

## Fighting and Framing Fake News

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**Abstract:** We begin by looking at definitions of fake news, taking ideas from science studies and philosophy to argue that the status of a news story as real or fake depends not on its truth content or on the intention of its producer but on the process by which it was constructed. We then document eight frames deployed by experts to explain fake news: as a weapon of war; a form of online dishonesty; a kind of state propaganda; a profitable business; an extreme form of media bias; a plot to delegitimize alternative media; a product of a post-truth society; and finally as a flaw in human nature. These different frames have naturally led to different proposed and attempted methods of fighting fake news. We document six of these weapons, tying each to the most relevant frames: fact checking & rebuttal; policing online platforms; counterpropaganda campaigns; censorship or regulation of media; media literacy training; and political reform. Throughout we take examples from Ukraine, on the frontline of the fight against fake news since 2014, as well as from the better known experiences of the United States.

**Keywords:** Fake news; disinformation; propaganda; bullshit; Russia; Ukraine.

Discussion of 'fake news,' a once obscure concept, was catalyzed in late 2016 when a gunman started firing inside a Washington, D.C. pizzeria that he, and many others, were convinced held children being imprisoned and sexually abused by senior members of Hillary Clinton's campaign. Reporters discovered that this was just the tip of a previously underreported iceberg. The surprise victory of Donald Trump in the US Presidential election had been facilitated by a wealth of fabricated reporting and conspiracy theories spread through websites and social media. Still more strikingly, a succession of statements, reports, and eventual criminal indictments (Kahn, 2018) from US intelligence and justice officials revealed that this disinformation campaign had been in large part fomented by Russian agents, including trolls using social media tools to spread divisive messages and fabricated stories. Russia's success led other governments, including those of Myanmar (Reed, 2018) and Saudi Arabia (Benner et al., 2018) to set up their own troll farms and online disinformation campaigns.

Realizing the scope of the online fake news problem led Western scholars to study it and propose cures, from technical fixes like tweaks to the algorithms used by Facebook to place stories in the newsfeeds of its users to calls for the public funding of quality journalism to inoculate the public against disinformation. We focus here not just on the US but also on Ukraine, where exposure to Russian-sponsored fake news peaked not in late-2016 but in mid-2014. Because the Russian campaign in Ukraine accompanied more traditional modes of military attack, Ukrainians were quicker to recognize the threat posed by state-sponsored fake news. Their efforts to fight it have shifted over time from debunking efforts to broadly based media literacy campaigns.

## Defining Fake News

In the summary above we did not systematically distinguished between fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Researchers have defined or categorized fake news according to the intent of its creators and initial disseminators: ‘most taxonomies agree that the phrase refers to the intentional dissemination of false information.’ (Levi, 2017) One recent definition suggests that ‘Fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.’ (Gelfert, 2018) By that definition, fake news would be disinformation, which is conventionally distinguished from misinformation by the intent of its disseminator to deceive.

Some have identified degrees of fakeness, based on the truth content of the news and/or the intent of its disseminators. For example, Verstraete et al. (2017) categorized several kinds of fake news. They distinguished satires from hoaxes based on the intent of the hoaxer to deceive, even though both were purposefully false and financially motivated. They also distinguish between propaganda and trolling based on intent: both intend to deceive, but trolls are ‘motivated by an attempt to get personal humor value.’ Claire Wardle (2017) similarly categorized different kinds of fake news on a scale based on increasing intent to deceive.

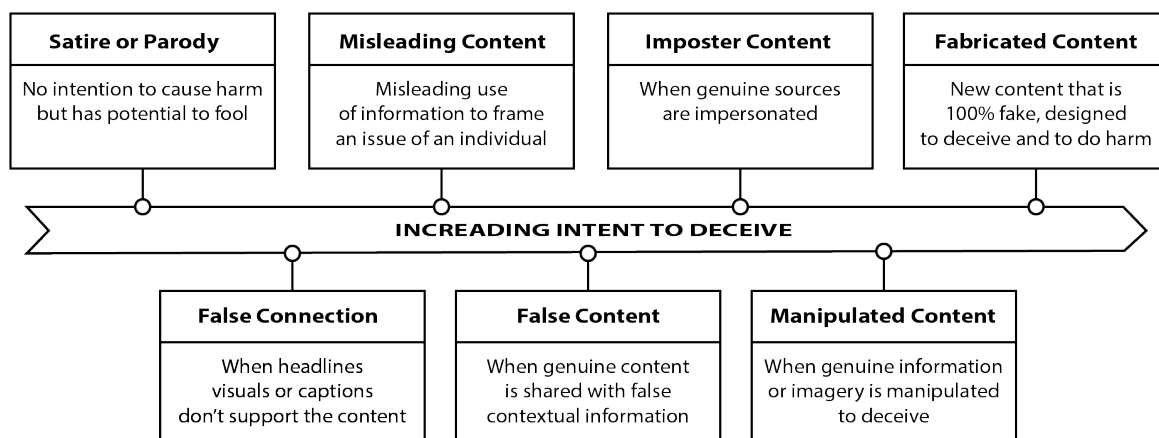


Fig. 1: Wardle's (2017) taxonomy of "7 types of mis- and dis-information" is centered on the intent of the creator of fake news, which may be challenging to determine.

When we tried to operationalized these taxonomies to categorized fake new stores we discovered a problem: they center (literally in Wardle's case) on the intentions of the creator. In Wardle's taxonomy, for example, satire and fabricated content are both entirely false, but are placed at opposite ends her spectrum based on the intent of their creators. Yet intent is a mental state, impossible to document with certainty. Typically we must infer it from clues in the news story and its context. Even when one can observe the creation of the news story, for example in the 4chan threads that gave birth to the Pizzagate conspiracy theory (Tuters et al., 2018) intent is elusive. White nationalists and other extremists routinely describe their propaganda as satire. How to categorize specific anonymous posters as paid trolls,

frustrated satirists, or would-be patriots who sincerely believed themselves to be uncovering a monstrous conspiracy?

Neither can the production and distribution of such a story be attributed to a single individual. Giglietto et al. (2016) have argued that disinformation should be studied not as the result of the deliberate actions of mischievous actors, but as the ‘emergent result of a series of interconnected actions’ taken by loosely coordinated actors. (p. 30)

Even if we could somehow determine whether the creator of a news story was malicious or unhinged, this would change nothing in the impact of the story or its relationship to reality. We prefer to define the difference between fake news and real news with reference to the process by which it was produced and disseminated. To infer the intent of a story one must do the following:

1. Compare the claims made in the story to sources it draws on to look for places where information is misleadingly contextualized, claims are made that can’t be found in any other sources, etc.
2. Draw inferences from this about the process by which the story was produced. For example, that its author mischaracterized evidence to support an argument it does not truly support. Or that the author must have fabricated information because it contradicts trusted sources.
3. Draw a further inference about the intention of the author, based on the idea the processes he or she chooses to use. For example, in Wardle’s taxonomy someone who manipulates a photograph has a high intent to deceive.

Hence to infer intent is to first make a judgement about the process used to produce a story, and then to make a second judgement about the motivations of someone who would use such a process. Process can potentially be observed, but intent must always be inferred. It would surely be more reliable to categorize a news story as fake based on its production process.

### Fake News is Bullshit

Some experts dislike the term ‘fake news’ and prefer to use the more general categories of disinformation or misinformation. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017), for example, have called the term ‘woefully inadequate’ (p. 15). In contrast, we feel that it has a valuable specificity. The concept of ‘fake’ news distinguishes shoddy, unreliable, or biased journalism from material that is not journalism at all but is presented as if it were. Fake news takes the form of a news report but is not a news report, just as a fake Vermeer is not a Vermeer and a fake diamond is not a diamond. Other disinformation takes other forms: fake science, fake history, fake letters, fake government documents, or fake statistics. Mimicking the form of the news report gives disinformation an aura of trustworthiness, misappropriated from the news stories it resembles, just as certain flies mimic wasps to exploit the deterrent power of stingers they do not possess.

In that sense, fake news is, to use the category established by philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005), bullshit – something produced without regard to the truth, or even to the need to appear truthful. This distinction was clearest in the avalanche of poorly faked news that appeared in the immediate aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, at some of which was produced in bulk by

workers in Saint Petersburg's notorious Internet Research Agency. The pages linked to by its trolls and bots looked like news reports, but the images they included were often misidentified or doctored, supporting details were imagined, and quotes were misattributed or distorted.

As Frankfurt (2005) pointed out "What is wrong with a counterfeit is not what it is like, but how it is made." (p. 47) A real news story is the visible product of an elaborate process, unseen by its readers, of reporting, writing, verifying, and editing. A fake news story is produced by a different process, one that makes no effort to create verifiable correspondences between the claims made in the news story and the real world.

Real vs. fake news therefore a different axis from true vs. untrue reporting. Fake news is usually untrue, but it doesn't have to be. As Frankfurt (2005) observed, 'although it is produced without concern for the truth, [bullshit] need not be false. The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong' (p. 47-8). Real news reporting is full of factual errors and misleading conclusions. Journalists are fooled by plausible seeming sources, mix up notes, or do shoddy work. Newspapers run corrections every day. Just as stopped clocks are right twice a day, a piece of fake news might occasionally be more true than a badly produced piece of real news. Yet the untrue news story is still real news, the genuine product of a journalistic process as flawed and compromised as anything else undertaken by humans.

We have argued elsewhere (Haigh et al., 2018), drawing on the science and technology studies literature, that defining fake news by its production process lets us distinguish between real and fake news without pretending that real news is objectively true. News is always biased in one way or another, whether by the conscious demands of newspaper and television proprietors or the unconscious assumptions of the journalists reporting it. The very idea of 'news' itself is structurally biased towards sudden, discrete events and away from analysis of chronic, long term issues.

As Lucas Graves (2017) has observed, 'fact checkers, investigative journalists and scientists [all deal] with controversies in which not just facts but rules for determining them are in question.' (p. 520) Although science studies has been caricatured (Gross & Levitt, 1994) as an anti-science or crudely relativist field, in recent years some of its most prominent scholars have come to the defense of the robustness of knowledge produced by climate science (Kofman, 2018) (Edwards, 2010). Something is accepted as scientific when its claims have been constructed and tested via specific social processes accepted by respected scientists in the relevant field (Latour, 1987). Likewise, something is real news because it has been produced using the social processes accepted as adequate by respected journalists in the relevant field. The end products produced by applying these rules are different – a newspaper article would not be published in a scientific journal – but both sets of processes create confirmable correspondences to reality. When that correspondence is tested and found to be defective, both communities have ways to evaluate the credibility of publications, and mechanisms to correct or recall work that proves defective.

## Framing Fake News

As the historian Michael S. Mahoney liked to say 'nothing is unprecedented.' (Mahoney, 2011) When faced with a new and unfamiliar thing we frame it as a special version of an old and familiar thing,

stretching or combining existing mental categories. Our minds identify the most suitable precedent. As a putatively new thing of interest to a broad range of commentators, fake news has been framed using many different precedents. To select one of these frames is to commit to an understanding of what fake news is and, therefore what possible fix might be appropriate for it.

### Frame 1: Fake News as a Weapon of War

When the term “fake news” began to gain currency in 2014 it was to describe part of a broad Russian offensive against Ukraine. During Russia’s initial military occupation of Crimea its special forces removed their insignia and its government denied knowledge of their identity. Its media and trolls supported this message of uncertainty to discourage international intervention. When Russian military and intelligence officers fomented a rebellion in Eastern Ukraine and took up leadership positions in rebel “republics” its information warfare specialists supported these efforts by spreading fake news of a Nazis in the Ukrainian leadership, the persecution of ethnic Russians, and atrocities by Ukrainian forces. In late summer, when regular Russian forces crossed the border to prevent a rout of the separatists and freeze the conflict, Russian disinformation campaigns denied their existence. When separatists shot down a passenger jet using a missile recently driven over the Russian border, fake news blamed everything from a Ukrainian plan to assassinate Vladimir Putin to a false flag operation involving a plane full of bodies harvested from morgues.

This tight coupling of conventional forces, paramilitary units, conventional propaganda, hackers, trolls, and fake news spread via social media attracted considerable attention. Russia was said by Jonsson & Seely (2015) to couple military, informational, economic, and energy weapons with political influence operations in what was sometimes called “postmodern warfare.” Mark Galeotti translated a 2013 speech on the topic by General Valery Gerasimov on the use of propaganda and subversion (which he believed America was deploying against Russia). After Russian’s action in Crimea, Galeotti’s headline phrase, “Gerasimov Doctrine,” entered common use to describe this coordination of forces. (Bartles, 2016).

The extent to which Russia’s extensive use of social media trolls and online fake news it represented a completely novel or coherent military doctrine has been questioned. Kuzio & D’Anieri (2018) argue for the continuity of current Russian information weapons with Soviet practices to undermine internal challenges and earlier Russian efforts to fragment other post-Soviet states such as Moldova and Georgia. Galeotti himself has (2018) apologized for coining the term “Gerasimov Doctrine” arguing that there is no ‘single Russian “doctrine”’ but a ‘broad political objective’ perused in ways that are “opportunistic, fragmentary, even sometimes contradictory.”

### Frame 2: Fake News as a Form of Online Dishonesty

Fake news has been understood primarily as a recent, primarily online phenomenon, though isolated uses of the phrase have been found in earlier periods. The idea that people act differently in online and offline interactions is well established, going back to Howard Rheingold’s (1993) early advocacy for the potential of ‘online communities’, Sherry Turkle’s (1995) sociological analysis of online identities and early work on the study of ‘cyberculture’ and ‘cybersociety’ (Jones, 1994). These authors stressed the inclusiveness of online communities and the fluidity of online identity. The message was summed up in

the famous 1993 New Yorker cartoon, in which a dog using computer keyboard tells another dog, ‘On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.’ In contrast, Lawrence Lessig (1999) argued that subtle design decisions embedded in the code used to create these online environments could have profound influences on the way people behaved in them.

Some discussion of fake news has focused on the characteristics of today’s online environments which make fake news easy to generate, easy to spread, and hard to combat. In traditional communities people know each other well enough to recognize lying, establishing identities over time. Antisocial actions are more likely to have direct personal consequences. (Keyes, 2004). The same affordances that make flaming (Bukatman et al., 1994), spam (Brunton, 2013) and trolling (Phillips, 2015) common features of online interaction also help to explain the prevalence of fake news.

In this frame fake news is one of several forms of online dishonesty and its rise can be explained by looking at the general characteristics of social interaction online and at the specific affordance provided by platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and 4chan. Twitter provides a social environment that rewards short, aggressive, decontextualized communication. Facebook’s algorithm promoted material that was likely to be shared and clicked, which favored fake news stories designed to produce strong and immediate emotional responses. 4chan and reddit made it easy for users to self-segregate into micro communities in which behavior that would be usually be stigmatized was normalized. The anonymity they provide further loosens restraint and accountability. This is seen most clearly in the collective work of 4chan users in collectively fabricating the elaborate Pizzagate narrative, in the apparently sincere belief that they were discovering clues to a vast conspiracy (Tuters et al., 2018).

### Frame 3: Fake News as a Form of State Propaganda

Work framing of fake news as a specifically online form of dishonesty, or as part of a new approach to warfare, typically stresses the novelty of fake news. Fake news looks different if one frames it as a continuation, with new tools, of long-established forms of state sponsored propaganda. In the context of this volume, we need not belabor the point that governments have used news reporting to manipulate public opinion for a long time, both among their own populations and abroad.

During the cold war, propaganda and disinformation became still more important. The KGB and its sister intelligence services in Eastern Europe fabricated evidence to put fake stories into circulation in Western media, including an elaborate hoax that AIDS had been developed by the United States as a biological weapon (Selvage & Nehring, 2014). The CIA likewise planted false stories to show the Soviet Union and its allies in a bad light, as part of its campaigns in places like Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Chile. Recent alarm about fake news does not always recognize these deep continuities with historical practice.

There are, of course, differences between modern fake news and traditional propaganda. We highlighted one of these differences when we called online fake news (Haigh et al., 2018) ‘peer to peer propaganda.’ Even stories posted by trolls or promoted by bots were still liked and shared by many real humans, who invested their own social capital to become inadvertent propagandists.

Modern fake news, particularly in the intensive campaigns of 2014 and 2016, has tended to be more amateurish than earlier state sponsored campaigns. Planting stories in foreign media could disguise their origin, but much traditional state propaganda, such as radio broadcasts over borders or pamphlets dropped from planes, was experienced by its targets as a message sponsored by a foreign government. Fringe media outlets, where conspiracy theories were more likely to appear, used production methods and distribution channels that clearly set them aside from mainstream media. Someone who purchased a fuzzily printed newspaper on a street corner from a shabbily dressed stranger shouting about world government could use these contextual clues to distinguish its reporting from that found in a more orthodox publication, or in a professionally published book found in a library.

Social media had a levelling effect: news stories of all kinds were likely to be encountered by readers as headlines, links, and a small graphic shared in their social media page by friends, groups, or institutional pages that they had 'liked.' An online news story, particularly when experienced on the small screen of a smartphone, has a similar appearance whether it came from a major news organization or a hastily created fake news site.

#### Frame 4: Fake News as a Profitable Business

Fake news can be understood as a commodity produced to maximize profits in the modern media marketplace: low-cost viral content that will attract large numbers of visitors to maximize advertising revenues. As Pablo Boczkowski (2010) has shown, modern online journalism requires its practitioners to constantly monitor the media environment and rapidly copy the information in new reports or post links and paraphrases of their content. The shift online has also hurt the pay, working conditions, and job security of journalists. This makes in-depth verification and fact checking harder. Publications that rely on social media shares, rather than subscribers, for financial viability are more likely to inadvertently spread fake news or heavily biased reporting.

From this viewpoint, fake news is no different from top 50 lists, teaser headlines promising dramatic celebrity revelations, or blog posts recycling scraps of information from other blogs. Journalists who went looking for the sources of widely shared political fake news after the 2016 election found stories originated with Russian state-controlled media and trolls. They found other sites run by people who claimed to be internet entrepreneurs with no state affiliations or deeply held political beliefs who were mass producing fabricated stories to bring in advertising revenue via social media shares (Ohlheiser, 2016).

One of the most success of these entrepreneurs, Cyrus Massoumi, built a sizable business on fake news and clickbait. (O'Brien, 2018) He began in the aftermath of the 2012 Sandy Hook school shootings by purchasing Facebook adverts asking those who opposed gun control legislation to click a 'like' button. He directed these users to 'a series of inflammatory conservative websites, finely turned to produce the most viral and outrageous version of the news.' (Frier, 2017).

Thanks to the global nature of the Internet, entrepreneurs based overseas could also profit from the American market for fake news. Beqa Latsabidze, a 22-year-old computer science student in the post-Soviet nation of Georgia, ran a popular website, departed.co, full of fake news stories celebrating

Donald Trump and denigrating his opponent, Hillary Clinton. He claimed (Higgins et al., 2016) to be serving no geopolitical agenda, and to have begun with a website posting favorable stories about Clinton only to discover that there was no market for them.

#### Frame 5: Fake News as an Extreme Form of Media Bias

The social processes of journalism work within broader cultural and institutional contexts that determine which stories, are reported and how the new event is framed (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Within communication research there is a tradition of exploring how concentrated media ownership, self-interested elites, and political ideology skew news coverage and marginalize certain kinds of reporting. One influential propaganda model by Herman & Chomsky (2010) identifies five sources of biases in corporate mass media: ownership, funding sources, sourcing, flak, and 'fear ideology'. From this viewpoint, there are differences in degree but not in kind between BBC World and Russia Today as state-sponsored broadcasters, or between cnn.com and departed.co as for-profit online news outlets. The former pair exist to serve the ruling elites of their countries, the latter pair to make money for their owners.

Some of the other tactics used in Russians disinformation campaigns also have analogs in established Western practices, such 'astroturfing' where corporations establish fake grassroots groups to lobby for their preferred policy positions on the basis of claimed public interest rather than corporate self-interest (Walker, 2010). In such cases, fake news is spread by fake activists.

During the summer of 2018 we interviewed Ukrainian journalists, media literacy specialists, and local news website operators in Kiev and Lviv. They explained that fake news had evolved since the initial onslaught in 2014 of blatantly fake news produced within Russia. Fake news has become more subtle and harder to debunk, mixing real details with fabricated claims. Several mentioned a wave of domestically produced fake news favoring particular politicians and factions. Ukrainian media has long been dominated by a handful of powerful business interests, so as the fake news crisis of 2014 is replaced with a chronic, ongoing fake news problem the dividing line between old-school biased reporting and newfangled fake news becomes less clear.

The mix of fabrication and bias is captured in the humorous fake news bingo game (figure 2) circulated by StopFake. It mixes the tactics of fake news, such as manipulated images and entirely fabricated stories, with biased reporting that exaggerates Ukraine's real problems such as poverty, weak leadership, and political instability. The central square holds the unifying message of the current fake news campaign: Ukraine is a failed state.



StopFake Bingo				
Ukraine uses ISIS/Islamist fighters in the Donbas!	Story about "NATO mercenaries" fighting in Donbas	Story about fake war atrocity	Story about USA running Ukraine	Story about extreme poverty in Ukraine
Scene from a film passed off as a real incident	Some country is cutting Ukraine off from aid/trade	Story about Western politician recognizing the Crimea as part of Russia	Poorly photoshopped image	Another country is demanding the return of historic land from Ukraine.
Ukraine teaches schoolchildren to hate Russians	Something about Eurovision	FREE SPACE - Ukraine is a failed state!	Story about a region of Ukraine demanding autonomy	Ukraine will freeze without Russian gas!
Story about Poroshenko being drunk.	Video/photo said to be in Ukraine but is actually not	Staged video about Ukrainian nationalists	Fake poll results	Story about Neo-Nazis running Ukraine
Story linking Ukraine to ISIS	Ukraine is about to collapse!	Claim that Russian-speakers are persecuted in Ukraine	Alternative MH17 theory	Story blaming Ukraine for extreme weather incident

Fig. 2: This satirical bingo card, produced by StopFake, summarizes the most common fake news and biased media tropes used against Ukraine around 2017.

#### Frame 6: Fake News as a Plot to Delegitimize Alternative Media

The fact that all media has structural biases can be used to redefine the category of ‘fake news.’ In this view, ‘The term “fake news” (or “misinformation”) has been introduced very deliberately and consciously into the vernacular of American and international politics as the catch-all justification for censorship.’ (Damon, 2018) Fringe publications often assert that establishment media is the real fake news (Damon, 2016). When responding to evidence that one of their writers was a plagiarizing Russian troll using a fake identity, the editors of the anti-establishment magazine *Counterpunch* repeatedly referred to the role the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in spreading false claims in the run up to the Iraq War (Clair & Frank, 2017).

Media scholar Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2017) explored divergent narratives around the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. Denying the ability of “an analyst to declare what is ‘true’ or ‘false’” he drew conclusions not about the accuracy of specific reports but the structural bias of different types of media. He noted the role of mainstream Western media in serving the “propaganda aims of imperial power,” praising “the countervailing influence of alternative news sources that have a demonstrable good-faith track record and capability in the provision of information” such as the World Socialist Web Site (the “online newspaper of the international Trotskyist movement.”) Its publishers have complained that measures against fake news have hurt their ranking in Google’s search engine (Wakabayashi, 2017). They

challenge the view that fringe and highly partisan news websites and media ecosystems have contributed to the spread of fake news (Benkler et al., 2017).

Boyd-Barret (2017) noted that Western media suggested that Russia had helped ‘thugs in the Donbass to establish separatist fiefdoms’ whereas Russian media and some alternative media organizations suggested that Russia ‘maintained a cool distance.’ He believed that the resulting narrative ‘clash inevitably tends towards the destabilization of the hegemonic Western discourse.’ This analysis echoed many of the motifs included by StopFake in its bingo game (figure 2), referring throughout to Ukraine’s 2014 revolution as a “coup” and asserting that ‘events in Crimea were an inevitable response to the Western meddling that had precipitated’ it. Timothy Snyder (2018), observing the frequency with which Russian propaganda tropes were echoed in news outlets of the kind favored by Boyd-Barret, argued that such journalists ‘were not analysts of, but rather participants in, the Russian campaign to undermine factuality.’ One scholar’s fake news is another scholar’s destabilization of hegemonic discourse.

Belief that establishment media is the real fake news has recently moved from the political fringes into the White House. Although Donald Trump’s administration has eagerly seized on the occasional retraction or corrections of unfavorable reporting, the president’s assertions of fakeness have rarely focused on specific errors. He has attempted not just to redefine what makes a news story ‘fake’, typically that it makes him look bad, but to shift the locus of fakeness from specific pieces of reporting to entire publications and media companies. At a rally in August 2018 he called the journalists caged at the rear of the event ‘horrible, horrendous people’ and said ‘they can make anything bad because they are the fake, fake, disgusting news.’ (Reuters, 2018) Media organizations such as CNN, the New York Times, and the BBC are motivated by the animus their reporters hold for him and ordinary Americans.

#### Frame 7: Fake News as Part of a Post-Truth Society

Discussion of ‘fake news’ is often joined to the idea that political discourse has entered an era of ‘post-truth,’ named as the 2016 word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). The phrase ‘post-truth,’ which goes back at least as far as the declaration of a ‘Post-Truth Era’ in (Keyes, 2004) is invoked to explain the ability of politicians to continue to repeat claims that have been widely rejected by experts and fact checking groups. Politicians such as Donald Trump often contradict themselves and show little interest in even pretending to offer evidence to support their assertions, yet they remain popular with many voters.

The post-truth frame explains the effectiveness of fake news not as a result of fake stories being hard to tell from real reporting but on a collective lack of interest in attempting any such distinction. This, it is claimed, reflects a broader loss of faith in social institutions and governing elites. For example, a RAND corporation study (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) termed the problem “truth decay,” and suggested that it reflects a privileging of opinions and experiences over facts as well as a loss of faith in formerly respected institutions and sources of factual information.

Like fake news, “post-truth” echoed a phenomenon familiar to observers of Russia. Peter Pomeransev (2014) titled his account of Russian media and politics, *Nothing Is True and Everything is Possible*. That was itself a phrase borrowed from a description of totalitarian propaganda by Hanna Arendt (1951):

“the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true... its audience... did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyway.” (p. 382).

Some observers see this as part of a broad shift in Western society away from faith in objective truth and towards an ideology that favors individual belief, often blaming the situation on the influence of postmodern literary theorists (Kakutani, 2018; McIntyre, 2018). Kurt Andersen (2017), for example, has knitted together scholarly enthusiasm for critical theory, science fiction, and new age religion into an overarching narrative of America as a country with a particular fondness for self-delusion.

The idea that fake news is part of a broader shift towards post-truth is not incompatible with the other frames presented here, though it does imply that fake news can't be treated in isolation. Fake news could be both driving and benefitting from a broader breakdown of truth, whether spread as a weapon of war, tool of state propaganda, or business opportunity. Timothy Snyder (2018) has argued that Russia's use of state-sponsored fake news is intended not to replace one coherent understanding of reality with another, but to weaken Western countries by undermining public faith in politicians, media, and other democratic institutions. Frankfurt (2005) argues that liars make an effort to appear truthful: 'a person who lies is responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful to it' (p. 56). Public tolerance of bullshit, in contrast, weakens the power of truth. This implies that bullshit is more dangerous to democracy than lies.

#### Frame 8: Fake News as Flaw in Human Nature

The post-truth frame explains fake news as the results of broad social and cultural shifts, while the online dishonesty frame focuses on the particular characteristics of online interaction and the affordances provided by particular platforms. Other work has pushed these ideas in a disturbing direction, suggesting that a preference for fake news is a fundamental feature of human nature rather than the product of a particular historical moment or form of online interaction.

Because the producers of fake news are indifferent to truth and are not constrained by journalistic practice, the stories they produce can be honed to include whatever claims are most likely to induce an immediate emotional response in the reader. This leads to rapid, 'viral' sharing on social media. Disinformation spreads faster on social media than debunking stories and has more impact. (Starbird et al., 2014)

A major study by Vosoughi et al. (2018), reported in *Science*, examined the diffusion of an enormous sample of around 126,000 true and (as ranked by fact checking organizations) false news stories on Twitter, from 2006 to 2017. It found that 'falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth,' particularly for false political news. People are drawn to disseminate novel and unexpected information (being new is the defining characteristic of 'news'). Because fake news is unconstrained by reporting practices, it is usually more sensational and more surprising than real news and hence more likely to be shared.

Quoted in *The Atlantic*, the study's lead author, Soroush Vosoughi, said that 'false information outperforms true information.... That is not just because of bots. It might have something to do with

human nature.’ (Meyer, 2018) This is a question for the field of evolutionary psychology, but it certainly seems plausible that humans evolved to favor emotional stories over rational ones and to pay more attention to shocking information than unsurprising information. That compounds the well known phenomena of confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance: the well documented preference of humans for information that confirms our existing beliefs and tendency to avoid evidence that might challenge them. The rise of political polarization and partisan news outlets makes this easier than ever, facilitating the spread of fake news (Beck, 2017). We might expect information that is both sensational and aligned with our prejudices is particularly likely to be shared.

## Fighting Fake News

Given these many ways of framing fake news, we should not be surprised that efforts to fight it have been similarly diverse. The Yale workshop ‘Fighting Fake News,’ discussed actions by actors including legislators, regulators, and technology and media companies. (Baron & Crotoft, 2017). No method has so far proven to be a ‘magic bullet’ able to vanquish the problem.

### Weapon 1: Fact Checking & Rebuttals

The most direct response to a fake news is to reveal a specific fake story as ersatz by debunking it. This was the approach taken by the Ukrainian group StopFake, which we have studied previously (Haigh et al., 2018). Within 16 months of its foundation in May 2014, StopFake had posted 539 pieces online. Each debunked at least one fake story, usually from fake social media accounts, Russian websites, or Russian media.

StopFake was influenced by Western fact checking groups like PolitiFact. Its founders described the group to us as an attempt to promote the journalistic standards they had been taught at university in Kiev. They insisted that they were not enlisted on the Ukrainian side of the conflict, pointing with pride to their occasional debunking of pro-Ukrainian fake news. This suggested a determination to adopt the frame of fake news as a kind of biased reporting. Like traditional fact checkers (Graves, 2016), StopFake fully documented its work, describing not just its conclusion that a news story was fake but the trail of evidence that supported the conclusion.

In other respects, however, it was doing something quite different. Traditional political fact checkers evaluates the claims of politicians. They assume the politician’s words were accurately reported and then adjudicate their honesty, typically using a scale offering options such as ‘partly true’ or ‘mostly false’ as well as complete truth or absolute falsity. They rely heavily on experts and sources of trusted facts, such as government statistics, to reveal subtle distortions or identify facts taken out of context. In contrast, StopFake was investigating the trustworthiness of the reporter. The closest established parallel for StopFake was therefore services like Snopes.com that attempt to evaluate the truthfulness of online folklore.

Unlike most fact checking groups, every published StopFake evaluation declared a story fake. Those that could not be definitively debunked were not posted. These methods were adapted to the flood of shoddily produced fake news inundating Ukraine at the time. For example, 35% of StopFake 539 StopFake rebuttals posted between May 2014 and August 2015 showed that an image in the story had

been misidentified, and 10% proved an image had been manipulated. This highlights the frame of fake news as online disinformation.

The same model has been adopted by other organizations fighting fake news. Since September 2015 the European Union has produced a weekly digest of disinformation. Debunked stories are logged in an online database (EU vs Disinfo, 2018). Its website mentions that 14 full time staff members working on fact checking. Ahead of the 2018 midterm elections in the United States, the political news organization Politico.com launched its own service (Lima & Briz, 2018) tagging known fake news stories as ‘hoax,’ ‘imposter’ or ‘doctored’

The impact of StopFake is hard to measure. Fake news has not been stopped, but over its first eighteen months the group achieved impressive things given its almost nonexistent budget. Its website received more than five million visits. Its posts were spread widely by its 120,000 social media followers, though not as widely as the fake news stories they were disputing. As we mentioned above, real news is typically shared less widely and less rapidly than fake news. Selecting fake stories to evaluate, researching them, writing up a careful analysis, and translating it into several languages took several days, giving the fake stories time to spread unchallenged.

The frames of fake news as the product of a post-truth society or a flaw in human nature suggest that its consumers may not be swayed by debunking pieces and will certainly not seek them out. Analysis of the 2016 U.S. elections suggest that the impact of fact checking is in decline (Vargo et al., 2018). People whose attachment to an unreliable source like Infowars or Russia Today can shaken by fact checking will likely be convinced after reading a dozen careful takedowns of fake reporting. Posting rebuttals of another hundred stories from each will not change many more minds. Treating fake news only as a form of media bias is an inadequate response to its deployment as a weapon or war or as part of state sponsored propaganda campaign, since its producers will not be deterred by appeals to journalistic standards. Neither will for-profit producers of fake news.

The group’s biggest success may have been in drawing the attention of journalists outside Ukraine to the fake news phenomenon. This made journalists cautious about echoing its tropes, for example that Ukraine was run by Nazis, in their own reporting.

## Weapon 2: Policing Online Platforms

Facebook and Twitter have received several wave of bad publicity since the 2016 elections for business models that promoted whichever stories were most likely to maximize user engagement. In response, Facebook used a combination of data mining and human investigation to flag, evaluate, and eventually delete hundreds of accounts used by Russians to spread fake news (Glaser, 2017). Some of these accounts had been used to organize marches or stage other events. Pages held messages targeted at different groups, including conservatives, African American activists, gun enthusiasts, and Hispanics. These efforts are continuing – a criminal complaint against a worker at the Internet Research Agency filed in October 2018 documented the use of fake Twitter and Facebook accounts to skew political discourse ahead of the 2018 midterm elections (Glaser, 2018).

While the amount of human labor needed to police a platform like Facebook for signs of fake news, extremist propaganda, or state-sponsored political disinformation might seem prohibitive, platform companies already employ a mixture of automated tools and human moderators to screen content for nudity, obscenity, and hate speech. (Roberts, 2016). The companies routinely flag and delete accounts identified as vehicles for commercial spam or the products of bots programmed to create accounts in bulk. During the first quarter of 2018, Facebook deleted more than 500 million such accounts (Romm & Harwell, 2018). Expanding these systems to police fake news and hate speech is a shift of emphasis within an existing regulatory regime, not the imposition of censorship on a formerly open platform.

One reason Facebook regulated nudity much more aggressively than fake news or extremist politics was the profitable customer engagement produced by fake news. Since 2016, tweaks to algorithms used to prioritize the personal newsfeeds of Facebook users have reduced the number of clicks received by fake news sites, and by news organizations in general (Oremus, 2018). That has changed the economics of the news business. In August 2017, fake news entrepreneur Cyrus Massoumi closed the most successful of his disinformation sites, MrConservative.com, complaining that changes to Facebook's newsfeed algorithm meant that what he himself called a 'garbage website' was left 'barely profitable after the fake news crisis.' Instead he poured his resources into a liberal clickbait website, TruthExaminer, which he hoped would stand more chance under the new measures. He aimed to 'offload' this for an 'eight-figure deal' during the next election cycle (Frier, 2017).

Companies would like to find ways to limit the proliferation of fake news without sacrificing other forms of profitable user engagement. One high profile experiment at Facebook was to partner with fact checking and fake news debunking organizations to flag disputed stories with a red warning banner. This proved counterproductive – users were more likely to click on flagged items (Constine, 2018). Instead Facebook announced a new tactic, giving fake stories smaller displays further down a user's personal feed and placing them next to links to reports debunking them.

Its fact checking partners told Facebook that 'they felt taken for granted, used as public relations cover, and ignored.' (Ananny, 2018) Like StopFake, they struggled to produce debunking stories fast enough to significantly impact the rapid spread of viral fake news. One solution would be an algorithm able to successfully identify fake news before it spreads far enough to attract attention from human fact checkers. Lucas Graves (2018) suggested that the ultimate goal of 'automated fact checking' is to build a system able to automatically evaluate stories and instantly deliver corrections. He cautioned that 'much of the terrain covered by human fact-checkers requires a kind of judgement and sensitivity to context that remains far out of reach for fully automated verification.' (p. 1) So far Facebook has been more cautious, using an algorithm to flag items that fit the profile of fake news for attention by its fact checking partners.

### Weapon 3: Counterpropaganda Campaigns

Another response, driven by the frame of fake news as a weapon of war, is the idea that Western countries should counter like with like. This might take the form of retaliatory propaganda designed to favor their national interests, or the international dissemination of accurately reported news to demonstrate the power of the values of the 'open society' in the clash of free and unfree systems, as

promoted during the Cold War by philosopher Karl Popper and in recent decades by the Open Society Foundations set up by philanthropist George Soros.

During the Cold War the US used both approaches. After it ended international broadcasting efforts such as Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America have been closed or reduced in scope, as were efforts to build “soft power” through cultural programming and exchanges.

NATO made efforts in recent years (Fredheim, 2018) to evaluate and publicize the threat posed by fake news as a weapon of war or tool of state propaganda, and to coordinate efforts to fight it (Guerrini, 2018). The US retains programs to promote democracy and press freedom, though these are viewed with suspicion by some on the left who see them as ways of dressing up the pursuit of American self-interest. It is hard to imagine the Trump administration adopting a strategy to build international respect for professional journalism, still less pursuing it with any credibility. In 2018, for example, Radio and Television Martí, a group sponsored by the US government to broadcast to Cuban audiences, ran an anti-Semitic piece calling Soros a ‘nonpracticing Jew of flexible morals’ and blaming him for the global financial crisis of 2008 (Sonmez, 2018). This echoed conspiracy theories long common in Russian sponsored fake news, subsequently adopted by far-right wing groups in the US, and most recently endorsed by Trump and other Republicans (Vogel et al., 2018).

#### Weapon 4: Censorship or Regulation of Media

The trend in democratic countries has been away from media regulation, following the idea that reducing government interference makes for a more open and vibrant media market. Rules to prevent concentration of ownership of print and broadcast media have been relaxed. Cable, satellite, and internet news is not subject to the same regulation as broadcast television. Russia Today was treated as a television channel like any other, broadcast digitally in some US cities, including Washington DC, and widely available on cable television providers.

The Ukrainian experts we talked to, echoing the framing of fake news as a weapon of war, suggested that one-sided openness to state sponsored propaganda was not sustainable during a military conflict. Ukraine had curtailed the dissemination within Ukraine of many Russian television channels, which were owned by the state or by oligarchs tied to Vladimir Putin. In 2017 it blocked access to the Russian social network VKontakte, used extensively by trolls. Since the expulsion of its founder Pavel Durov in 2014, reportedly following his unwillingness to disclose information on Ukrainian protestors, it has been owned and controlled by forces closely aligned with the Kremlin.

These moves were controversial, criticized by some international groups such as Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2017) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2017) as infringements on freedom of expression. Such dramatic restrictions seem unlikely in the US, not least because of the constitutional protections for press freedom and the strength of domestic media organizations such as Fox News operating on the borderline of biased reporting and fake news. The most dramatic effort so far was a private business decision targeted at conspiracy theorist and fake news entrepreneur Alex Jones. In 2018 Apple, Google’s YouTube service, Facebook, and Twitter all terminated distribution of his Internet television show InfoWars. Shifts in public opinion



and the threat of legal liability pushed online media gatekeepers to apply clauses against hate speech in their terms of service. Such action responds to the frames of fake news as a business and as a form of online dishonesty, by making that business less profitable and the online environment less rewarding for fake news producers.

Government actions in Western countries have so far focused on political fake news designed to sway elections. Robert Mueller's ongoing FBI investigation of Russian election tampering has, as of October 2018, issued criminal indictments against twenty-six Russian individuals and three Russian companies involved in conspiring to influence the outcome of the election by spreading fake news, hacking and leaking Democratic party documents, and organizing political rallies within the US. In 2018 the European Union persuaded Facebook, Google, and Twitter to sign up to a voluntary code of practice designed to fight political fake news, including monthly progress reports on implementation. According to two European commissioners (King & Gabriel, 2019), their initial compliance has been disappointing.

### Weapon 5: Media Literacy Training

Studies testing the ability of citizens to distinguish between real and fake news have produced worrying results. A widely reported study suggested that even Stanford undergraduate students, so-called "digital natives," could not evaluate the credibility of online reports. (Stanford History Education Group, 2016)

News consumers are not in the habit of performing searches to validate claims and details, or of looking closely at domain names or the presence of links for clues that might reveal a story as fake news. Training them to do these things, becoming "media literate," might inoculate them against infection with fake news. By the summer of 2018, even our Ukrainian informants still associated with StopFake had accepted that media literacy, rather than expert debunking of fake news, would be their primary long-term weapon. Media literacy addresses several frames for fake news: weapon of war, form of state propaganda, and extreme form of media bias.

We have written in detail elsewhere (Haigh & Haigh, forthcoming) about the Ukrainian 'Learn to Discern' media literacy program run by the American-headquartered nonprofit group IREX, the International Research & Exchanges Board. The program covered traditional print and television reporting, from which most Ukrainians get their news, as well as online reporting. It encouraged news consumers to evaluate news messages in the context of the ownership and credibility of the news outlet providing it. Its centerpiece was an elaborate 193 page training manual with real examples of fake and biased news and information on Ukrainian media ownership. Over a nine-month period, around 15,000 members of the public were trained to evaluate the credibility of media reporting, identifying manipulative techniques, and check startling claims against other sources.

The study (Murrock et al., 2018) concluded that eighteen months after being trained, participants were better than a control group at evaluating the credibility of news stories. They also felt more confident in their ability to distinguish fake news from genuine reporting, which made them more inclined to trust news media. That suggests that training can increase awareness of fake news without reinforcing belief in a 'post truth' world. Media literacy expert Renee Hobbs called this a new model for how to 'measure media literacy competencies acquired by adults through formal media education programs.' (Guernsey,



2018) At the time of writing, IREX is attempting to integrate similar skills into education for 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade school students in Ukraine, and extending the Learn to Discern program to other countries including the United States where pilot programs were planned in Arizona and New Jersey.

### Weapon 6: Political Reform

The Ukrainians we spoke to pointed to government corruption and cynicism about the likelihood of politicians enacting fundamental reform as an underlying cause for people's openness to disinformation. More than two centuries ago, with the chaos of the French Revolution in mind, Joseph de Maistre quipped that nations get the governments they deserve. Perhaps they also get the news media they deserve. If the post truth political environment is real, and reflects a loss of faith in democratic institutions then fake news is the product of gradual but profound cultural changes. Reforms that rebuild faith in the authority of expert knowledge, the practices of professional journalism, and politicians whose claims are constrained by reality might reduce the reach of fake news.

Whether they fill us with gloom or with hope, we tend to assume that current trends will continue forever. As communications historian Michael Schudson (1981) has shown veneration for objective reporting is not an inherent characteristic of American society but a product of the historical conditions under which American journalism evolved. Its stress on journalistic objectivity and separation of news and opinion writing was only fully institutionalized in the Progressive Era, a period of dramatic reform in American society during which expertise of all kinds was venerated (Kaplan, 2002). During the Cold War, competition from unfree socialist countries pushed the United States to demonstrate its commitment to the institutions and practices of open democracy, including free and putatively disinterested reporting. Although these specific economic, technological, and political circumstances are unlikely to recur, our own historical moment will prove equally impermanent.

### Conclusions

Fake news, as it appeared in Ukraine in 2014 and in the United States in 2016, has many similarities with other forms of propaganda, dishonesty, and disinformation but was distinct enough to be usefully treated as a new phenomenon. Our discussion of the many frames that can be applied to fake news, each invoking a different set of precedents, shows that it combines aspects of previously understood phenomena into something distinctively new. We see fake news as a metastasis of everything toxic in the modern media environment and contemporary political discourse, ruthlessly exploited by state and commercial interests.

The epistemological threat posed by politicians undermining the very concept of fake news by redefining it as professional reporting unfavorable to them is particularly grave. We resist it here by using the term precisely and urge others to do so also.

The methods appropriate to fighting fake news vary according to which frames one chooses to favor. None of the methods we discussed could address every frame. Platform policing, debunking, counter propaganda, legal enforcement, media literacy training, and political reform all have potential. Political reforms and cultural shifts to roll back acceptance of bullshit and post truth politics would provide the strongest defenses against fake news. Fake news will never be beaten, but it may be contained.

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