

**Comedy as an instrument for change: A look at U.S. political  
television satire during the Trump presidency**

**- and -**

**Fake news: A look at deception and facts in the U.S. during  
the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

**by**

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## **Abstracts**

### **Comedy as an instrument for change: A look at U.S. political television satire during the Trump presidency**

This essay examines television satire, why and how it is used in politics, as well as its efficacy in shedding light and awareness on serious topics. Also, it explores the potential of satire to motivate people to act and influence change. The essay includes examples of satirical television since the election of President Trump up to the release of the Mueller Report using content from John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* and Stephen Colbert's *Late Night with Stephen Colbert*.

**Keywords:** political satire; television

### **Fake news: A look at deception and facts in the U.S. during the 21st century**

This essay looks at fake news in its recent evolution primarily in the United States since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, highlighting the phrase's social construction before and after Donald Trump became president. Comparisons of modern-day fake news to media hoaxes, advertising, propaganda and public relations are outlined to provide historical perspective. Furthermore, fake news is examined using two recently published frameworks using dimensions of facticity, intention as well as mis- and disinformation. Lastly, the implications of the *new* fake news are explored.

**Keywords:** fake news; deception

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# Comedy as an instrument for change: A look at U.S. political television satire during the Trump presidency

## Introduction

*For the last eight years, we've had a president we could assume would generally stand up for the rights of all Americans. But that is going to change now. So, we're going to have to actively stand up for one another. And it can't just be sounding off on the internet or sharing think pieces or videos like this one that echo around your bubble. I'm talking about actual sacrifice to support people who are now under threat.*

John Oliver, *Last Week Tonight*, November 13, 2016

While this passage does not come across as humorous, it was transcribed from a popular satirical comedy show often mentioned in communications-related scholarly literature: John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight (LWT)*. Oliver was, of course, referring to the U.S. election of Donald Trump the week prior. Oliver had dedicated this 29-minute episode to, among other things, projecting what the next four years would look like under a Trump presidency including the potential reshaping of the Supreme Court to a more conservative bias, changes to established strategies around the military and international trade, as well as modifying regulations around environmental protection that could unwind agreements secured by previous administrations. He reiterated the issues that Trump campaigned on – repealing and replacing Obamacare, building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, deporting undocumented immigrants, appointing a special prosecutor to investigate Hilary Clinton and temporarily banning Muslims from entering the United States. Oliver warned of the normalization of a Trump presidency and of people becoming uncaring, complacent and inert. While there were laughable moments throughout the commercial-free comedy show which airs on HBO, Oliver was unquestionably serious (Garber, 2016, para. 4). And while the original show had 1.17 million U.S. viewers the day it aired (according to Showbuzzdaily's Top 150 Sunday Cable Originals Network Finals), over 16 million further views of the episode have been logged on the *LWT* YouTube channel at the time of submitting this essay.

John Oliver is one of many comedians taking satiric aim at the 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. President. Indeed, satire aimed at the Trump presidency has mushroomed on the late-night television scene led by the likes of Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, Jimmy Kimmel and others (Bode &

Becker, 2018, p. 1572). But Oliver is unique in the approach to his show. He includes a lengthy main segment similar to television news magazines on wide-ranging topics such as chicken contract farming, pharmaceutical marketing and net neutrality. The extended segments are thoroughly researched by a team of people that include former journalists and researchers, much like investigative journalism (Bode & Becker, 2018, p. 1573). The segments confront issues at greater length and in finer detail than other comedy shows (Bode & Becker, 2018, p. 1573). They expose corruption and take jabs at those who they believe are responsible for it, all the while insisting they are comedians not journalists (Andersson, 2018, p. 4). And there are times when Oliver suggests his audience perform an action. Indeed, in 2015, *TIME Magazine* dubbed his influence the 'John Oliver Effect' for the outcomes inspired by his in-depth investigations. One of the most notable instances occurred in 2014, when the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) dropped its proposed changes to rules regarding net neutrality. The commission had been proposing to create two lanes on the internet, one fast and one slow, with the former being sold to cable companies with the inclination to pay (Andersson, 2018, p. 4). Ultimately, this would result in undermining the spirit of a free and open internet. While there had been news coverage on the subject spanning months prior, Oliver was able to break through the cluttered media landscape and present what he claimed was a *boring* topic in an understandable and satirical way (Andersson, 2018, p.5). People took notice. When he asked fans to express their displeasure with the FCC on the proposed changes, it resulted in the agency's servers crashing due to the volume of comments (Andersson, 2018, p. 4). This prompted more news coverage. It is this aspect of satire, along with its comedic effects, that make it an interesting and promising method of communication. It can break through barriers. It can spur on change. Satire holds the possibility of being an instrument of change. And in this era of heightened political divisiveness in the U.S., specifically under the Trump presidency, satire can arguably both help and hinder relations on the political landscape.

*The Late Show (TLS)* with Stephen Colbert is also at the forefront of satiric television aimed at Trump and his administration. Unlike Oliver's *Last Week Tonight (LWT)* which airs on cable television, Colbert's show airs on a broadcast network (CBS) and is therefore subject to FCC regulations such as prohibiting *indecent* material between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. (Wikipedia). While *TLS* airs in most U.S. markets outside of the indecent material designated time, profanity is bleeped out. (Oliver's *LWT* has plenty of profanity.) Colbert's monologues, which frequently directly target Trump through mimicry and pointing out contradictions in what Trump has said over time on camera and through tweets, are jam-packed with satirical commentary. An episode broadcast live immediately following The State of the Union (SOTU)

Address to Congress on February 5, 2019 demonstrates Colbert's quick wit and tactics. He opened the show with a 16-minute monologue lampooning Trump's 82-minute speech saying it was "not a particularly good speech, but what it lacked in quality, it made up in length". Whether Colbert referred to Trump's boasts about the state of the economy ("hottest economy anywhere in the world"), his rhetoric on illegal immigration or his slightly camouflaged threats towards the Democrats on partisan investigations ("if there is going to be peace and legislation, there cannot be war and investigation"), he masterfully dissected, scrutinized and ridiculed the SOTU Address – all broadcast live within minutes of the SOTU Address finishing. Colbert's play-by-play of the speech and critical analysis mimicked conventional news coverage. This illustrates a key theme of this essay: how the near liveness of television as a medium can blur the line between satire, or entertainment, and journalism.

In this essay, I will examine television satire, why and how it is used in politics, as well as its efficacy in shedding light and awareness on serious topics. And, as Oliver suggests to viewers in his first post-election show which saw Trump win the Electoral College vote in 2016, I will explore satire's potential to motivate people to act and influence change. The essay has been structured around five questions outlined in Table 1 including: (1.) What is satire? (2.) What is political satire? (3.) Why focus on television? (4.) How does television satire contribute to political change?, and finally, (5.) How has satire contributed to awareness and change? For each question I will explore scholarly, and in some cases, popular literature. I will also include and discuss examples of satirical television since the election of President Trump in November 2016 using content from John Oliver and Stephen Colbert, who have both arguably contributed significantly to a new era of satirical television, one with a marked emphasis of inspiring people to become involved particularly in the realm of American politics, especially following the election of President Trump.

**Table 1: Questions examined in this essay**

- 
1. What is satire?
  2. What is political satire?
  3. Why focus on television?
  4. How does television satire contribute to political critique?
  5. How has satire contributed to awareness and change?

## 1. What is satire?

*The best humor is always something of a puzzle in its camouflaged criticism, implicit standards, and negativism. Its appreciation requires mental participation by the audience, and its lessons are not hortatory, but self-learned.*

Charles Schulz in Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 15

**The origins of satire.** Satire is not new. It is neither a North American phenomenon nor is it confined to any one medium. While this essay focuses on contemporary satire, namely political satire on television since the 2000s, it is important to acknowledge the origins of satire extend far before this. There are traces of satire in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece even though it was not named *satire*. For instance, Greek playwright, Aristophanes, produced plays with strong critical political and societal commentary particularly with his portrayal of an Athenian general, Cleon, in *The Knights*, representing him as a corrupt, warmongering agitator (Wikipedia). Satire often arises from a need for something important to be said (Jones, 2009, p. 60). Indeed, looking back, satire spans time (millennia), space (geographies) and people (cultural identities) largely because of its potential to address needs that transcends these dimensions. An in-depth look at satire will be discussed next.

**The definition of satire.** As the fan base continues to expand for satire, defining it becomes more complex (Marc, 2009, p. ix). Comedians are constantly changing or adding to their repertoire of techniques. For instance, the *lengthy* news magazine style segments on John Oliver's *LWT* represents a new technique for the genre on television. Because satire is a key concept of this essay, I will initially begin by defining what it is and what it is not. Even though it is a subgenre of comedy, satire does not necessarily need to be funny (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13; O'Connor, 2017, p. 196). It is neither lighthearted like other forms of comedy, nor does it follow a specific formula like the familiar plots of television sit-coms which tend to mock personal behaviors of people (Jones, 2009, p. 60). Furthermore, satire is not necessarily negative or dismissive (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13). Satire can be and often is the opposite of these concepts. What then is satire? As a starting point, it is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary: "the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)). There are two key parts to this definition. Firstly, is that satire criticizes with intent. It is not criticism for its own sake – there is a reason behind it. It often

provokes and “challenges the inequities and prejudices of the social, political and economic status quo” (Holm, 2018, p. 642). Secondly, satire generally serves a purpose in that it offers a form of critique or judgement (Holm, 2018, p. 644). Satirists opine. What this dictionary definition lacks is the important question of *why* it is used. Importantly, satire is used as a method of holding people accountable for their actions (Marc, 2009, p. ix) in pursuit of positive change (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 12). As mentioned earlier, satirical content then arises from a *need* for something important to be said (Jones, 2009, p. 60) and can serve to keep those with power accountable (Marc, 2009, p. ix).

When it comes to how satire functions, it requires context to be understood, i.e., the audience needs to know the specifics about a time, place and people (Test in Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 15). Being an insider is necessary. Furthermore, it “requires a level of sophistication [... and a...] heightened state of awareness and mental participation” (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 15). This requirement of the audience separates satire from other forms of comedy. So, ultimately, satire is humor with a “social purpose” (Kercher in Kilby, 2018, p. 1936) and, the best functioning satire aims to cure, not to hurt (Thompson in Bailey, 2018, p. 200). Satire can attack many issues that come about due to imbalances of power whether it is economic, social or political. Indeed, political satire is imperative to a free and democratic society as it “provides a valuable means through which citizens can analyze and interrogate power and the realm of politics rather than remain simple subjects of it” (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 17). Table 2 provides a summary of the attributes of satire: it has intent, expresses an opinion, requires context to be understood, contests power and has a higher purpose.

**How satire operates.** Irony, exaggeration and ridicule are some of the forms of communication used in satire. Other forms include reversal of fortune, grotesque and stark contrast – all of which challenge established and predictable norms (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 8). Parody is also frequently used in conveying satire. For instance, Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show (TDS)* parodied many of the conventions of television news broadcasts such as Stewart wearing suits, like newscasters, and sitting behind a desk while he read the stories (Day, 2009, p. 87). Furthermore, graphics and videos that supported the stories were shown next to him just like a newscast. John Oliver’s *LWT* follows this form too. The Oxford English Dictionary defines parody as “an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect” ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)). It is important to note that “not all parody is satiric. However, news parody, parody of political speeches or debates, and parody of

other genres of political discourse is often satiric” (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 18). In addition to the attributes of satire previously mentioned, the attributes that are *not* necessarily satiric – including parody, material that is negative, funny or lighthearted – are also outlined in Table 2. To demonstrate the definition of satire just established, contemporary comedic examples from John Oliver (*LWT*) and Stephen Colbert (*TLS*) will be examined next.

**Table 2: Summary – what is satire?**

<b>Attributes:</b>	<b>Can be, but not necessarily:</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Intent:</b> challenges social, political and economic status quo <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Opinion:</b> expresses the satirist’s point of view <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Context:</b> requires insider knowledge about a time, place or people <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Power:</b> originates from the margins or a non-dominant position to contest power <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Higher purpose:</b> aims to cure	<input type="checkbox"/> Negative or dismissive <input type="checkbox"/> Funny <input type="checkbox"/> Parody
	<b>Is not:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Lighthearted

**Net neutrality.** Described earlier, John Oliver’s 2014 segment on net neutrality seems to check all the boxes of satire’s attributes: (1.) it had intent, i.e. to challenge the FCC and its proposed changes to rules regarding net neutrality; (2.) it expressed Oliver’s point of view, i.e., he was undoubtedly in opposition to the changes; (3.) it required context to be understood which Oliver supplied throughout the 13-minute segment; (4.) it originated from a non-dominant position, i.e. a comedian challenging the FCC with the authority to change rules and regulations; and finally, (5.) it had a higher purpose, i.e. to keep the internet free and open for all. The segment on net neutrality clearly has the attributes of satire as have been summarized in this section.

**Bernie Sanders as presidential candidate.** Not all comedy that pokes fun at people, even politicians, is necessarily satirical. For instance, Stephen Colbert sometimes takes jabs at more liberal politicians such as Bernie Sanders, someone who shares some of Colbert’s political views. On February 19, 2019 after Sanders announced he was entering the Democratic primary for the 2020 presidential election, Colbert in a six-minute monologue on *TLS*, made fun of the way Sanders made the announcement, i.e., on Vermont Public Radio. Colbert added to this: “after that he made it official by posting a flier on a bulletin board at his local co-op”. Colbert also suggested that Sanders might face more difficulties climbing to the top of the of the field than back in 2016, by putting up photos of every Democrat who is running or expected to run – a

total of 22 people. Then the producers played a clip of Bernie Sanders talking from earlier in the day:

*We have got to look at candidates, you know, not by the color of their skin, not by their sexual orientation or their gender and not by their age. I mean I think we have got to try to move us toward a nondiscriminatory society which looks at people based on their abilities, based on what they stand for.*

After this, Colbert mimicking Sanders' voice said:

*Yes, like Dr. King, I have a dream. A dream where this diverse nation can come together and be led by an old white guy. Where do I find the courage? Also, where do I find the pudding – I want pudding.*

Colbert goes on further joking about Sanders age and how other candidates have adopted many of the ideas from his 2016 run. Comparing this content to the attributes of satire outlined earlier, it is debatably not satire mostly as there seems to be no intent (i.e. challenge to the political status quo), it lacked a strong opinion on Colbert's behalf, it does not appear to contest power, nor is there a higher purpose behind the comedy. Thus, from the attributes identified in this essay, not all political comedy is satire, even when it is delivered by one of America's top satirists on television today. Political satire will be examined.

## **2. What is political satire?**

So far, I have identified that satire has intent (i.e., it challenges the status quo), it expresses the comedian's opinion, requires context to be understood, comes from a non-dominant position to contest those with power, and has a higher purpose. Furthermore, satire need not necessarily be funny, negative or in the form of a parody. And satire is not lighthearted. As a subgenre of satire, political satire has its own attributes and there is abundant scholarly literature on the subject. While it has all the characteristics of satire, political satire has specific qualities and functions. At its foundation, research has shown that political satire can assist with spreading political knowledge and fulfilling the information needs of citizens living in a democracy (Boler & Turpin in Higgin, 2017, p. 74; Jones, Baym & Day, 2012, p. 3). Indeed, research has demonstrated that satire has been as informative as mainstream journalism (Harrington in O'Connor, 2017, p. 198). This is particularly relevant for younger people who are increasingly getting their news through satire (Gettings in Higgin, 2017, p. 74; Day, 2009, p. 99). On top of its ability to spread knowledge on politics, political satire can correct misinformation of

the news (McClennan & Maisel in O'Connor, 2017, p. 198) and challenge “the authoritative discourses of journalistic and political actors” (Jones, Baym & Day, 2012, p. 3). In this sense, political satire helps keep politicians accountable.

This last point can be underscored by the trust viewers place in certain satirists. For instance, in 2007, Jon Stewart was rated the “fourth most trusted journalist” in a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press despite Stewart’s repeated claims that he is a comedian, not a journalist (Rich, 2015, p. 370). Indeed, correspondents from *TDS* were able to secure press passes to official events like political conventions (Day, 2009, p. 100). Furthermore, research shows that non-journalistic fake news can provide a more authentic version of the news than real news, especially when real version lacks substance due to PR spin and lack of serious interrogation by news media (Jones, Baym & Day, 2012, p. 13; Day, 2009, p. 86). But it is a fine line that satirists walk. For satirists and their comedy to remain sharp with effect, they must remain outsiders (Day, 2009, p. 101). Their somewhat unrestricted position comes from *not* needing to conform to journalistic ideals and operational norms (Kilby, 2018, p. 1936). Ironically, their voices must remain unauthorized in terms of conventional journalism to be considered an authority. Lastly, for political humor to be satiric it should provoke in a meaningful political way (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13). For instance, Stephen Colbert taking comedic aim at Bernie Sanders when he announced that he was running for president does not really provoke political issues. Table 3 summarizes the attributes of political satire: it spreads knowledge on politics including correcting misinformation, it aspires to hold politicians accountable, it has a level of authenticity and evokes trust and it is politically provocative.

**Table 3: Summary – what is political satire?**

- 
- Spreads knowledge on politics and even corrects misinformation
  - Aspires to hold politicians accountable
  - Has authenticity and evokes trust
  - Is politically provocative

***Saturday Night Live.*** Identifying some attributes of political satire helps classify comedic programming. For instance, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* has included political content in its programming since the show’s inception in 1975. However, it can be argued that not all of its sketches on politics or politicians can be categorized as satire according to the attributes developed in this essay. For instance, when Dana Carvey started doing his masterful

impersonation of President George H. Bush, in the late 1980s, including a nasally voice and mimicking his hand gestures, it was funny, however, it lacked political bite and commentary (Jones, 2009, p. 42). As Jones argues, “simply creating material that can be laughed at does not amount to meaningful satire” (2009, p. 42). Thus, not all political comedy is satire. It needs to be politically provocative, such as question those with political power and how they are exercising it.

**Stephen Colbert’s monologue on *TLS* – the Mueller Report.** *The Late Show* airs on weeknights on network television and typically opens with Colbert performing his signature monologue covering current topics in the news, including politics with a *heavy* emphasis on Donald Trump. Colbert’s techniques for storytelling include contrasting news headlines with readings of the President’s tweets mimicking Trump’s voice and hand gestures. The graphics of the news stories and tweets are shown throughout the storytelling lending authenticity to what Colbert is saying. Colbert frequently uses metaphors to demonstrate irony. His extra-long monologue spanning a commercial break the day the Mueller Report – where Robert Mueller investigated Russian interference with the 2016 presidential election – was made public (April 18, 2019) shows an example of irony. During the segment, Colbert went over some of the conclusions of the Report holding a physical copy of the 448-page redacted report in hand like a ream of paper. In a piece of the monologue where Colbert was exploring obstruction of justice charges, he started:

*Trump may or may not have obstructed justice, but it ain’t for lack of trying, because [reading from the report] The President’s efforts to influence the investigation were mostly unsuccessful but that is largely because the persons who surrounded the President declined to carry out orders or accede to his requests.*

Colbert then punctuates the humor with an example and a metaphor. He continued:

*Like his former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski [reading from the report] did not deliver the President’s message to [Jeff] Sessions that he should confine the Russia investigation to future election meddling only.*

Then, mimicking Trump’s voice and hand gestures, Colbert says:

*Look, I will tell you this Kremlin hacking will not stand [pause] from here on out. Russia you get one mulligan, maybe two.*

This piece uses irony in that the act of obstruction has a new timeline: only forward-looking and ignoring the past. The segment demonstrates political satire by spreading knowledge on politics by exploring the Mueller Report findings, aspires to hold politicians accountable by examining possible instances of obstruction of justice, has authenticity due to direct quotes of the report combined with Colbert's reputation as a near journalist on providing political information, and is politically provocative by focusing on Trump's attempts to wield his power to change *only* future investigations.

**Political satire across media.** Political satire in the U.S. and Great Britain is arguably at an all-time high in popularity based on its prevalence throughout the media landscape, including print, podcasts and video. For instance, originally only available in print, *Mad* magazine (1952-present) is known for its influential satirical style. It recently published its 2018 issue featuring the 20 dumbest people, events and things of the year with an oversized and stylized illustration of Donald Trump on the front cover. A podcast called *The Bugle*, an independent weekly show of comedic commentary about the news stories from around the world and hosted by British comedian and author Andy Zaltzman out of the UK, was relaunched in 2016 and frequently discusses contemporary issues around Brexit, Donald Trump's presidency and human rights in Saudi Arabia. Even TED Talks has touched upon political satire. For example, American satirist, comedy writer and producer, Joe Raiola, recently hosted a TED Talk called: *Does political satire matter in the Age of Donald Trump?* where he challenged the value of satire aimed at a U.S. president who appears "to be invincible" to it (2017). Although it was not always the case, satire is now ubiquitous through both cable and network television programming. For instance, John Oliver, Stephen Colbert or Samantha Bee – all former alumni of Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* with its epic and frequently documented run from 1999-2015 – currently contribute to a daily feed of political satire which is available to those with access to the internet and a screen as well as a desire to laugh. Arguably, political satire on television is at its pinnacle simply because of the sheer volume of it since the U.S. election in 2016 (Raiola, TED Talk, 2017). In the next section, I will look specifically at television as a medium for satire.

### 3. Why focus on television?

*Television is the "least confident" of media, "the most terrified of rejection, scared that if you stop being funny for a single moment its audience will have reached for the remote.*

Peter Keighron in Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13

**The broadcast network era.** While satire is not new, its prevalence on television is. Well before satirical television gained its current level of popularity, television was more often the topic of satire than a medium that satire was distributed on (Marc, 2009, p. xi). Indeed, during the broadcast era of television – from the 1950s to the 1980s, where there were a few large television networks in the U.S. – satirical programming was an occasional style compared to other forms of comedy such as sit-coms and comedy-variety shows. Satirical programming did not mix well with the expectations of network executives. Television executives and producers expected comedy to be funny (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, content that might “offend audiences, alienate advertisers, and undermine network economics” (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 22) was steered clear of. Network executives feared that satire could be too cryptic and out-of-reach for the mass audiences they wanted to attract as they might not get the jokes (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 20). As mentioned in the definition of satire section of this essay, satire need not necessarily be funny and requires context to be understood, i.e., the audience needs to be in on the joke. Also, satirists tend to opine on controversial subjects. Because of these attributes, many network producers navigated away from satire as it was considered riskier than other forms of comedy. Instead, during the broadcast era, comedic television programming tended to be more conservative than what might be broadcast on radio or appear in print at the time. This fundamentally changed, however, with the shift from television broadcasting to mass audiences to narrowcasting to niche audiences.

**Narrowcasting.** As touched upon earlier, the history of satirical television differs from that of other media. Indeed, satire was disseminated through print and vinyl long before it was aired on television (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 20). Technology changed this. One of the advancements that enabled satire to be regularly broadcast on television was the means of transmission: cable (Marc, 2009, p. xi). While cable was started in the 1950s, it was only when the satellite transponders covered much of the earth that the technology could support narrowcasting (Marc, 2009, p. xi). This has been one the main reasons for the proliferation of specialty genres that appeal to smaller audiences including a network that fully embraced satire, Comedy Central, with its beginnings in the 1990s (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 14). Satirical programming has proliferated on Comedy Central with programs that challenge the status quo on social, political and economic issues including *South Park*, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

**Blurring of news and entertainment.** The immense popularity of Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central demonstrates another quality that television as a medium has: the blurring of news and entertainment (Day, 2009, p. 85). Indeed, news and entertainment are not mutually exclusive realms and there is much research on this subject. For instance, the phrase *discursive integration* describes how the blurring of boundaries between “discourses of news politics, entertainment, and marketing have grown deeply inseparable” (Tinic, 2009, p. 168). Another example comes from media critic Neil Postman. Back in 1985 he referred to this blending or blurring of news and entertainment as infotainment. Postman was greatly concerned with the burgeoning of broadcast television and its effects such as marking the death of public discourse and rationale thinking and its resulting in the dumbing-down of people. He was highly critical of television and show-business suggesting that the medium was reshaping everything from politics, education, religion and journalism into pure entertainment.

Postman said:

*Those who run television do not limit our access to information but in fact widen it. [...] It does everything possible to encourage us to watch continuously. But what we watch is a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say, information packaged as entertainment.*

1985, p. 141

While Postman’s seminal book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, was written before television satire became commonplace on the medium, its content ostensibly fits with contemporary satirical programming: the blurring of news and entertainment. Indeed, the comedians mentioned frequently in this essay – John Oliver, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart – all have or had programs that mimicked the news in a satirical way, literally blending news and entertainment. But, as outlined in the definition section, satire has intent, expresses an opinion, requires context to be understood, contests power and has a higher purpose. Satire requires more from its audience than basic sit-coms or variety shows. Indeed, many scholars have contrasted the works of Jon Stewart and *TDS* versus journalism (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 279; Andersson, 2018, p. 1). Satire has a level of sophistication not present in sit-coms or other comedy programming. Furthermore, many have mentioned that young people are getting their news from news parody programming (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 28; Day, 2009, p. 99). Indeed, some might argue that television satire has the ability to reignite public discourse.

Satire has an earnest quality and a level of authenticity that is appealing to citizens and politicians alike:

*It is the very quality that politicians and other overproduced public figures bend over backward attempting to convey, while there is something about the unabashedly personal, ironic, tongue-in-cheek perspective that appears refreshingly authentic.*

Amber Day, 2009, p. 101

In this new era of narrowcasting and overly-produced politicians and business people, satirical television could potentially bring back a certain level of discourse that critiques those with power. John Oliver's lengthy segment on the release of the Mueller Report demonstrates this potential and is discussed next.

**John Oliver's segment on LWT – the Mueller Report.** The Sunday after the Mueller Report was released (April 21, 2019), John Oliver delivered a 14-plus minute segment on some of its content. Not only was it chock-full of satire, but Oliver concisely and compellingly delivered some of the reports most interesting findings about the two-year investigation. Most notably, Oliver chose to examine two key factors of the report that, as he suggests will likely save Trump's presidency. First, is incompetence when it came to conspiracy with Russia. And second, is disobedience when it came to obstruction of justice.

On the first factor, incompetence, Oliver outlines:

*The report found multiple instances where people tied to the Russian government offered Trump's campaign assistance and, in some instances, the campaign was receptive. But the thing that seemed to stop closer coordination from happening was often cartoonish levels of disorganization and incompetence. On top of which, there were times when Trump's team's ignorance of basic legal concepts seems to have actively helped shield them from criminal liability. Most notably when it came to the infamous Trump Tower meeting featuring Don Jr., Jared, Paul Manafort and a Russian offering more dirt.*

Oliver summed it up the incompetence issue:

*Trump's saving grace may have been that despite Russians wanting to help, everyone around him was too inept to work with them.*

On the second factor, obstruction of justice, Oliver goes on:

*Despite ample evidence that he tried to do it, everyone around him was too disobedient to listen.*

He continues to describe that Trump ordered at least 10 officials or associates to perform duties that might constitute obstruction, however, no one listened. Throughout Oliver's delivery, producers showed a variety of clips from *real* news broadcast shows including those on CNN and MSNBC, peppering in satirical analogies with the use of profanity.

Oliver saves the best for last using irony to provoke the audience's thinking. Towards the end of the Mueller Report segment, Oliver pokes Trump and his administration for taking an "unearned victory lap" with the report's conclusions. He shows a clip of Trump's campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway, saying:

*The idea that any of us, and me, as the campaign manager would cheat, steal, lie, cut corners, talk to Russians was an insult from the beginning.*

Oliver challenged:

*But was it though? Was it? An insult would be to say that Kellyanne Conway died many years ago and is now a skin suit occupied and operated by 300 rats that have evolved the ability to lie. That's an insult. That's what an insult is. A fact, however... A fact is that the Mueller Report explicitly shows Trump and his associates doing many of the things that she just listed.*

Oliver's segment hits all the attributes of satire and political satire. It has intent by challenging the political status quo. It unequivocally shows Oliver's opinion. It provides context by clearly summarizing two reasons Trump will likely remain in the White House. It originates from a non-dominant position to contest power. Furthermore, it aims to cure the issues such as foreign intervention of U.S. presidential elections. And finally, the act spreads knowledge on politics and correct misinformation and aspires to hold politicians accountable. Throughout the segment, Oliver comes across as knowledgeable and authentic evoking the audience's trust. Oliver's work here is unquestionably politically provocative, challenging the behaviors and actions of the political elite.

**Going viral and the concept of liveness.** Finally, television is an interesting medium to focus on because it can be shared easily, widely and frequently on social media, i.e., it can go viral. This has contributed to the spread contemporary television satire. Indeed, John Oliver's 2014 story on net neutrality mentioned at the beginning of this essay demonstrates this viral quality. While the show's initial broadcast on HBO attracted 1.17 million U.S. viewers, a video of the segment on the show's YouTube channel logged an additional 16 million views so far. Similarly, the episode reviewing the Mueller Report attracted 1.31 million U.S. viewers on HBO that day (according to Showbuzzdaily's Top 150 Sunday Cable Originals Network Finals). Only 21 days after airing on HBO, the segment on Oliver's YouTube channel was viewed in excess of six million times. In addition to this viral quality, television has another quality, the concept of liveness, contrasting it from cinema (Day, 2009, p. 93). This liveness or near liveness is key as satire is frequently used to tackle up-to-the-moment issues. Comedians can react to a quickly changing political landscape with television satire. These qualities, along with narrowcasting and the shift to infotainment, make television a unique medium for researching satire. How television satire contributes to political critique is examined next.

#### **4. How does television satire contribute to political critique?**

*True political satire can be funny or prescient, but it always attacks power with cheekiness rather than tickling its cheeks powerlessly.*

Jeffrey Jones, 2009, p. 60

**The expected.** Satire television has contributed to the political landscape in both expected and unexpected ways. On the expected side, as a method of political communication, satire has an ability to "attack power and pass judgement on the powerful while doing so in playful and entertaining ways", (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 12). While critics may claim that satire "diminishes meaning" (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13) "great ironists such as Shakespeare tended to expand meaning" (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, political satire is partisan. The satirist represents the voices of their community (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 16) and provide a way to attack power and those who have it: "satire provides a valuable means through which citizens can analyze and interrogate power and the realm of politics rather than remain simple subjects of it" (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 17). Indeed, *TDS* with Jon Stewart surfaced on cable television from the fringes of political discourse (Bailey, 2018, p. 202). These are just a few of the expected outcomes of satire on the

political landscape: it results in expanded meaning and understanding of political issues along partisan lines and provides a more subjective way to view and critique them.

**The unexpected.** What might be somewhat unexpected is that politicians and their associates, seeing the popularity of satire television, are finding ways to take advantage of it by linking themselves with the very shows that can lambaste them. These days politicians are commonplace on television. Why? Politicians seek ways to enhance their value as citizens (Gray, 2009, p. 150). Indeed, actively looking for opportunities to be a part of comedy has become a part of political campaigning for its cultural capital (Higgie, 2017, p. 76). For instance, in 1992, Bill Clinton appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* playing saxophone making him be more relatable to voters. Clinton was not the first. Back in 1968, Republican candidate Richard Nixon appeared on the American sketch comedy show *Laugh-In* in the famous “Sock it to me” sketch actually saying the words: “sock it to me”. Nixon then went on to become president. Similarly, Donald Trump hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 2015, the year before he became president. Politicians looking to connect with their bases and broader audiences are not only willing but *pursuing* the opportunities to be associated with popular comedians, even satirists. While this might seem harmless, it may not be. In politics, likeability matters (O’Connor, 2017, p. 202). Indeed, American satirist and former editor of MAD magazine Joe Raiola warned that when politicians are portrayed in humorous ways that make them seem more relatable, they are ceding or yielding comedic ground. Raiola said:

*It is not the job of political satirists to cozy up to politicians, make them feel comfortable, or give them an opportunity to show the world what a great sense of humor they have. When political satirists do that, they give their power away.*

TED Talk, 2017

Perhaps another unexpected contribution of satire to political critique is its reachability. There is a large segment of society that political satire just does not reach and there are two key reasons for this. First, not everyone has access to cable. Comedy Central and HBO are paid subscription services. While segments are found on YouTube, the programming does not reach mass audiences. Second is the prevalence of echo chambers throughout the media landscape which describes a situation whereby people’s beliefs are “amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system” (Wikipedia). While in these chambers, people look for information that underpins their existing opinions and beliefs. Indeed, Raiola

acknowledged that there are limitations to political satire especially nowadays as we all live in our own echo chambers of our own creation. As such, that satirists are often preaching to the proverbial choir.

**Post 9/11 satire.** Much of the political television satire since 9/11 shifted focus to the topic of journalism, specifically how there is an over-reliance on the notion of objectivity with emphasis on facts, being unbiased and nonpartisan. Media critics show how, among other things, the notion of objectivity end up favoring the viewpoints of government and big business due to an over-reliance on official sources, at times constructing a false balance (Hackett and Zhao, 1996, p. 6). This *balance* simply means that every side receives equal billing even when there are times they should not. For instance, on the topic of climate change, minority skeptics, as opposed to the majority of scientists, should not have equally billing on media as it can lead to political foot-dragging on key environmental policies (Cottle, 2009, p. 83). Another critique of journalism is that just objectively reporting facts in a disinterested way, can lead to lazy reporting (Cunningham, 2003, para. 10). Thus, journalistic objectivity can pose challenges.

Political television satire potentially provides an alternative, subjective point of view to conventional journalism as well as challenges news media itself. For instance, a common technique of news parody shows is to use a montage of news media clips on various networks saying the same thing juxtaposed to what the comedian is saying (Morreale, 2009, p. 113). In a sense, this can demonstrate the media's complicity in covering inconsequential topics. For instance, on *LWT*, John Oliver has a short segment called "How is this still a thing?" which focuses on benign themes aired across television news reporting. In one of these segments Oliver's team showed several news anchors including Jeff Glor, Wolf Blitzer and Scott Pelley running through the history of how voting for presidential elections came to be on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. This segment highlights how news outlets sometimes focus on trivial matters at times, rather than helping citizens with their information needs.

Whereas television journalism adheres to the notion of objectivity in a dispassionate way – which has arguably translated into a "hesitancy to question" in a post 9/11 era – political satire television acts as a sort of "comedic interrogator" (Day, 2009, p. 95). Satirists have a certain freedom to cross examine. They act as an "every person stand in" (Day, 2009, p. 96). Satire can play an important role in challenging news media to question politicians. Also, satirical television can challenge politicians and their actions directly. How satire contributes to awareness and change is examined next.

## 5. How has satire contributed to awareness and change?

*When it works, satire TV is that rare delicacy: something that entertains, yet also makes us think critically, something that hails us as audiences looking for a laugh, yet also as citizens desiring meaningful engagement with public life.*

In Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 32

Scholarly literature on the efficacy of satire contributing to change is mixed. As Kilby claims, “TV satire is fraught with limitations” such as “its inability to change politics, its ability to encourage apathy and promote a partisan logic” and it “preaches to converted audiences” (2018, p. 1934). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, television satire is situated in infotainment which critics like Neil Postman and Robert McChesney claim contributes to the demise of public discourse (2018, p. 1935). However, even with its limitations, Kilby argues that “in the wake of Trump’s presidency, TV satire’s reporting practices have moved beyond comedy and critical discourse, and into the field of advocacy journalism” (2018, p. 1942). Perhaps the most significant contribution of satire is the promise of breaking through the clutter, whether it is bullshit, echo chambers or perhaps most importantly, apathy. These three topics will be covered next.

**Breaking through the bullshit.** President Trump recently reached a new milestone for politicians: telling over 10,000 lies. On May 2, 2019, he told his followers on Twitter that he “never told then-White House Counsel Don McGahn to fire Robert Mueller”. From Mueller’s Report, which disclosed that Trump was obsessed with firing the special counsel, Trump’s tweet was proven to be a lie. It was bullshit. As Baym claims, the term bullshit is a provocative concept, “a form of language use that doesn’t rise to the level of actual *communication*” (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 286). Baym contrasted bullshit to Habermas’ concept of “strategic speech” which is speech with the aim of honestly moving the speaker and listener closer to mutual understanding or consensus (p. 286). Baym claims:

*Bullshit is a subset of speech that doesn’t simply misrepresent the facts but displays a complete disinterest in the very concept of truth, emptied of any notion of validity. Bullshit is the primary language of advertising.*

2010, p. 286

While Baym's work on bullshit was published in 2010, it seems even more significant in today's political environment than it was then. The 10,000-lie milestone Trump recently surpassed underscores this. Bullshit can affect the news too. Indeed, when it comes to news, Jones and Baym suggest:

*Most news has become a product packaged to sell with its interests resting far more with attracting audiences and protecting corporate priorities than informing the citizenry and holding power accountable.*

2010, p. 281

Some of the attributes of satire – its intent to challenge, contest power and aim to cure – satire can be a remedy to bullshit (Andersson, 2018, p. 14). Satire and specifically news parody have been described as “essential resources [...] for an engaged, sustainable, democratic public culture” (Hariman in Bailey, 2018, p. 202). Citizens need to be informed in a democracy, but it would be a mistake to think that democracy can only result from “serious public discourse” (Hariman in Bailey, 2018, p. 202). Because satire requires the audience to understand the context, the comedic subgenre can require more active engagement on the part of the audience than other types of content, even the news (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 290). Satire can be a powerful instrument when it comes to fighting PR spin and bullshit. Furthermore, Tinic suggests that one of the powerful characteristics of satire is its normative quality: “satire as a discursive form that emphasizes the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be” (2009, p. 176). Hence, satire can contribute to awareness and change by challenging bullshit.

**Breaking through the echo chambers.** As cable transformed the transmission abilities of television from broadcasting to narrowcasting resulting in niche audiences, it also contributed to the echo chambers that permeate throughout society today. The dangers of echo chambers are that people are surrounded by mostly those who share the same beliefs including their views of the world. People's beliefs are then continually reinforced. Satirists could potentially break through the echo chambers of others with differing beliefs, but they likely need some guidance in at least two areas. First, is that satirists should keep their aim solely at those in power and *not* those who support them. No one wants to be called names as Hilary Clinton found out after publicly calling half of Trump's supporters a “basket of deplorables” in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election. Rather than permeating an echo chamber, name calling can result in the opposite: making the walls more impermeable. As political analyst, Zerlina Maxwell, said while sitting as a panelist on Bill Mahar's show *Real Time with Bill Mahar* on April

26, 2019: we need to “stop being assholes”. While she made the comment in reference to preventing discriminatory behavior, the simple and sage advice works as guidance for *not* further cementing the boundaries of echo chambers. Satirists could have more impact by focusing completely on their targets and not the target’s supporters.

Second, liberal politicians and activists need to make more frequent appearances on the news media that support the Trump Presidency and promulgate a more right-leaning and divisive ideology: Fox News. Exposing the quick wit of satirists, with their aim sharply directed at those with power, on media that speak to those with differing ideologies, will allow for opportunities to break through the walls of the echo chambers. In order to make a difference when it comes to elections, citizens need to care *and* act; breaking through apathy is discussed next.

**Breaking through the apathy.** Apathy is arguably one of the most significant real dangers with respect to a political democracy. Detractors of satirists have questioned the ability of satire to engage citizens in any consequential way. Even worse, some suggest that satire only inspires cynicism (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 7). This essay started with a segment from John Oliver’s show *LWT* that aired immediately after the 2016 election of President Trump. As Garber pointed out in her November 14, 2016 article in *The Atlantic* entitled: *John Oliver, Activist*, Oliver’s self-declared enemy is apathy. She noted that “he has long been dissatisfied with anger and indignation alone; his shows have generally doubled as calls to action” (para. 7). Indeed, Oliver ended the seminal post-election episode with several calls to action:

*We’re gonna need to stay here and fight. And not just in four years, but constantly. [...] If you can afford the time or money, support organizations that are going to need help under a Trump administration. For instance, if you’re concerned about women’s health, donate to Planned Parenthood, or the Center for Reproductive Rights. If you don’t believe man-made global warming is a silly issue, donate to the Natural Resources Defense Council. If you don’t think refugees are a terrorist army in disguise, donate to the International Refugee Assistance Project.*

Oliver further recommends that people donate to NAACP Legal Defense Fund, The Trevor Project for LGBTQ youth and the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Oliver suggested that people make recurring donations as “this is not a short-term problem”.

Ultimately, apathy is the real villain of democracy. While the amount of scholarly literature on satire has burgeoned along with the proliferation of satire on television, research on the effects of exposure to satire with *calls to action* like what John Oliver frequently does on *LWT* is mixed. As Bode and Becker (2018) conclude in their research on *LWT* that “political satire can have a mobilizing effect, but only for small, low-cost political behaviors” (p. 1573). For instance, for the segment on net neutrality mentioned near the beginning of this essay, leaving comments on the FCC website is considered a small behavior (Bode & Becker, 2018, p. 1578). Oliver’s call to action worked here. But, for behaviors that require more of an investment on behalf of the audience – for example, seeking out more information or contacting politicians – are not affected by exposure to calls to action made during an episode (Bode & Becker, 2018, p. 1578). The authors conclude that the exposure to satire with calls to action that required deeper engagement in an issue in a single episode did not have a noticeable effect (Bode & Becker, 2018, p. 1579). However, Bode and Becker do suggest that future research on the effects of *repeated calls to action over time* is needed (2018, p. 1581).

## Conclusion

*Laughter performs a very important role in setting a tone through which genuine democratic exchange can occur.*

In Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 282

As Tinic suggests, “satire serves as a barometer of the temper of the times” (2009, p. 178). Although her comment was published a decade ago, it seems ever-more appropriate today than it was back then. Indeed, in many ways, satire is becoming more popular, more pervasive and arguably more provocative in today’s media landscape. And as has been noted in this essay, satire as a topic or instrument for critical commentary, has spread throughout media, including the comparatively late entrant: television. As Hariman suggests, satire is an “essential resource” and that “scholars should not assume that democracy needs only the right forms of serious public discourse” (Bailey, p. 202). Political dialogue needs to be expanded beyond the authorized voices, like those of journalists, to be more inclusive. Comedians and satirists, in many ways, and on many topics, have proven to provide their audiences with information and alternative ways to think about issues that are imperative nowadays, spanning from social to political to economic issues and beyond.

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# Fake news: A look at deception and facts in the U.S. during the 21<sup>st</sup> century

## Introduction

*Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.*

Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927-2003)  
American politician, sociologist and diplomat<sup>1</sup>

It is no surprise that the frequency of the phrase *fake news* has skyrocketed in recent years on the media landscape. One only needs to look at the volume of books, news and scholarly articles published since the 2016 U.S. presidential election related to “*fake news*” as a bellwether on the popularity of the subject. For instance, when searching *fake news* as part of the subject in the SFU Library Catalogue online on July 4, 2019, 377 out of a total of 403 search results over the past ten years (or 94% since 2009), were published within the past two years (since 2017)<sup>2</sup>. Not surprisingly, this is related largely to the number of mentions in the field of politics. Other subjects that come up in the ten-year search period for *fake news* include: social media (62 instances), computing and processing (45), misinformation (44), journalism (37), social networks (36), disinformation (30), media (28), news (28), Twitter (28) and news media (27). All these subjects clearly relate to the current political environment in the United States.

Today the topic of *fake news* touches the public in various ways. For example, the seemingly benign technology FaceApp, which takes people’s photos and uses artificial intelligence ages them, could become a form of *fake news* content. The app went viral recently with many celebrities including Heidi Klum, Drake, Mindy Kaling and Mario Lopez among others posting their before and after images on social media. The story was picked up across traditional news outlets and social media. As Geoffry Fowler of *The Washington Post* pointed out, in the app’s fine print, the company is granted a “‘perpetual’ license to use the photos” (para. 10). While the app’s CEO, Yaroslav Goncharov said FaceApp deletes “most” photos after 48 hours, that may not be the end of the story. According to Fowler, in the app’s terms, it gives the company “and whoever might buy it or work with it in the future – the right to do whatever it wants, through an ‘irrevocable, nonexclusive, royalty-free, worldwide, fully-paid, transferrable

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel\\_Patrick\\_Moynihan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Patrick_Moynihan)

<sup>2</sup> A search for “fake news” in the subject field over the past ten years in the SFU Library Catalogue was conducted on July 4, 2019. Preferred disciplines automatically filtered included business & economics, journalism & communications as well as political sciences. No other filters were applied. 403 search results were served up between 2009 – 2019. 377 search results were served up between 2017 – 2019.

sub-licensable license” (2019, para. 11). Privacy and data issues aside (*a very big aside*), the artificially aged photos are manipulated content, which some might argue can become a form of *fake news* if they are published widely on news media. This type of *fake news* content will be explored further in this essay.

*Fake news* seems to now describe many forms of content circulating online. Furthermore, the phrase’s meaning has changed considerably during the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a pivot point coming shortly after the 2016 presidential election in the United States. Indeed, over a relatively short period of time, the phrase went from a way to view and gain perspective about the news media, typically in the form of TV satire, to a way to call any news or news organization that the president does not agree with.

In this essay, I will examine *fake news* in its recent evolution primarily in the United States. I will start with a look at how the phrase was socially constructed since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, highlighting the meaning before and after Donald Trump became president. This pivot in meaning sets the stage for the rest of the essay. And, because issues around *fake news* are not new, I will look at other periods in history that can provide perspective. For instance, media hoaxes, advertising, propaganda and public relations provide interesting comparisons around manipulated content. Then I will look at *fake news* using two recently published frameworks: Tandoc, Lim and Ling’s version that looks at facticity and intention and Wardle’s seven types of mis- and disinformation published on the non-profit website [www.firstdraftnews.org](http://www.firstdraftnews.org). These frameworks help shape definitions of the types of *fake news* in circulation as well as identify content that should not be considered *fake news*. Lastly, I will discuss some of the implications of *fake news*. The topics covered in this essay fall under four main sections and are outlined in Table 1: (1.) *Fake news* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; (2.) The history of deception and manipulation in news media; (3.) Defining *fake news*; and (4.) Implications of the new *fake news*.

**Table 1: Topics examined in this essay**

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1. *Fake news* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
  2. The history of deception and manipulation in news media
  3. Defining *fake news*
    - a. The continuums of intent and facticity (Tandoc, Lim and Ling)
    - b. Seven types of mis- and disinformation (Wardle)
  4. Implications of the *new fake news*

## 1. Fake news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

*The ability to reshape language—even a little—is an awesome power to have. According to language experts on both sides of the [political] aisle, the rebranding of fake news could be a genuine threat to democracy.*

Danielle Kurtzleben (2017), in Brummette (2018), p. 502

**Before President Trump.** The meaning of *fake news* has morphed considerably over the past two decades and can be separated into before and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Prior to the election, the phrase's meaning was influenced heavily by Jon Stewart and his epic run on *The Daily Show* from 1999 through 2015. Indeed, it could be argued that *The Daily Show* epitomized *fake news* during this time simple due to the frequency it is referenced in both pop culture and academic research. The show airs on Comedy Central, a specialty channel which extols satire as a central tenet to its brand strategy (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p. 29). From Monday through Thursday each week, Stewart would discuss current news stories and events in front of a live audience, debate issues with politicians and pundits, and punctuate the segments with largely left-leaning satirical commentary (Day, 2009, p. 85). What was unique during Stewart's run was how the show contrasted with other TV comedy shows at the time. Unlike situational comedies, variety shows with skits and impersonations and standup comedy, *The Daily Show* mastered a combination of the mimetic and the real (Day, 2009, p. 85). The mimetic, or imitation of something, (Day, 2009, p. 85) coupled with real news and events footage and headlines was (and still is) foundational to the show's format. Stewart would recap and deconstruct news headlines, copy, video clips and interviews repackaging them in a satirical, sometimes witty, manner which invariably had a deeper meaning and intent. Indeed, satire is a special kind of humor with a "social purpose" (Kercher in Kilby, 2018, p. 1936) and often challenges power. In fact, as Day (2009) claims, Stewart often targeted mainstream news media for its "lack of substance" around political discussions, its "lack of interrogation" in reporting, and allowing the proliferation of "public-relations spin" throughout the news (p. 86).

*The Daily Show* uses many of the tropes in mainstream news (Day, 2009, p. 87) blending the real with the mimetic. For instance, the anchor person sits behind a large desk, videos and photos and corresponding texts are shown off the shoulder of the anchor as are logos and stylized backgrounds (Day, 2009, p. 87). The show also features news correspondents much like straight news programs, who, with press credentials, *report* from events like political campaigns. Real news content is the foundational content for *The Daily*

*Show* and taking a critical look at the *news*. At times, the show acts as “investigative journalism” that is often missing in mainstream media (Morreale, 2009, p. 110). Indeed, in highlighting issues in the coverage of news and providing critique of news media, politics and organizations, Jon Stewart became the “every-person stand-in”, i.e. “the viewer’s surrogate”, an outlet for viewers’ frustrations is issues (Day, 2009, p. 96). In fact, Day argues that Stewart and the show provide a more authentic and trustworthy version of straight news. She (2009, p. 85) explains:

*Though the program is almost universally referred to as “fake news,” that label obscures the show’s more complicated relationship to “real” news programming, as well as the attraction it holds for fans frustrated with the compromised authenticity and relevance of straight news programming. Less a fictionalized imitation, the program acts as a comedically critical filter through which to process the suspect real world of reportage and debate.*

This trustworthy aspect was underscored by research conducted by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign whereby 21 percent of Americans between the ages of 18-49 learned about the candidates and the campaigns from comedy shows (Day, 2009, p. 99). Thus, *fake news*, particularly as it has operated in the U.S. in the 21<sup>st</sup> century up until 2016, was largely shaped and understood through a lens Jon Stewart developed with his alumni including John Oliver, Stephen Colbert and Samantha Bee. *The Daily Show* and the shows it spun off – such as *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver and *Full Frontal* with Samantha Bee – blurred the lines between real or straight news and entertainment providing viewers both information on politics, economic and social issues as well as opinions on how to view current happenings. The frequency that Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* has been written about from an academic and pop culture perspective demonstrates the level to which the show was associated with *fake news*. But the meaning would change soon enough, not long after Stewart left the anchor’s desk.

**After Donald Trump became president.** The meaning of *fake news* took a turn after the election. It turned from a genre of a comedy show to something more sinister. According to an article published on *BuzzFeed* on October 20, 2016, a few weeks prior to the presidential election, a worrisome phenomenon was happening (Gorbach, 2018, p. 236). The first sentence of the article said it all: Hyperpartisan political Facebook pages and websites are consistently

feeding their millions of followers false or misleading information<sup>3</sup>. While the accompanying story did not attract much attention immediately, Donald Trump's win the following month and Mark Zuckerberg's retort of Facebook's connection as "a pretty crazy idea" sounded the alarm that *fake news* had disrupted the election and delivered Trump the win (Gorbach, 2018, p. 236). A flurry of articles on the subject were subsequently published.

Not long afterwards, another development in how the phrase *fake news* would be used came directly from the U.S. president. In January 2017, Trump, in response to a question from reporter Jim Acosta of CNN said: "you're fake news" (Wendling, 2018, para. 20). He also repeated the phrase on Twitter. Some claim it was at that moment where Trump co-opted the phrase and began to use it to describe any media outlet that took a critical stance with him (Benkler, 2018, p. 18; Brummette, 2018, p. 499). Since then, he has weaponized the phrase against mainstream media even going so far as to call them the "enemy of the people". Trump has taken it further by creating Fake News Awards for those news outlets he claimed misrepresented him in the lead up to the election and during his presidency announcing the winners on a blog post of the GOP website on January 17, 2018<sup>4</sup>. What's more is that his continual unrelenting use of *fake news* publicly has likely heightened his supporters' distrust of mainstream media (Benkler, 2018, p. 18). The phrase's meaning has clearly morphed from how it was socially constructed under Jon Stewart's time on *The Daily Show*.

In addition to understanding the context around how *fake news* has shifted during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, defining some key terms is also foundational to this essay including deception, manipulation, truth and post-truth. These definitions, from the Oxford English Dictionary are provided in Table 2. The last two words, truth and post-truth, are of particular interest as they can have very different meanings based on the context. For example, truth can be associated with spiritual reality or faith. In this essay, truth will have a pragmatic definition relating to facts. In the next section, I will examine a historical context of deception and manipulation in news media.

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Silverman et al., Hyperpartisan Facebook Pages Are Publishing False and Misleading Information at an Alarming Rate. [www.buzzfeed.com](http://www.buzzfeed.com)

<sup>4</sup> [www.gop.com/the-highly-anticipated-2017-fake-news-awards](http://www.gop.com/the-highly-anticipated-2017-fake-news-awards)

**Table 2: Definitions of key terms**

Deception	The action of deceiving or cheating
Manipulation	The exercise of subtle, underhand, or devious influence or control over a person, organization, etc.
Truth	Something that conforms with fact or reality
Post-truth	Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion or personal belief

Source: Oxford English Dictionary ([www.oed.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca](http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca))

## 2. The history of deception and manipulation in news media

*Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.*

Thomas Jefferson (1807) in Gorbach, 2018, p. 237

**The origins of fake news in America.** While the phrase *fake news* is a relatively contemporary one—indeed, the word *fake* is only about 100 years old (Fallon in Brummette et al, 2018, p. 498)—the idea of deception in journalism in the United States goes back several centuries. Deception is not bound by geography, people or time. Traces of deceit can even be found in ancient times (Darnton in Brummette et al, 2018, p. 498). Some claim that the concept of *fake news* has been around since print was invented 500 years ago (Soll in Brummette, 2018, p. 498). Moreover, deceit is not a new concept in news media. In fact, as Georgetown associate professor, Jonathan Ladd (2011, p. 6) clearly articulates, truth and facts in news did not always go hand-in-hand; he claims that only in a brief period of history when the press were trusted, from 1950 to the 1970s:

*The existence of an independent, powerful, widely respected news media establishment is an historical anomaly. [...] Prior to the twentieth century, such an institution had never existed in American history.*

Deceptive messages are “knowingly transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the receiver” (Buller & Burgoon in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 351). There have been various reasons documented for deception from bringing public attention to social issues to entertaining and selling newspapers to partisan politics. Indeed, there are periods of time over the past few centuries in American journalism when these themes are more prevalent.

In this section, I will examine deceptive messages such as media hoaxes including how and why they were used to manipulate audiences; the introduction of professionalization in American journalism including the movement towards the notion of objectivity; and finally, the rise of public relations.

**Media hoaxes.** Some consider media or literary hoaxes as a precursor to *fake news*. They tend to have the following traits: “deliberately concocted untruth made to masquerade as truth” (MacDougall in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 352); “usually created to entertain—not cheat—the public” (Fedler in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 353); and typically have a higher motivation around “shap[ing] public opinion and to attract the public’s attention” (Boese in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 353). From this aspect, hoaxes are similar to satire which will be covered in the next section. Historically, media hoaxes served a purpose: they were used as a means for critiquing social and political challenges (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 353). Hoaxes differ from fraud in that the truth eventually becomes public and the farce is uncovered (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 353). To pull off media hoaxes, three conditions typically apply: (1.) the sender must be aware of the untruth and the receiver must not, (2.) the sender intends the audience to believe it, and (3.) the hoax requires a large audience, i.e., it is public as opposed to private (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 356). Comparatively speaking, non-political media hoaxes were innocuous and inconsequential forms of deception; people were mostly unharmed (Barclay, 2018, p. 43).

**a. Hoaxes as critiques (1700s to early 1800s).** One of the earliest hoaxes that was published in news was orchestrated by British satirist Jonathan Swift in 1708. Swift was motivated to expose “astrologers as charlatans” (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354). He concocted a story where he publicly predicted the death of astrologer and almanac-maker, John Partridge (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354) by writing his own almanac under the name Isaac Bickerstaff (Wikipedia)<sup>5</sup>. However, Partridge was very much alive and angered by Swift’s actions. Later, Partridge published his own letter to refute the claim and assert he was alive. As with modern day satire, the hoax had a specific purpose: exposing that astrology was not supported by science. Indeed, Swift had initiated the hoax as a form of critique of those who believed in pseudoscience (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354; Gorbach, 2018, p. 239).

A look at Benjamin Franklin’s works provides other examples of media hoaxes that serve a higher purpose and shape public opinion—and he made a fortune doing so (Gorbach, 2018,

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<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Bickerstaff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Bickerstaff)

p. 259). In 1747, Franklin crafted a speech that was published in the London *General Advertiser* from the court hearing of the fictitious Polly Baker drawing public attention to how women were punished for having children out-of-wedlock while fathers were not (Boese in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354; hoaxes.org). Later, other British newspapers and magazines reprinted the speech (hoaxes.org). Franklin followed this hoax with others in an effort to continually publicly criticize social injustices (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354). Franklin also used hoaxes to condemn British policies regarding American colonies as well as “religious intolerance, slavery and witchcraft” (Fedler in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354). Thus, early satirists like Swift and Franklin concocted and published hoaxes throughout media with the purpose of shaping public opinion on a range of issues of the day. The purpose of conducting hoaxes would change over the next century from influencing public opinion to one rooted in commerce and entertainment.

**b. Hoaxes as entertainment (mid-1800s to early 1900s).** The advent of the penny press in the 1830s helped accelerate newspaper production with entertainment content. Technological advances around printing, namely steam-powered presses enabling mass production (hoaxes.org), combined with advertising revenues contributed to faster and cheaper printing at a price that working people could afford to pay (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354). For instance, the *New York Sun* with its “high quota of human interest stories” (Thussa, 2012, p. 364) sold for one penny at a time when those of the competition cost six cents (Thussa, 2012, p. 364). On a highly competitive landscape with multiple newspapers, reporters turned to more sensational stories to pump up content to sell newspapers, whether that meant stretching the truth to full-on fabrication. The techniques exemplified by the *New York Sun*, for example the use of exaggeration, sensationalism and scandal-mongering among other salacious tactics, became known as yellow or tabloid journalism (Wikipedia)<sup>6</sup>.

For example, in Richard Locke’s moon hoax series published over six days starting in August 1835, he carefully detailed how an astronomer, Sir William Herschel, through a powerful telescope, discovered life on the moon and saw “moon bison, man bats, moon puppies and moon beaver” (Walsh in Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 354; hoaxes.org). The articles became very popular and contributed to skyrocketing circulation for the *Sun*. Indeed, the circulation ballooned to 18,000 (McLeod, 2014, p. 116). The *New York Sun* was aimed at the “working masses” with its low price, use of large headlines and “eye-popping articles and several bold-faced hoaxes” (McLeod, 2014, p. 116). It also fueled distribution through newsboys selling

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia - [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow\\_journalism](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_journalism)

issues on the street (hoaxes.org). Towards the end of the month, other New York-based newspapers were reprinting the tale. It then spread to other cities illustrating an early form of pre-digital *going viral*. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the literary hoax was dying out and the hoax took a dark twist which is discussed next.

**c. Invisible, devious hoaxes (1890s to 1920s).** Prompted by the motive of financial gain, coupled with heightened competitive forces, the literary hoax morphed into something more sinister towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Chicago at the epicenter (Sims in Gorbach, 2018, p. 243). Newspaper reporters had adopted a “roguish and wild approach to journalism” (Gorbach, 2018, p. 243). Indeed, writer, Ben Hecht recalled his experience starting in the industry as a “picture chaser” where he would “beg, borrow, or—mostly—steal newsworthy photos” (Gorbach, 2018, p. 243). Later as a cub reporter and hoaxer, he “delivered splashy scoops” (Gorbach, 2018, p. 244). Hecht’s stories of dubious practices, which were eventually preserved in the Broadway show, *The Front Page*, included providing the competition with false tips, manufacturing or planting evidence and impersonating the police among other shenanigans (Gorbach, 2018, p. 245). Throughout this shadowy period, the news, (i.e., *real news*), was sacrificed in the pursuit of profit. At the same time as these deceitful, invisible hoaxes were being executed, there was a parallel movement towards bringing professional standards to journalism in the U.S. This shift towards professionalization is discussed next.

**Shift to professional journalism (early 1900s).** The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many fields—e.g. medicine, law, education and journalism—transforming into institutionalized professions (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 5). Indeed, Columbia University’s journalism school, which opened in 1912, became a central institution where aspiring reporters were trained on journalistic practices (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 6). And when it came to reporting the news, these practices would become adopted in the industry. They were known as objective journalism and included the practice of writing from a detached, nonpartisan position, using facts and balance in reporting, as well as the inverted pyramid writing style (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 6). Not surprisingly, after WWII and all the propaganda that came with it, a turn towards greater truth seeking hastened (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 6). Certain professions were incorporating truth into their practices, for example, “government statistic agencies; science and academic investigations; law and the legal profession; and journalism” (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 6). But manipulation did not die as other disciplines evolved and sought to influence public opinion with less commitment to truth-telling, specifically public relations. Propaganda and public relations will be discussed next.

**Rise of public relations (early 1900s).** Hoaxes are not the only source of manipulation in the media. Indeed, just as media hoaxes were concocted to help sway public opinion such as Benjamin Franklin did on matters like social injustice more than a century prior, so too did public relations (PR) with its birth in the early 1900s. In both cases (hoaxes and PR) public persuasion was the outcome. However, the manipulation resulting from public relations differs in a distinct way from a hoax as, at some point, the hoax is publicly exposed as a ruse, while the PR spin remains.

While some might argue that the public relations have a negative, even deceptive and dark connotation, that was not necessarily the original intent behind it (Olasky, 1984, p. 25). In fact, Edward Bernays, often described as the father of public relations, in his influential book titled *Propaganda* (1928), argued that the manipulation of public opinion was imperative to a practicing democracy. The term *propaganda* was what Bernays initially referred to as *public relations* until it was used as a tool of Third Reich in Nazi Germany (Gunderman, 2015, para. 17). Bernays (1928, p. 37) believed propaganda or public relations could support democratic societies:

*The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate the unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, and our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast number of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society.*

The irony of Bernays statement is profound. Rather than extoling the merits of a democratic society, where it is considered that “the people” generally rule, Bernays was ostensibly arguing for as society ruled by a small group of people, authoritarian style (Olasky, 1984, p. 26). Bernays (1928) clearly extoled the possibilities of propaganda and public relations as a means for civilizing and organizing society (in Olasky, 1984, p. 26):

*Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos.*

Edward Bernays considered himself a “professional opinion maker who, by following precise principles, could produce desired changes in attitudes” (New York Times, 1995, para. 8). Indeed, his campaigns around cigarettes “as both soothing to the throat and slimming to the waistline” (Gunderman, 2015, para. 14) and disposable drinking cups as the only choice that was sanitary (Gunderman, 2015, para. 16), among others are legendary. He even helped Calvin Coolidge win the 1924 U.S. presidential election (Gunderman, 2015, para. 11). Admittedly, public relations campaigns are not *formally* considered part of the news or news media. Public relations campaigns are usually created by organizations wanting to affect the news and can be influential in manipulating or shaping public opinion. The same could potentially be said for *fake news*. Next, I will take an in-depth look at what is *fake news*.

### 3. Defining *fake news*

*News is supposedly—and normatively—based on truth, which makes the term “fake news” an oxymoron.*

James Kershner (2005) in Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018, p. 140

There are two recently published frameworks that are helpful in navigating the current terrain of *fake news*. They are similar and are already frequently referenced in scholarly literature on the topic even though they are less than two years old at the time of writing this essay.

**a. The continuums of intent and facticity.** As a way to understand the usage and definitions of *fake news*, Tandoc, Lim and Ling in their influential 2018 article, *Defining “Fake News”*, reviewed academic literature between 2003-2017 where the phrase appeared. Their goal was to clarify the meaning of *fake news* and develop a framework for future research. Most of the 34 articles they researched were U.S. centric. They identified six ways that the phrase has been operationalized including news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda and advertising (2018, p. 141). They claim that what distinguishes each is the message sender’s intent to deceive the audience and the level to which facts were provided (2018, p. 147). Both dimensions form continuums, from high to low (2018, p. 147) and are included in Table 2. First, the *intent* of the sender of the message in terms of deception, i.e., was s/he trying to deceive? Second, the level of *facticity* used, i.e., to what extent were facts used, none to little to fully fabricated? These two features – intent to deceive and level of facticity – operate as continuums rather than absolutes. Each of the ways *fake news* has been operationalized according to Tandoc, Lim and Ling will be briefly summarized next.

**News satire.** As identified earlier, *The Daily Show*, is a prime example of news satire. What distinguishes this type of *fake news* is that it is entertainment first, delivered by a comedian (Tandoc, et al., 2018, p. 141). While selective current affairs provide the basis for the content, satiric communication techniques such as humor, irony, exaggeration and sarcasm with the intent to entertain are infused in it. As discussed in a previous essay on the subject (2019), I identified several key attributes on satire including the following: it has intent (i.e., to challenge social, political and economic status quo; expresses an opinion (i.e. the satirist's point of view); requires context to be understood (i.e. typically knowledge about a time, place or people); originates from a non-dominant position to contest power; and finally, has a higher purpose or aims to cure<sup>7</sup>. Creators of satire work well beyond attempting to make people laugh. On the spectrum of intent to deceive, news satire lands on the low side, i.e., there is little to no intent to deceive the audience on behalf of the sender. In terms of the level of facticity, it falls on the high side, i.e., a high level of facts is included. As Tandoc et al. (2018) make explicit, only the format is fake (p. 142).

**News parody.** Like satire, parody relies on humor as a communication style. It differs from satire in that it does *not* rely on factual information to make it funny (p. 142). Indeed, as Tandoc et al. (2018) explain “parody plays on the ludicrousness of issues and highlights them by making up entirely fictitious news stories” (p. 142). *The Colbert Report* (2005-2015) provides an example of news parody. Comparing *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* shows the difference between satire and parody. Jon Stewart recaps and reacts to real news content pointing out hypocrisies along the way (Day & Thompson, 2012, p. 181). *The Colbert Report*, on the other hand, is an act; Colbert plays a fictitious character, namely a right-wing conservative pundit (Day & Thompson, 2012, p. 181). Throughout his act, however, Colbert winks and nudges the audience, allowing his real opinion to come through (Day & Thompson, 2012, p. 181). Parody tends to include fabricated content. Thus, news parody has a low level of facticity. Furthermore, there is low intent to deceive.

Both satire and parody play a key role when it comes to the Fifth Estate, which Tandoc et al. describe as the “unique boundary *vis-à-vis* mainstream news media by enabling critiques of both people in power and also of the news media” (2018, p. 142). Satire and parody are thus part of the actors that serve as watchdogs of the press ensuring news media, including journalists, meet expectations set out regarding journalistic conduct (Tandoc et al., 2018, p.

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<sup>7</sup> I outlined the key attributes of satire in a previous essay titled: Comedy as an Instrument for Change: A Look at U.S. Political Television Satire during the Trump Presidency. (2019, p. 8).

142). In both cases, with satire and parody, the audience is assumed to be insiders and thus, the intent to deceive is on the lower end of the spectrum.

**News fabrication.** With news fabrication, articles lacking a factual foundation are published in the form of news and the creator is not acting in good faith (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 143). The intent is clear: to misinform. Thus, the facticity is low and the intent to deceive is high. Like literary hoaxes, the reasons for fabrication include financial motives. But fabrication has changed considerably since the age of media hoaxes of the 1700 to early 1900s, as digitization has enabled technology such as news bots to now propagate content widely, creating a network of fake content and making it more difficult for people to verify facts (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 144).

**Photo manipulation.** While somewhat self-explanatory, photo manipulation refers to more than altering photos. The aged photos rendered by FaceApp are a clear example of manipulation. But this category also includes the misappropriation of photos, i.e. photos used out of their context for another narrative (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 145). Thus, photo manipulation, whether the photos were altered or not, has low level of facticity and the publisher has a high intent to deceive.

**Advertising and public relations.** Communications material in advertising and public relations, such as press releases, advertisements in the form of news stories with subtle indicators that it is news, i.e., native advertising, are also included on the dimensions of intent to deceive and level of facticity (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 145). Profit is the primary motivation behind this type of communication influencing the sender's intent to deceive. In terms of facticity, there may be some level of facts albeit they are selectively chosen. Hence, the level of facticity can be on the mid- to high end of the continuum. Tandoc et al. (2018) also touch upon clickbait as a scheme that is on the rise. The involves the use of juicy headlines, enticing viewers to click on them, taking the unsuspecting viewer to another commercial website, often to content that is unrelated to the headline clicked (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 146).

**Propaganda.** Finally, Tandoc et al. (2018) describe propaganda which generally refers to news content shaped by political players with the goal of affecting public opinion (p. 146). As with advertising and public relations efforts, propaganda typically has some factual foundation; it also has bias (p. 146). The ultimate goal behind the use of propaganda is, of course, to persuade.

The value of the combination of the two continuums outlined by Tandoc et al. (2018) when looking at content described as *fake news*, is that it can recalibrate thinking and inform the discussion. It also helps inform what is not *fake news*. For example, that the appropriation of the phrase *fake news* by the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States does not necessarily fit within the model, that is, singling out reporting based on not agreeing with the content, does not fit the definitions.

Lastly, Tandoc et al. (2018) have summarized common elements of their research of fake news across the articles they analyzed; these include: (1.) *fake news* borrows the look and feel of real news; (2.) it “hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like fake news” (p. 147); and (3.) through technologies like news bots, a fake news network can feed and grow all on its own.

**b. Seven types of mis- and disinformation.** First Draft News, a nonprofit organization founded in 2015, is “dedicated to supporting journalists, academics and technologists working to address challenges relating to trust and truth in the digital age” ([www.firstdraftnews.org](http://www.firstdraftnews.org)). In 2017, the organization published a framework to address *fake news* although they preface that the word *fake* is an inadequate descriptor to illustrate the convoluted types of misinformation and disinformation being circulated. Indeed, the organization’s executive director, Claire Wardle, in her 2017 article, *Fake news. It’s complicated.*, has distilled “problematic content” on a scale from low to high depending on the content creator’s underlying “intent to deceive” (2017, para. 6). The more benign, or with the least intent to deceive, is satire or parody such as that of Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*. At the other end of the continuum compiled by Wardle of First Draft News, or with the highest intent to deceive, is fabricated content meaning that it is completely false and designed to deceive as well as do harm (2017). The continuum highlighting seven types of mis- and disinformation is provided next ranked from the sender’s lowest to highest intent to deceive.

1. Satire or parody – sender has no intent to cause harm, only to fool
2. False connection – occurs when headlines or visuals do not support content
3. Misleading content – misleading use of information to frame something
4. False context – when real content is shared with false information
5. Imposter content – impersonating genuine sources
6. Manipulated content – when real content is manipulated to deceive
7. Fabricated content – when content is 100% false and designed to deceive

Source: [www.firstdraftnews.org](http://www.firstdraftnews.org)

Wardle suggests that there are three key elements to understanding today's "information ecosystem" including (1.) the types of content being created and shared, (2.) the creators' motivations, and (3.) the methods of disseminating the content (2017, para. 3). Wardle, citing technology and social media scholar, Danah Boyd, explains (2017, para. 3):

*[W]e are at war. An information war. We certainly should worry about people (including journalists) unwittingly sharing misinformation, but far more concerning are the systematic disinformation campaigns. Previous attempts to influence public opinion relied on 'one-to-many' broadcast technologies but, social networks allow 'atoms' of propaganda to be directly targeted at users who are more likely to accept and share a particular message. Once they inadvertently share a misleading or fabricated article, image, video or meme, the next person who sees it in their social feed probably trusts the original poster, and goes on to share it themselves. These 'atoms' then rocket through the information ecosystem at high speed powered by trusted peer-to-peer networks.*

The frameworks outlined by Tandoc et al. and Wardle provide a way to approach and consider content under the umbrella of *fake news*. Deception, the sender's intent, and manipulation are common themes between them. It is imperative to have clear definitions and understand what constitutes *fake news* as the phrase has become frequently misused. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), activities excluded from the definition of *fake news* are accidental mistakes in journalism, false statements by politicians that are not full-on lies, unpublished rumors and conspiracy theories (in Brummette, 2018, p. 500). Some of the implications of *fake news* in the digitized era are discussed next.

#### **4. Implications of the *new fake news***

*The assault on truth, including but not limited to fake news, alternative facts, and post-truth have created a moral panic and a threat to democratic life.*

Brennan in Brummette, 2018, p. 502

There have been other times in history marked by increased polarization within the United States. For example, the Revolutionary War and the Civil War were marked by intense division, disagreement and bloody violence among citizens. According to Barclay (2018), there is no *current* evidence to conclude that *fake news* has made the societal divide worse than other

divisive times (p. 45). Instead, Barclay (2018) claims, it may just be that the ease of access to digitized information has simply made *fake news* “harder to ignore” which should not be confused or mistaken with “cause” (p. 45). On a positive note, in this environment organizations like First Draft News and PolitiFact are proof that there is a resurgence in fact-checking and investigative journalism (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1867). However, having said this, there are implications of an environment infused with *fake news*, or as Wardle describes, the information ecosystem, and these will be discussed next.

**More bullshit.** Bullshit is a provocative concept. In the realm of communication, it refers to “a form of language use that doesn’t rise to the level of actual *communication*” and shows disinterest in truth on behalf of the sender (Jones & Baym, 2010, p. 286). On May 2, 2019, President Trump reached a unique milestone for politicians: fabricating and telling more than 10,000 lies. According to Baym (2010), bullshit fails to move the speaker and listener towards understanding (p. 286). While Baym was referencing advertising, the application to political communications and discourse seems potentially even more fitting. For instance, in an environment where the information ecosystem is impacted by news bots propagating false information, it invariably means there will be more bullshit on the media landscape to contend with.

**Information overload.** Related to more bullshit is the idea of information overload. In fact, as Barclay claims, the sheer volume of content available online today is seemingly beyond human comprehension (2018, p. 48). In fact, according to [www.webhostingrating.com](http://www.webhostingrating.com), in 2019, there were 1.94 billion websites, 336 million monthly active Twitter users, 2.27 billion Facebook users and Google processes between 7 to 10 billion search results per day. That is a massive amount of content, users and activity. Furthermore, people tend to cope with the overload in various ways. One method is to simply tune out or limit the sources of information they are exposed to (Barclay, 2018, p. 50). That just may be the intent of some the architects of *fake news*: bury people in content to the point that they simply give up on consuming, considering and reacting to information.

**More impermeable echo chambers.** A possible result of information overload is that people retreat even further into their own bubble, connecting and interacting only with others that share the same views and traits (Brummette et al., 2018, p. 502). This is especially easy to do with social media. The danger of this environment is that there is a need for diversity of news content, ideas and voices when it comes debating issues which supports the spirit of the First Amendment (Brummette et al., 2018, p. 502). Indeed, pluralism and the marketplace of ideas is

a fundamental tenet for many Americans. When it comes to *fake news*, the marketplace provides a mechanism to deal with false information in a public way (Brummette et al., 2018, p. 502). But with more impermeable echo chambers, this becomes more challenging. Instead of a marketplace of ideas, an environment of homophily sets in whereby people gather and interact with others who have similar ideas (Brummette et al., 2018, p. 502).

**Ease of content manipulation.** While not necessarily an outcome or implication, the ease with which documents, images, sounds and video can now be altered is remarkably easier than only a few years ago (Barclay, 2018, p. 51). It does not take much imagination to think of the ways that clever and conniving individuals or groups could do with manipulated content. While FaceApp might be a novel way of seeing how one might age, it could be used in more nefarious activities such as showing a politician as weak and potentially unfit to run for office. The ease of content manipulation will likely mean more content will be published cluttering the landscape even further.

**Problematic automated content creation.** Barclay (2018) identifies three types of automated content that can produce false information or misinformation including bots, machine-written articles and search engine optimization (p. 53). Bots are computer programs with algorithms that automatically generate messages. During the 2016 U.S. election, political bots were used by both candidates (Barclay, 2018, p. 53). While not in and of itself problematic, deception occurs when the messages are presented as falsely coming from humans (Barclay, 2018, p. 53). Other automated content comes in the form of machine-written articles which are, at this stage, less prevalent than bot messages (Barclay, 2018, p. 54). Finally, search engines which use algorithms to produce ranking based on a few factors such as the frequency that a searched term materializes on a site, the amount of links to a site and the ease of use among other factors. Search engine specialists work to optimize sites for web traffic. While many organizations and businesses pay for these services to help with their marketing efforts, the practice can also be used for more unsavory purposes such as boosting political agendas (Barclay, 2018, p. 54).

**Susceptibility to *fake news*.** Early research regarding the effect of fake news on the 2016 election results suggest that the phenomenon would not have changed the votes enough to overcome the margin that Trump achieved (Barclay, 2018, p. 46). Furthermore, one researcher commented: “panic over fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles is exaggerated, and not supported by the evidence from users across seven countries” (in Barclay, 2018, p. 48). This view is somewhat supported by Benkler, Faris and Roberts in their

2018 book: *Network Propaganda*. In it, they examined the 2016 presidential election to understand the effect of false information with similar findings (2018, p. 6):

*But it is important to recognize that for all the anxiety, not to say panic, about disinformation through social media, we do not yet have anything approaching a scientific consensus on what exactly happened, who were the primary sources of disinformation, what were its primary vectors or channels, and how it affected the outcome of the election.*

**Struggles over truth.** The concept of truth has been challenged in journalism. Prior to the widespread adoption of professional journalism practices, media hoaxes demonstrate instances where facts and truth were sidelined in favour of other objectives such as advertising revenues and newspaper sales. The struggle for truth is not new. Furthermore, the current political climate in the United States is ostensibly suffering from an epistemological crisis, i.e., people's worldview about what is knowledge and how we know about what we know. A look at Stephen Colbert and "truthiness" demonstrates this crisis. The word, which Stephen Colbert used during the debut of *The Colbert Report* in 2005, encompasses the belief that statements can be true with no regard to facts, logic or evidence, but rather based on intuition (Wikipedia)<sup>8</sup>. While the term was used on a news parody TV show, the word and its meaning arguably express the shifting epistemology currently surfacing around political knowledge (Meddaugh, 2010, p. 376). That is that truth is untethered from facts or reality. In this environment, it becomes easier for politicians to deny challenges backed by scientific facts, such as climate change.

**Understanding of truth and post-truth.** Since the period of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, science has played an important role in what is considered legitimate knowledge. And, as discussed earlier, this was central to the professionalization of institutions including medicine, law, education and journalism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, digitization and the internet marked "the end of the age of information scarcity" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868) and journalism has been disrupted as the boundaries around content creation have been blurred (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868). *Fake news* and post-truth are really indicators of the current condition of global, public communications which have undermined and chipped away at previous notions about news and truth that were grounded the scientific paradigm (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868).

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

*In the vast and chaotic information landscape, the limitations of the model of elite-dominated, scientific realism that sustained “professional” journalism have become conspicuous.*

In this post-science as truth age, where there is disagreement about how we know about knowledge, i.e. our epistemology. And in this environment, for some, truth become more about personal choice and group convictions instead of facts (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1871).

## **Conclusion**

*The consequences of misinformation can range from the trivial (because your car’s GPS system is slightly misinformed you about the best route to your destination, you drove a mile farther than necessary), to the alarming (three bullet holes in a pizza joint and a lot of terrified citizens), to the tragic (more than once in human history, propaganda has begotten genocide).*

Donald Barclay, 2018, pp. 1-2

Having factual and reliable information matters. Motivated primarily by financial gain or ideology (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 138), producers of fake news likely will not subside any time soon. And the voracious rate at which books and articles are being published related to *fake news* since the 2016 presidential election demonstrates the increasing level of interest in the subject. As discussed earlier, contemporary references to *fake news* have very different connotations to earlier references (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 138). *Fake news* is no longer rooted media hoaxes, advertising and public relations, or in what Jon Stewart and his disciples John Oliver, Samantha Bee and Stephen Colbert constructed with *The Daily Show* and other political satire TV. It has mutated to the point that it is nearly meaningless outside of an umbrella statement to describe published content that considers the sender’s intent to deceive and the level of facticity included. It is interesting to note that according to the frameworks and definitions discussed in this essay, the appropriation of the phrase and its vitriolic use by Donald Trump has very little, if anything, to do with “real” *fake news* as defined here. Given the increasing volume of articles and books on the subject, the understanding of fake news will likely continue to be update, massaged and refined. What is seemingly absent from the current research on the topic is the role of the audiences or receivers and how they are processing *fake news*. That would, at the very least, help broaden the understanding of the implications of *fake news*.

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