

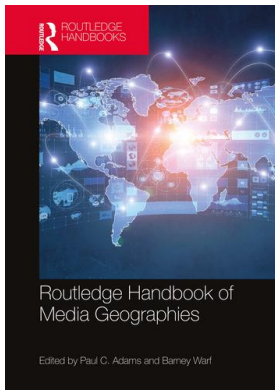
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8

FAKE NEWS

Mapping the social relations of journalism's legitimation crisis

James Compton

What is the relationship of truth to news? This simple question is at the heart of much handwringing and debate among journalists, politicians and news consumers. We are a long way off from the casual faith audiences placed in Walter Cronkite's signature CBS Evening News sign off: "And that's the way it is." Cronkite was an iconic broadcaster who enjoyed widespread trust that no contemporary newsreader could reasonably claim. Today's polarized media landscape, by contrast, is fractured along deep political, economic and social cleavages. Since the 2016 American presidential election, much of the blame has been placed on so-called fake news. The initial spark for the debate was an influential report published by the online magazine BuzzFeed about how Macedonian teenagers in the small town of Veles were making money fabricating pro Donald Trump stories for pseudo-news websites with names such as USConservativeToday.com, and USADailyPolitics.com. The stories were created specifically to be shared by users of hyper-partisan Facebook pages (Silverman & Alexander 2016). The report dripped with irony, given that BuzzFeed had cut its teeth pioneering sharable "clickbait." And shortly following Trump's election victory concern spread after a North Carolina man was arrested for walking into a popular Washington, DC pizza restaurant carrying an assault rifle. The man told police he was investigating a false conspiracy theory circulating during the 2016 election that the restaurant was linked to a pedophile trafficking ring involving Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (Siddiqui & Svrluga 2016). The circulation of fake news was having dangerous real-world consequences.

Donald Trump famously embraced the term conferring the label on news organizations he disliked, such as CNN and the *New York Times*. Others would follow. The phrase became commonplace, used by authoritarian leaders, conspiracy theorists and satirical comedians around the world. The term's imprecision has lent itself to the description of a range of activities—from political propaganda, to misinformation and comedy (Tandoc Jr. et al. 2018). Perhaps most importantly, it is intricately connected to a moral panic concerning the legitimacy of journalism and liberal democracy (Walsh 2020). Anders Hofseth, writing for the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, captured the concerns of many when he argued that fake news presents journalism and liberal society with a crisis of trust:

When the audience is trained to doubt everything they meet in the news, it may lead to devaluation and destabilization of society's system for information, and a vacuum might appear. This poses a threat not only to the media itself. It is challenging the entire structure of society.

(Hofseth 2017)

This chapter provides a critical social mapping of fake news, its historical context and implications for democracy. It situates current debates about fake news and concerns that we have entered a “Post-Truth” era (McIntyre 2018) within the broader political economy of accelerated commodity production and circulation. It discusses the flexible accumulation strategies of networked news organizations struggling to find new business models amidst audience fragmentation, advertising losses and massive job shedding. News media, formerly oriented to local geographic areas, are increasingly financialized institutions that now answer to hedge funds for whom loyalty to a community or place is downgraded or non-existent (Abernathy 2016). It argues that the fake news controversy is connected to a weakened social consensus and lack of trust in mainstream institutions, such as journalism, following the financial collapse of 2008. It details how the social space once occupied by mainstream institutions of government and media has been challenged and fragmented by promotionally interested social actors of various political stripes who use their knowledge of networked media and platforms to advance their interests via the circulation of misinformation, competing truth claims and “clickbait.”

Fake news origin stories

While the term fake news gained global prominence following the 2016 American presidential campaign, its provenance can be traced back hundreds of years. In 1755 news of the Lisbon earthquake carried rumors the disaster was a form of divine retribution, prompting philosopher Voltaire to denounce religious explanations for natural disasters (Soll 2016). Tricks of the trade were refined in the early 19th century era of the penny press, in a transparent ploy to boost circulation. On August 25, 1835 the *New York Sun* newspaper published the first in a series of six sensational feature stories about the discovery of life on the moon. The articles were given the byline of Dr. Andrew Grant, said to be a colleague of a famous contemporary astronomer of the era Sir John Herschel. The stories featured graphic pictures of the discoveries made by Grant using a powerful telescope at his observatory on the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, including large bi-pedal beavers and furry humanoid creatures with batwings. It was complete fantasy, but many readers, in an age of geographic exploration, were said to have been fooled as sales spiked. Close to a month later the *Sun* confessed to the hoax (Zielinski 2015), but sales of the paper did not suffer after the deception was revealed. Indeed, the sensationalist narrative style of the penny press was later extended into the infamous “yellow journalism” wars waged by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. The term referred to the popular Yellow Kid comic strip that first appeared in the *New York World*, before its creator was wooed away to Hearst's *New York Journal*. It was then that the term “yellow journalism” became associated with their newspaper rivalry. The style, featuring bold typography, multicolumn headlines and dramatic illustrations has continued today in the pages of supermarket tabloids where sightings of space aliens and Elvis have become routine.

War reporting has often harboured false or misleading coverage. Hearst's *Morning Journal* notoriously stretched the truth to help launch the 1898 Spanish-American War. In 1964

news media repeated false claims by White House officials that a US destroyer had been attacked by North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin. The incident was used by American President Lyndon B. Johnson to ask Congress to authorize the use of force in the region, escalating the Vietnam War. Four decades later in 2003, the administration of President George W. Bush would tout the imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction held by Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein to justify the invasion of Iraq. No weapons were found.

Errors in war reportage are often dismissed as products of “the fog of war.” However, writing in 1925, senior Associated Press Editor Edward McKernan took a different view. He raised the well documented (Bloch 2013 [1921]) spectre of “fake news” circulating from the battlefields of Europe during World War I, blaming the heightened danger on the increased speed of news dissemination brought about by new global telegraph networks. “Advantage has been taken of every device of wit and science to speed up the report until the swift transmission of news is in itself a source of unprecedented danger” (McKernan 1925, 529). Because of the speed of these international networks, argued McKernan, news “explodes with a bang and its echoes are heard in the four corners of the earth” (p. 530). But what made McKernan particularly worried was the rise of individuals motivated to deliberately take advantage of the accelerated pace of the news file to misinform the public for the purposes of money, publicity or propaganda. He labelled these so-called “arch enemies of the Public and the Press... the Market Rigger, the News Faker and the Professional Propagandist” (p. 533).

All these examples are forms of what John B. Thompson calls “mediated quasi-interaction”—types of mass communication that, unlike face-to-face communication, or talking on the phone, are monological in character in that they are directed in one direction to an indefinite range of individuals “stretching social relations across space and time” (Thompson 2020, 5). Thompson, importantly, directs our attention to the social relations involved in different forms of mediated communication. Changes and innovations in printing technology in combination with large-scale, profit-driven national news agencies fundamentally reshaped 19th century social space. The accelerated flow of the news commodity made possible by electronic telegraphs profoundly remodeled the experience of space and time. As Anthony Giddens argues: “In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (Giddens 1990, 19). The constraints of space that had historically separated people and events had been overcome through the swift delivery of news—whose value was intricately connected to time. Being first mattered. This process of “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989, 241) reconfigured the relationship of the local to the global. The production of this new mediated space was not neutral; it was from the beginning implicated in relations of control and power (Lefebvre 1991). “News agencies created the electronically mediated relationship between places in different parts of the world. However, these places had different exchange values depending on transmission time... and their location” (Rantanen 1997, 618). News agencies produced “phantasmagoric” stories of distant others from exotic locales favoring largely urban audiences located in cities such as London, Paris, Berlin and New York. This reshaping of space through mediated electronic communication was constitutive of the material interests of news agencies, reflecting hierarchical and colonial relationships, but they also created opportunities and constraints for action involving individuals who had the necessary skills and opportunity to exploit the accelerated global flow of information. These included McKernan’s Market Rigger, News Faker and Professional Propagandist.

In this way, following Thompson, “the use of communication media involves the creation of new forms of action and interaction, new kinds of social relationships and new ways of relating to others and to oneself” (Thompson 2020, 4). This social dynamic continues to the present day, in the persons of Macedonian bloggers and far right online promoters of the QAnon conspiracy theory—a bizarre tale that falsely claims the world is run by a satanic pedophile ring led by Hillary Clinton and the so-called deep state. Memes such as this are examples of what Manuel Castells calls “mass self communication” (Castells 2009, 249), and have become constitutive of the production, circulation and consumption of the fake news commodity, by anonymous users on social media and President Trump himself who has retweeted QAnon many times (McIntire et al. 2019).

In what follows, we will contextualize the most recent iteration of fake news by situating the development and use of digital technology within a broader political economy that remains committed to the acceleration of commodity production, distribution and exchange. As David Harvey (1989) and Bob Jessop (2009) argue, the uneven spatio-temporal dynamics of capitalist globalization require spatio-temporal fixes to overcome tensions and crises in the flow of capital. A case in point is the overproduction crisis of the 1970s; it was overcome, in part, through the introduction of information and communication technologies that allowed for newly networked global supply chains. The elimination of space through the acceleration of time continues today with investments in internet and social media technologies—tools used to integrate world markets and accelerate the flow of commodities and financial capital. Importantly, this cycle of acceleration carries over into the cultural realm affecting the pace of everyday life and the rate of social change (Rosa 2009), “reshaping experience and perception” (Crary 2013, 39). The phenomenon of fake news, it will be argued, is one of the effects.

Journalism, change and uncertainty

To suggest journalism has a legitimation crisis is not novel. In fact, one might suggest the “craft” has long been dogged by uncertainty and criticism (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Tong 2018). To understand the historical conjuncture, Peter Dahlgren (2009) offers five key developments that have altered media geography creating uncertainty and change: proliferation, concentration, deregulation, globalization and digitization.

We are “awash” in media as content and format choices proliferate via cable, website and social media offerings (Dahlgren 2009, 35). Despite this proliferation of media, corporate mergers and acquisitions and other cooperative ventures have continued. Media behemoths, such as News Corporation, sit atop of integrated empires that encompass all forms of media, from print, to broadcast and internet. With this concentration comes a tension between the drive for profits and longstanding professional traditions of ethical behavior. Cyberspace is not immune from these forces. Google and Facebook now control more than 75 percent of the online advertising market (Abernathy 2018).

On the policy front, neoliberal deregulation and privatization have been ascendant. These policies have supported corporate concentration, but they have also enabled the financialization of the overall economy, including journalism. The repercussions have been enormous. The role of the finance sector has swelled around the world over the past couple of decades (Winseck 2010) with banks and hedge funds increasingly taking leadership roles.

Into this uncertainty is added the digitalization of media. Some critics (Benkler 2006; Shirky 2009) point to the rise of blogging and citizen journalism to suggest that the old hierarchies of so-called legacy media are giving way to a democratized mediascape of do-it-

yourself journalism. In the words of Shirky: “here comes everybody.” Notwithstanding the welcome optimism, the utopian marketplace of ideas did not materialize, and instead we face the challenge of a moral panic over fake news.

Newsroom rationalization and the production of news deserts

The global proliferation of media, concentration of ownership, deregulation, globalization and digitalization have created many stress points and contradictions, perhaps none more visible than for local newspapers. Daily newspapers, boasting newsrooms significantly larger than their broadcast cousins, have traditionally been the bedrock of news production, with TV and radio following their lead. Newspapers had earned a reputation for their health and profitability, enjoying double-digit profit margins on the strength of being a core community hub for local events, classified and general print advertising. Those days are over, and the numbers have been dire. The trend has occurred worldwide, but the experience in the United States is instructive. Between 2004 and 2018 journalists employed by newspapers in the United States were slashed by half while print advertising, still the main source of revenue for newspapers, plummeted to record low levels with the Facebook/Google duopoly dominating online ad buys (Abernathy 2018). One should be careful not to blame the abstraction of the internet or some unholy alliance of citizen bloggers. The digitalization of media happened in conjunction with the forces of corporate concentration, deregulation and globalization. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the financialization of newspapers.

In the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, newspaper revenue plunged leaving many local papers in distress (Doctor 2020a). It was at this time that private equity hedge funds saw an opportunity and entered the newspaper market purchasing hundreds of papers. By 2018, researcher Penelope Muse Abernathy would report that:

five of the 10 largest newspaper chains were owned by hedge funds, private equity firms and other types of investment groups, which have vast portfolios of unrelated holdings such as real estate, financial services, international debt and health care companies.

(Abernathy 2018)

New Media/Gatehouse, itself a subsidiary of Fortress, and owned by a large Japanese telecommunications conglomerate, went on a debt-fueled purchasing binge to eventually become the owner of over 154 daily newspapers operating in 39 states. Digital First Media, owner of *The Denver Post*, *Salt Lake City Tribune* and *Boston Herald*, would become the property of New York-based hedge fund, Alden Capital, a company with a large international portfolio including holdings in a large Canadian pharmacy chain (Abernathy 2018). Consolidation continued with several significant leveraged deals, and bankruptcies in late 2019 (Doctor 2020b). The biggest transaction was the merger of Gatehouse with Gannett, the owner of *USA Today*. New Media Investment Group outbid Alden Capital in a \$1.4 billion deal to seize control of Gannett creating America’s largest newspaper chain—constituting a quarter of all newspapers—with 260 daily newspapers in the United States, along with more than 300 weekly publications, in 47 states (Tracy 2019). That same year, Alden Capital became the controlling shareholder of Tribune Publishing, owner of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Newspaper consolidation by private equity hedge funds fundamentally reshaped the geography of local news creating regional tensions and contradictions between local and national

markets. Newspapers serving local and regional communities were now answerable to globally integrated transnational capital. The new business model did not involve building newsroom capacity and serving readers. Instead, these companies deployed the same strategy they had used when purchasing other distressed properties in different sectors of the economy. They drastically cut costs by slashing editorial staff, engaged in aggressive financial restructuring, including bankruptcy, and sold off fixed capital, such as printing facilities and buildings located on prime real estate. The moves left newsrooms gutted and unable to cover traditional news beats such as city hall or state and provincial legislatures with any rigor. Close to 1800 newspapers closed in the United States between 2004 and 2018, resulting in the production of “news deserts,” most often affecting poorer and more vulnerable populations. “In an era of fake news,” wrote Abernathy, “the diminishment of local newspapers poses yet another threat to the long-term vitality of communities. Many of our 7,100 surviving newspapers are mere shells, or ‘ghosts,’ of their former selves” (Abernathy 2018). According to Ken Doctor, one of the most dedicated chroniclers of the financialization trend:

The impact is obvious. As America has moved from jokey indulgences in truthiness to a point where fact fights for its very life, it’s the bankers who are deciding what will be defined as news, and who and how many people will be employed to report it.

(Doctor 2019)

Contradictions in uneven media space

While finance capital was stripping value from newspapers to meet short-term debt payments, and monopoly online platforms were draining local newspapers of advertising revenue, a group of elite media were enjoying a so-called “Trump Bump.” CNN rode the spectacle of the Trump White House to the highest ratings and revenues in the network’s history—clearing \$1 billion in annual profits in 2018 (Pompeo 2018)—while the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* saw enormous increases in their online subscriptions (Molla 2017). The contradiction between local media and larger players able to tap into national and international markets was striking. While CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* regularly bemoaned Trump’s targeting of the media as “fake news,” and accurately fact checked the president’s many false statements through a series of well documented investigative scoops, their reporting on the never-ending Trump spectacle was also a boon for business. This reporting was a perfect fit for online engagement strategies of producing transposable, melodramatic stories designed to efficiently repurpose content and reaggregate fragmented audiences among a propriety network of print and online properties (Compton 2004). Two successful examples of this approach were “The Daily” and “Can He Do That?” podcasts produced by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* respectively. Both podcasts were created to provide summary and analysis of the maelstrom of scandals and controversies connected to the Trump White House, including an FBI investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election, and the use of fake social media accounts to sow distrust and dissension in the political system (Lukito et al. 2020). As such, the podcasts were part of the boundary work and paradigm repair (Carlson & Lewis 2015) effort among elite news organizations, including CNN and MSNBC, aimed at blunting White House criticism of their reporting. These meta-discourses also served to contrast newsrooms with Fox News, whose primetime hosts were widely criticized for their embrace of unfounded conspiracies and pro-Trump apologies concerning the President’s impeachment and subsequent Senate trial on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress (O’Neil 2020). In turn, the

acceleration in online news production more generally created pressure on editorial staff as work routines were altered and longstanding journalistic norms challenged.

The so-called “high modern” paradigm of journalism has been weakening for decades (Altheide & Snow 1991; Hallin 1994). Charges of tabloidization and hyper-commercialism are old hat, while the relationship between business interests and the newsroom has always been fraught. This history notwithstanding, the defense from within the craft has traditionally rested on the sincerely made claim that professional norms and standards of journalism worked to mitigate against the profane influences of advertising and politically motivated ownership (Alexander et al. 2016). In the wake of the Great Recession, and in conjunction with a search for a profitable online business model for newspapers, that changed. A once shameful thought was now advanced in the open—that the “Church and State” separation between the editorial and the business sides of news organizations should be rethought. When Joseph Ripp took the reins as Chief Executive Officer at Time Inc. in 2013, he quickly instituted a new policy to reorient editorial content to the company’s multiple digital platforms and native advertising strategies—i.e. content paid for by clients, but given the appearance of traditional journalism (Ferrer Conill 2016). Media workers across the board were now being asked to embrace “a further intensification of the circulation of commodities” through social media and the encouragement of “promotional, auto-commodifying reputation-management”—now seen as a necessary “voluntary” contribution (Dyer-Witherford 2015, 92).

Major news organizations such as E.W. Scripps Company—later known as the Journal Media Group—teamed up with Knight Digital Media Center at USC/Annenberg to investigate the “transformation of newsrooms.” According to Michelle McLellan, a co-author of a report for the Center: “It’s a matter of re-engineering journalists’ attitudes and their relationships with news consumers, as well as changing newsroom workflows and priorities” (McLellan 2015). This “re-engineering” was ostensibly in response to technological changes in the production and delivery of information brought about by digitalization. But such transformations entailed not only process changes, but fundamental alterations to the professional norms of editorial independence and integrity. The drive for structural and cultural re-engineering was so ubiquitous that even the Grey Lady herself, the *New York Times*, produced a widely discussed internal “Innovation Report” in 2014 calling for the abandonment of “our current metaphors of choice—‘The Wall’ and ‘Church and State.’” The report called for the creation of “promotional teams” in the newsroom and for individual reporters and editors to better promote themselves and their work using social media (Benton 2014). These changes did not occur without resistance. Unionized reporters and editors working at Alden Capital owned Digital First newspapers were particularly vocal, organizing a large-scale media campaign to defend quality journalism amidst large-scale layoffs (Reynolds 2017). Resistance to poor working conditions spread, as union certification drives proliferated across traditional and online news organizations, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, BuzzFeed, Vice, Slate and the digital employees at NBC News (Greenhouse 2019).

What is clear from this overview is that the ground had already been prepared for a journalism legitimization crisis prior to the moral panic about the circulation of fake news in 2016. Financialized local newspapers as well as broadcasters had laid off tens of thousands of workers creating a large reserve army of skilled writers and editors as regional markets were rendered news deserts. As labor precarity in newsrooms increased, owners and management at both local and national news organizations openly pushed to “re-engineer” journalistic common sense to create a more flexible labor regime for online promotional strategies. Despite organized pushback from union activists, the “conversion of news companies into

financial instruments” by “outside money men,” according to Doctor, had stripped them “of civic responsibility” (Doctor 2019). This was the context of an internal struggle to impose a new form of discursive legitimation on the craft—one that sought to replace self-determined norms of public service with a new common sense that allowed for digital technical efficiency in the service of networked media companies.

Bad actors and the legitimation crisis of fake news

The proliferation of bad faith actors spouting misinformation in 2016—early 21st century versions of McKernan’s Market Rigger, News Faker and Professional Propagandist—occurred within a broader legitimation crisis sweeping Western governments and civil-society institutions following the 2008 financial collapse and the state bailout of financialized capital—most prominently banks deemed “too big to fail.” In the wake of this massive redistribution of wealth, public faith in government and civic institutions was tested, plunging social institutions into a broader social and political crisis, spawning the Occupy Wall Street movement on the left and various nationalist movements on the right, such as the Tea Party in the United States. “At the root of this crisis of political legitimacy,” argues Manuel Castells, “was the crisis of a form of capitalism, global financial capitalism” (Castells 2019, 15).

As we have seen, these were the broader forces involved in the creation of news deserts, but they were also at play, argues Castells, in the related crises of democratic representation and identity. “The latent contradictions in the economy and society as transformed by globalization, the resistance of identity and the dissociation between state and nation, were all phenomena that became apparent in social practices during the economic crisis of 2008–10” (2019, p. 15). As Marc Bloch noted in his 1921 study of the false news emanating from the World War I battlefields of France and Belgium:

False news is probably born of imprecise individual observations or imperfect eyewitness accounts, but the original accident is not everything: by itself, it really explains nothing. The error propagates itself, grows, and ultimately survives only on one condition—that it finds a favorable cultural broth in the society where it is spreading. Through it, people unconsciously express all their prejudices, hatreds, fears, all their strong emotions.

(Bloch 2013 [1921], 3)

The complex social brew of the crisis of globalization, years of economic austerity, combined with a breakdown in political and institutional authority, supported the nationalist assertions of identity seen in the election of Donald Trump and the successful referendum bid for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union under the banner of “Brexit.” This was the context in which “information systems” became vulnerable to “a mix of strategic disinformation from both national and foreign actors” (Bennett & Livingstone 2018, 127).

The remainder of this chapter will be given over to a brief mapping of the social relations at play within a new communication space in which traditional mass media networks are integrated with horizontal user-generated promotional commodity circulation. It is an uneven space, in which new companies, such as the Leaf Group, formerly Demand Media, and other so-called “content mills” (Frank 2010), take advantage of user-generated content (UGC) and the expanding reserve army of volunteer, or under-employed workers, who produce it. “What we are observing,” argues Manuel Castells, “is the coexistence and interconnection of mainstream media, corporately owned new media, and autonomous Internet

sites” (Castells 2007). The new social and political fields are “hybrid” spaces in which traditional media is integrated with the circulation logics of online commercially oriented platforms and online UGC (Chadwick 2017).

The low barriers to entry afforded by the proliferation of online media were a boon to both profit-oriented bloggers in Macedonia, eager to exploit the Facebook algorithm, and politically motivated conspiracy theorists, such as Alex Jones’ Infowars website (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). Both groups leveraged emotional content on social media “to generate attention and viewing time” (Bakir & McStay 2018). These actors then fed into a pre-existing moral panic over the deleterious effects of digital media on democracy (Wasserman 2020, 4). But while this hybrid media space made room for a variety of social actors, empirical research has found that far right activists had a disproportionate presence and influence during the 2016 American election, contributing to a more radical and polarized media system (Benkler et al. 2018; Bennett & Livingstone 2018). Fox News, along with other nodes on the network, played a prominent role, acting as amplifiers for disinformation circulating on sites such as Infowars, Breitbart, Truthfeed and Gateway Pundit, contributing to a “right-wing media ecosystem” that “represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system” (Benkler et al. 2018, chap 1, loc. 338). Breitbart, funded by billionaire Trump supporter Robert Mercer, and The Daily Caller, backed by billionaire Charles Koch, both promoted a broad anti-government agenda (Bennett & Livingstone 2018). Another Mercer-funded organization that played a role in the dissemination of disinformation during the 2016 election was Cambridge Analytica. The voter-profiling firm took advantage of the Facebook algorithm using artificial intelligence technology in support of both the Trump campaign and the official “leave” side in the Brexit referendum (Benkler et al. 2018, chap 9, loc. 4828).

In addition to small-scale bloggers and well financed micro-targeting campaigns, the hybrid media space also includes state actors, most prominently in 2016 the Russian-sponsored Internet Research Agency (IRA). Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s indictment of the IRA found that the agency “operated thousands of Twitter accounts posing as Americans to weigh in on US political discussions on social media between 2014 and 2017” (Kukito et al. 2020, 197). The IRA was particularly successful in tapping into traditional news media’s desire to represent “vox popul,” by having tweets from fake accounts appear in public opinion news round ups (Kukito et al. 2020).

Final thoughts

This chapter, in a preliminary way, has tried to map the broad changes to social space made possible by the forces of media proliferation, concentration, deregulation, globalization and digitization. In doing so, we have drawn attention to the wider social relations at play in the production, dissemination and consumption of the so-called fake news commodity. A popular notion has spread that so-called “filter bubbles” or “echo chambers” (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017) have contributed to selective exposure to news, thus deepening the polarization of media consumption and limiting exposure to information that may challenge ideological predispositions or assumptions. These fears have gained traction following the spread of conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, that appear immune to factual evidence. However, the filter bubble thesis has been challenged by research that suggests Facebook and Google had limited effect on the direct exposure to news (Cardenal et al. 2019), while other research has found evidence that social media also increased individual exposure to material from one’s non-preferred ideological perspective (Flaxman et al. 2016). And while Benkler et al. (2018) report that right-wing networks are disproportionately responsible for the spread of

disinformation, the authors shy away from blaming technology, or specifically social media, as a determinative driver. Their work, instead, suggests researchers should investigate institutional, political and cultural factors. In line with scholars such as Lance W. Bennett and Steven Livingstone, the chapter has focused less on the details of specific tales of disinformation, and instead attempted to broaden perspectives and “to resist easy efforts to make the problem go away by fact-checking initiatives and educating citizens about the perils of fake news” (Bennett & Livingstone 2018, 135). The roots of fake news, dating back as far as the *New York Sun*’s “moon hoax” of 1835, must be situated within the uncertainty of social, political and technological change and struggle.

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