes that comprise a media ecosystem (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1967) are best understood through an historical lens of the media environment (McLuhan, 1962). As a result, this study

analyzed the technological, communication, media, and human influences associated with fake news from a critical-historical lens.

My analysis follows the tradition of media ecology scholars who integrated the critical framework of the Frankfurt school into their scholarship (Heyer, 1988; Patterson, 1990; Stamps, 2001). Critical scholars argue that dominant ideologies result from power inequities (Kelly, Foucault, & Habermas, 1994) that are strengthened and fortified through media and communication (Horkheimer, 1982; Piccone, 1978). They contend that liberation from dominant ideologies (Hall, 1980; Horkheimer, 1982) is possible through a critical examination of media and power (Kelly, Foucault, & Habermas, 1994). As a result, this study critically analyzes the power dynamics associated with the production, purpose, and themes of fake news in the hopes that critical media literacy scholars can synthesize them into pedagogy of resistance and liberation.

The data for this study came from three areas. First, I performed an extensive review of scholarship in the communication, history, media studies, and media education disciplines. I used key word searches to identify scholarship on journalism, propaganda, news, and media. This enabled access to primary and secondary sources of fake news. Next, I combed through the newspaper and congressional archives for key terms such as “fake news,” “false news” and “propaganda” to locate primary news media content about fake news. Finally, I examined contemporary news stories via Internet searches of corporate and independent news outlets from 2016-2019, that were false or misleading. I collected both national and international fake news content. This enabled my research to have a global analysis. All of this research is augmented by secondary sources about the influence and outcome of fake news consumption.

Each of the hundreds of pieces of content underwent three cycles of process coding (Saldaña, 2015) to determine the producer, purpose, themes, and influence of the fake news. During the initial cycle of coding, I summarized fake news content with words and phrases that were typed onto the document (Saldaña, 2015). During the second cycle of coding, I categorized the codes based on producer, purpose, themes, and consequences. During the final cycle of coding, I looked for reappearing terms and concepts within each category. The findings illuminated the anatomy of fake news.

Findings

The data revealed the producers of fake news; the purpose behind the production of fake news; the themes found in fake news content; and the consequences associated with the consumption of fake news. The producers of fake news are the press; governments both foreign and domestic; satirists; self-interested actors; political parties; and politicians. There are a handful of reoccurring themes found in fake news content: nationalism, fear, hate, and celebrity gossip. Finally, I identified the consequences of fake news which are moral panic and outrage; radicalization of consumers; marginalization of the press; social division; manipulation of democracy; and implementation of an authoritarian regime. Throughout the findings section, I provide a few examples that illustrate each argument and exemplify the larger theme. The examples included in the text were chosen in an effort to illustrate a diverse range of time periods, mediums, formats, and producers of fake news.

The Purposes for and Producers of Fake News

The data revealed that fake news producers are the press; governments both foreign and domestic; satirists; self-interested actors; and political parties and politicians. Each fake news producer has their own unique reason for constructing fake news.

Press: The fake news disseminated by press outlets serves to build their audience and revenue. The for-profit press depends upon building and maintaining an audience in order to generate the profits that make its business model feasible. Often, this incentivizes press outlets to engage in the construction and dissemination of sensational fake news such as the “penny press” newspapers of the 19th century which reported moon colonies and the existence of a bat-man (Young, 2017; Wu, 2017) or popular patriotic fake news coverage leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq which falsely claimed that Iraq had procured “weapons of mass destruction” (Cardaras, 2013). In both cases, the sensationalistic false stories served to engage audiences and increase the press outlets’ revenue streams.

State-sponsored propaganda machines: State-sponsored propaganda machines seek to centralize the governments’ power and spread its influence with fake news. The propaganda machines organize people and resources to construct and circulate dominant messages that direct and influence human behavior and attitudes. Originally, they were created for a temporary purpose, such as Great Britain and America’s effort to increase troop enrollment and national support for World War I (Wu, 2017; Simmonds, 2013), but in the Cold War they became a perpetual component of nation-states. State-sponsored propaganda machines not only produce and disseminate fake news, but work to construct an environment that limits domestic discourses to state-sponsored fake news narratives. For example, in the U.S. during World War I, the federal government spread fake news, and castigated alternative messages with censorship laws, and broad appeals to patriotism through parades, posters, performances, and speeches (Brune, 2003; Creel, 1920; Newton-Matza, 2017; Wu, 2017). Similarly, during the Cold War, the U.S.S.R. disseminated fake news into Eastern Europe, and employed a secret police force to censor alternative press outlets (Applebaum, 2012). In the 21st century, social media manipulation has enabled regimes such as China to limit public discourses to state-sponsored fake news (“The Facebook Dilemma,” 2018).

Foreign governments: The demands of the Cold War, resulted in the state-sponsored propaganda machines of World War II becoming a globally recognized permanent component of foreign policy (Applebaum, 2012; Bernstein, 1977; Oliver, 1989). They often serve to destabilize rival nation-states with fake news. During World War II, the state-sponsored propaganda machines in the U.S. (Dizard, 2004); Japan (Howe, 1993); Germany (Wu, 2017), and Italy (Rhodes, 1976) began to disrupt other nations with fake news. In the US, Japan and Germany sought to create national instability with fake news that exploited racial tensions in America (Masaharu, 1999), and offered a favorable portrayal of the Nazi regime respectively (Taylor, 2017). During the Cold War, the U.S.S.R. and U.S. operationalized the spread of fake news to destabilize nations around the globe such as Guatemala, Iran, Italy, and Poland (Bernstein, 1977; Kinzer, 2007; Waller, 2012). By the 21st century, the Internet and digital technologies enabled nations without superior military strength, such as Iran (Stubbs & Bing, 2018) to compete with nations such as Russia (“Macedonia and Greece,” 2018) in an effort to shape global opinion with fake news. The

state-sponsored propaganda machines gave fake news a digital reach that resulted in the global saturation of false content.

Satire: Satirical fake news is spread in an effort to entertain and shape audiences' political perceptions. Satirical fake news programs are based on entertaining commentary about social issues. Usually through partisan narratives, the programs appeal to emotion through humor rather than logic (Amarasingam, 2011). For example, Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* was grounded in polarizing critiques, targeting Republicans three times as often as Democrats ("Journalism, satire," 2008). In the early 21st century, these programs became so popular they competed with real news for audience share ("Journalism, satire," 2008). In response, traditional broadcast media adopted satire news formulas to their programming such as Fox News Channel's *Red Eye* (Stanley, 2015) and the hyper-partisan on-air ideological lampooned based war between MSNBC's Keith Olbermann and Fox's Bill O'Reilly (Fletcher, 2009). This served to blur the lines between satirical fake news and journalism transforming much of traditional news outlets programming from news reporting to fake news entertainment.

Political Party Propaganda Apparatuses: Political party propaganda apparatuses optimize fake news to win elections and policy debates. A political propaganda apparatus is a loosely connected group of actors and institutions aligned to a political party or political ideology that, sometimes through coordination and other times through overlapping interests and actions, work to influence public opinion. Their influence, and fake news content, helped transform American news media into entertainment and hyper-partisan political communication outlets that often create and spread fake news. Political party propaganda apparatuses have existed in one form or another since the early 20th century (Lepore, 2018), but began regularly producing influential fake news starting in the 1980s with individuals such as Lee Atwater (D'Ambrosio, 2008) and Roger Stone (Kamen, 2005) as well as lobbying firms such as Black, Manafort & Stone (BMS) (Thomas, 1986). They construct and disseminate false news through such means as taking a rival candidates' words out of context to falsely represent their ideology, such as the 1930s portrayal of Upton Sinclair as a communist (Lepore, 2018), and staged events such as "Brooks Brothers riot, where actors were hired to protest the 2000 election recount (Nackenoff, 2006). By the late 20th century, the successful persuasion techniques of political propaganda apparatuses won the attention of wealthy and ideologically driven media investors. Media owners eventually reshaped Fox News (Toobin, 2008) and MSNBC (Terwilleger, McCarthy, & Lamkin, 2011) to spread political propaganda apparatuses' fake news content.

Self-interested actors: For a host of reasons from entertainment to ambition, self-interested actors engage in the construction and dissemination of fake news. Some individuals create fake news for their own entertainment such as Internet included hoaxes or pranks ("Famous internet hoaxes," 2011). Others create fake news for career advancement such as Jussie Smollett, who in 2019, in a presumed effort to tap into national racial discourses and draw attention to his career, allegedly positioned himself as a victim of racial violence by hiring people to attack and leave him with a noose around his neck (Maddaus, 2019). Self-interested journalists have published fake news stories to further their career such as *The New York Times*' Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass of *The New Republic* (Wu, 2017). On the Internet, fake news entrepreneurs such as Matt Drudge and Alex Jones have created personas as journalists and reporters to amass an audience

for profit (Wendling, 2018). Although there is a vast array of fake news producers, with an even larger set of motives and goals, the themes in fake news content are quite limited.

Fake News Themes

There are a handful of reoccurring and often overlapping themes found in fake news content such as nationalism; fear; hate; and celebrity gossip. Although these themes appear regularly across the globe, the manner in which they are expressed is unique to the local culture.

Nationalism: The theme of nationalism reoccurs in fake news content. Usually, it is in an effort to gird patriotism such as the Nazi Party who during World War II built national pride with fake news stories that claimed they had won battles that they actually lost (Goebbels, 1944). This enabled the leadership to maintain a sense of national pride as their military efforts were collapsing. Similarly, in the 21st century, North Korea attempted to buttress up national pride by reporting that it was voted the second happiest place on earth (Craziest North Korean, n.d.; Myers, 2011). This served as a sense of national pride for a nation where nearly a fourth live in poverty and a fifth face food insecurity (Silva, 2017).

Hate: Hate is often a central theme of fake news expressed in the form of anti-Semitism, racism; sexism; xenophobia; Islamaphobia; homophobia; and transphobia (Berghel, 2017; Blakemore, 2018; Burleigh, 2000; Cave, 1996; Dain, 2003; Jane, 2016; Ringstrom & Mason, 2017; Rodricks, 1993; Wendling, 2018). The hate themed fake news stories often offers a dichotomous narrative between groups such as political parties (Paxton, 2004) or religious denominations (Burleigh, 2000) that eventually advocate for the censorship, imprisonment, or murder of the targeted group (Berkhoff, 2004; Smith, 2018).

Celebrity Gossip: Celebrity gossip has been a central theme of fake news for centuries. In the 19th century, newspaper produced fake news about the economic and employment status of Buffalo Bill star Annie Oakley (Stotesbury, 1905). Oakley spent years traveling from town to town suing for libel over these false stories that she was addicted to cocaine (Stotesbury, 1905). By the late 20th century, the fame of Microsoft founder Bill Gates resulted in fake news stories online that claimed the billionaire had purchased the Catholic Church (“Famous internet hoaxes,” 2011). Finally, in the 21st century, Trump’s television, political, and business fame resulted in fake news stories that the Catholic Pope Francis had endorsed his presidential bid and that he used his private jet to rescue marines lost at sea (Ritchie, 2016).

Fear: One of the main themes of fake news is fear. Fear is powerful tool to influence human behavior and attitudes (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Some fear laden fake news content targeted marginalized individuals engaging in acts of power and autonomy such as women practicing witchcraft during the Salem witch trials (Baker, 2014) and African American slaves organizing rebellions (Elliot, 1961). Fear of an outsider is a reoccurring theme in fake news content. For example, during the Cold War, fake news in the U.S. positioned the communists as the outsider threatening Americans. For example, communists were falsely accredited with attacking the U.S. military in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam when no attack occurred (Cohen & Solomon, 1994) and taking over the American city of Mosinee, Wisconsin on May 1, 1950, which was actually a staged event by the American Legion (Fried, 1998).

The Consequences of Fake News

There are many dangerous and often overlapping consequences associated with individuals and groups exposed to fake news. Fake news often serves to engender moral panic and outrage; radicalize individuals; marginalize the press; sow division; manipulate democracy; and implement an authoritarian regime. The last of which is generally the result of the other consequences coming to fruition.

Manipulation of democracy: Fake news plays an influential role in manipulating democratic elections. For example, push-polling, for which Lee Atwater was famous, occurs when a political operative approaches voters under the auspices of collecting polling data, but instead spreads fake news about an opponent to shift voter attitudes (Poundstone, 2008). Fake news can manipulate democracy in others ways, such as distracting voters. A distraction is a powerful tool, especially in a democracy, because it covers up or allows the continuation of malfeasance by people in power (Higdon & Huff, 2019). Finally, fake news can influence voters' decisions to support a proposal they would otherwise oppose (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). This is especially true for war in the U.S., where fake news persuaded voters to support the Mexican-US War; Civil War; Spanish American War; World War I; Vietnam; The Gulf War; and 2003 invasion of Iraq (Cardaras, 2013; Cohen & Solomon, 1994; Davis, 1969; Kinzer, 2007; Paddock, 2004; Regan, 2002; Reilly, 2010).

Marginalize the press: The marginalization of legitimate journalists and press outlets is a reoccurring outcome of fake news. Individuals, organizations, and governments further their hegemony by dispelling and castigating journalists who offer fact-based critiques of the fake news they disseminate. For example, Hitler's Germany revitalized and optimized the phrase "lugenpresse" (Kimont, 2016), which means false news, as part of a larger effort of fear, intimidation, and violence against the press with the goal to persuade German citizens to accept Nazi-produced fake news as fact and actual journalism as false. Similarly, President Trump weaponized the fake news phrase in an effort to demonize the press; remove journalists' press credentials; and limit press briefings (Higdon & Huff, 2019).

Sow Division: Division is another consequence of fake news. Fake news can be a divisive force causing violence and political instability, such as the genocide in Myanmar (Reuters in Yangon, 2018) or the violence and murder associated with White supremacy in the U.S. (Davis, 1969). Divisive fake news content can emerge from other nations, such as Russia's IRA troll factory which sought to create division in the U.S. by spreading fake news during the 2016 presidential election cycle (Jamieson, 2018); or domestically such as President Trump's fake news about Muslims and Arabs (Ringstrom & Mason, 2017); Democrats (Halperin & Heilemann, 2013); immigrants (BBC, 2018); and the press (Jamieson, 2018).

Moral Panic: Cohen (1972) defined moral panic as "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges and become defined as a threat to societal values and interests." For example, in 1741, a fire erupted in New York that burned so hot and spread so quickly that it took down the governor's mansion (Lepore, 2018). Fake news in the form of rumors quickly spread that African Americans had started the fire. The rumors incited panic which led to tortured confessions and violence against New York's black population. In fact, over 150 black men were arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated, while nearly 20 others were executed (Lepore, 2018). Over two

centuries later, a faux communist takeover of Mosinee, Wisconsin on May 1, 1950, orchestrated by the American Legion, left residents and news consumers panicked about communists taking over American cities (Fried, 1998). This fed into the McCarthy era panic that led to the curtailing of civil liberties and discourses in an effort to identify and eliminate communist ideology in the U.S. (Schrecker, 1999).

Moral Outrage: Where a moral panic is a response to fear laden content, moral outrage is the “anger provoked by the perception that a moral standard—usually a standard of fairness or justice—has been violated (Batson et. al., 2007).” During WWI, Great Britain’s fake news sought to dehumanize the Germans and provoke moral outrage as a way to entice enlistment. They spread fake news stories about Germans impaling babies with bayonets, sexually assaulting nuns, enslaving and murdering priests, cutting off the hands of children, using civilians as human shields, turning cadavers into soap and margarine, crucifying soldiers, and cutting the breasts off nurses (Simmonds, 2013).

Radicalize Supporters: Individuals who repeatedly consume fake news can become radicalized to the point of violence and murder. On the Internet, fake news from “meninists,” males who believe in the supremacy of men over women, has included claims that women are conspiring to ban sex with men and implementing feminism as an ideological justification for establishing the supremacy of women (Wendling, 2018). The repeated consumption of these false stories has led meninists to lash out in hateful acts of violence. For example, a harassment campaign, known as Gamergate, targeted female game designers and critics with doxing in 2014 (Wendling, 2018). Similarly, Cesar Sayoc had been radicalized after the vast consumption of fake news stories about journalists’ and the Democratic Party. He responded by mailing pipe bombs to President Barack Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former Vice President Joe Biden, Representative Maxine Waters, Senator Cory Booker, Senator Kamala Harris, former CIA Director John Brennan, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, and CNN (Romo & Rose, 2018; Sullivan, 2018).

Establish an Authoritarian Regime: Fake news not only radicalizes individuals to engage in violence, but accept state violence by authoritarian regimes. There is a strong relationship between fake news and authoritarian regimes such as the fascist regimes of the 1930s Germany and Italy; the U.S.S.R.; and the 21st century U.S. (Fuchs, 2018; Wolin, 2017). For example, Filipino President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, who spent a vast amount of resources on Internet fake news to garner public support for his presidency (The Facebook Dilemma, 2018) and his war on drugs (Iyengar, 2016). The fake news led to his election and the widespread normalization of his war on drug dealers and users that has witnessed thousands of people murdered (Lamb, 2017). This acceptance of a violent leadership, that disregards human rights and pillars of democracy such as the press, is emblematic of authoritarian regimes (Paxton, 2004). Authoritarians also disseminate fake news to not only centralize, but maintain their power. In North Korea, Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jong-Un climbed an active volcano; the military operas were written by the first Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Il-Sung; calendars began in 1910, or year 0, when their leader was born; and the second Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jong-Il holds the world record after he shot a 38-under par including 11 hole-in-ones which was 25 strokes better than the previous record holder (Coleman, 2018).

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal the crucial influence of technology on fake news optimization. Historically, each piece of new technology came with what Neil Postman referred to as a Faustian Bargain (Postman, 1993), meaning it simultaneously offered attractive opportunities for users while enabling fake news producers to construct more effective forms of fake news. The Internet cultivated a new phase of fake news consumption, where false content's legitimacy is empowered by practices of brain-hacking, micro-targeting, data collection, filter bubbles, bots, and algorithms (Zuboff, 2019). Once optimized, these data enable fake news producers to strengthen the perceived validity of their messaging.

The findings also reveal that no political ideology has a monopoly on the production or weaponization of fake news. Fake news producers have spanned the ideological spectrum from Nazi Germany on the right to the U.S.S.R. on the left. In the U.S., the Democrat and Republican Party supporters manufacture, disseminate, and defend the veracity of fake news. In addition to new technologies, regimes from all political ideologies benefit from the repetitive consumption of fake news accomplished by force, such as mandated Nazi listening rooms in the 20th century, or algorithms, such as filter bubbles, in the 21st century.

My research found that in their polarized pursuit of profit, the press abdicated its responsibility to hold leaders accountable starting in the late 20th century. By consistently privileging political narratives over facts, the press ushered in a post-truth era where truth is marginalized to the point of irrelevancy (Levitin, 2016; Barclay, 2018; Bartlett, 2017; McIntyre, 2018). The categorization of truth as subjective has rendered the press inadequate at deterring fake news narratives. At the same time, digital tools afford world leaders with new possibilities for fake news optimization that is unmatched in U.S. History.

Fake news serves to weaken democracy by marginalizing facts and those that communicate them. The study confirms the scholarship that argues there is a connection between fake news and decaying of democracy (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017). Furthermore, the study finds that fake news is not dangerous when it is developed and used for harmless fun such as a hoax or entertainment. Instead, it agrees with much of the scholarship that fake news is only dangerous when it is optimized (Levitin, 2016; Barclay, 2018; Bartlett, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Stephens-Davidowitz & Pabon, 2017). My research showed scant, but some evidence that fake news optimization is a growing global threat. Further research is needed to examine the global relationship between contemporary digital tools, fake news, and democracy.

Conclusion

Throughout history, fake news has been an influential and dangerous force, especially on democratic societies. The study illustrated that many of the 21st century solutions to fake news derive from individuals and institutions with a history of disseminating fake news such as governments, private industry, technology companies, and political parties. This speaks to the need for developing a solution that addresses the central factor enabling the legitimization of fake news: the consumer's inability to delineate fake news from journalism. As an educator, I believe that effective critical education that explores the anatomy of news and fake news can

mitigate the pernicious influence of fake news. Future research needs to apply a critical media literacy framework to the findings of this study.

This study represents the first attempt to anatomize fake news for critical media literacy educators. Armed with a comprehensive understanding of fake news, critical media literacy scholars need to incorporate this study's findings into curriculum; lesson plans, resources, and teacher training workshops that educate students on fake news. Critical pedagogy provides liberation from dominant ideologies (Hall, 1980; Horkheimer, 1982) through an examination of power (Kelly, Foucault, & Habermas, 1994). For students to recognize and analyze these ideologies in news content, critical news literacy educators must synthesize the power dynamics associated with the production, purpose, themes, and consequences of fake news into pedagogy of resistance and liberation. The presumed impact of this pedagogy will be the weakening the power of fake news machines and/or fake news propagators. Such a pedagogy has the potential to develop students' critical awareness of fake news content.

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