

Fake News in Digital Cultures

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Fake News in Digital Cultures: Technology, Populism and Digital Misinformation

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Rob dedicates this book to the late Ashton Taylor, cousin and former student, whose journalism and blogging on health disinformation scandals played an important role in highlighting the material impact of false hope on Australians with chronic illnesses.

Ashleigh dedicates this book to her father, Rex Haw, whose tireless career in journalism and unwavering dedication to purveying information that informs democracy has led to many fruitful discussions about the core issues of this book.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Digital Cultures and Fake News

What is Fake News?

In its current, contemporary form, fake news emerged as a concept, a topic and a social issue in the mid-2010s. There has, of course, been a long-standing concept of false communication, lies, propaganda and media bias, extending back centuries and related often to the key emergent media and communication forms of the day. However, the circulation today of fake news as online material – either as deliberate disinformation or accidentally believed and shared as misinformation – is widely recognised as having a serious and problematic impact on how we perceive politics and politicians. It is also understood as affecting the capacity to distribute accurate health information (particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic), the capability of ‘real’ journalists to perform the task of objective reporting and re-circulating newsworthy content, and the ability of public figures, celebrities and everyday individuals to maintain reputation and control public narratives about their lives, work and activities. Questions about the current and future meaning of truth, post-truth, facts, journalistic practices and news routines are increasingly debated not only by professionals, scholars and practitioners, but by politicians, artists, everyday readers and viewers of news, and others.

If we were to ask a random person on the street what they thought about fake news, there are considerable odds they would have a strong opinion and most would probably express their concern about the quality of information in an era in which disinformation, misinformation and falsehood circulate purporting to be news. If we were to ask a political agent at any time over the past five years, they will more likely express their concern that the circulation of fake news in the form of deliberate disinformation has substantially complexified the practices needed for proper political messaging during an election period. And if we ask people in health communication or social welfare at any time since the start of 2020, they will undoubtedly explain that both deliberate disinformation dressed up as news stories and *misinformation* (the re-circulation of inaccurate ideas by those who have been misled by such fake news) have made it more difficult to get results from health communication, including gaining compliance with the life-saving social distancing and mask-wearing practices needed globally during the

COVID-19 pandemic, with faith in institutional health communicators, and in garnering traction with vaccination regimes. In that sense, fake news is not just a matter of communication becoming more complex in the twenty-first century, or of the extra labour demanded of communication professionals to ensure factual communication, but has an impact on the everyday lives of ordinary communicators – where social participation, identity and belonging is grounded in cultural relationalities that are grounded in communication.

In the twenty-first century, fake news can be described as follows: deceptive content circulated primarily through digital networks, created deliberately to shape a particular public viewpoint or perception of a topic. It is broadly understood as text (including audio or video) which purports to be news but is intentionally and verifiably false, aiming to mislead readers and viewers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). It generally relies on a kind of ‘trickery’ whereby those deliberately circulating fake news for nefarious purposes do so by dressing up information in a form that might appear to be news (for example, adopting the tone, style, newsworthiness and pyramiding functions of recognisable news) and with embellishments that make it appear to be from a credible news source (for example, a website that has an address, or URL, very closely matching that of a recognised news site, or the deliberate use of banners, headers and logos of credible news sites).

An important example is news which has circulated through social media purporting to be from a credible source. In October 2016, a viral story circulated that claimed anti-Trump protesters attending his pre-election rallies were being paid by the Democratic Party. A user would click a link circulating on social media that contained the headline ‘Donald Trump Protester Speaks Out: I Was Paid \$3,500 To Protest Trump’s Rally’. Clicking the link would take the user to a web page purporting to be that of the United States’ *American Broadcasting Company* (ABC). The page had the logo, look and feel of an ABC news story, but was not news published by them. The giveaway? A URL that, at first glance, is similar to ABC’s website but not actually the correct URL. A discerning reader might notice the site, but we doubt that many people necessarily check a browser’s address bar unless there is a particular reason. Good security software aligned with a computer browser might pick up on a known fake news site and alert the reader. But for a very large number of digital citizens, a false story may be taken in as fact. A portion of the electorate may be led to believe that the recognised Democrats were using underhand tactics to destabilise Donald Trump’s election campaign. Others may believe that the genuine protest movement and dissent against Donald Trump was smaller than otherwise known (Keller, 2016). Ultimately, however, those who were misled were *potentially* at risk of casting votes or forming attitudes that were improperly influenced not by a distillation of fact but by the purely non-factual lie.

We discuss the definitions of fake news and its relationships with disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, deep-fakes and concepts of truth and democracy in the next chapter. It is helpful here to briefly to drill down a little further into some of the key concepts, and what these might mean for apprehending and addressing fake news as a social problem. That is, to recognise fake news as a

serious social issue, we are obliged to consider not only its meanings and effects but to draw on cultural studies' collective tools to make sense of its origins and formation in historical, philosophical, social and cultural knowledge frameworks. This means that, at times, fake news is a vague concept, sometimes it is a catch-all for anything disliked, sometimes it is used to discredit genuine factual communication, and other times its definitions are too simplistic to be of any use in finding solutions. Mara (2019) defines fake news as a news story that has been released through recognised media that is either greatly exaggerated or outrightly untrue (4), arguing that the unknowable capacity for a tweet to go viral and thereby be circulated and reinforced through that circulation globally is a key factor in the production and persistence of fake news. Conversely, Brian McNair (2017) understands the meaning of fake news not through the destabilising movement of its false content but as an expression of 'a wider crisis of trust in elites, including political and mainstream media elites, whose members are struggling to maintain their traditional roles in our liberal democracies' (p. x). In looking to the ways in which fake news is the emanation of alternative political practices, McNair is interested in defining it through its concomitant impact that further embeds and sustains distrust, both produced through and reinforcing political and social crises that mark the twenty-first century.

At other times, however, fake news might be understood to be news that comes from a credible news source but is a mistake gone viral. This is not the same as news where a factual error (of the kind for which we expect a later correction by the publication) has crept in. Rather, it is where a mistake is made based on the circulation of a falsehood and re-circulated by a credible media source. For example, on New Year's Eve of 2016, BBCNewsUKI tweeted a post which read: 'BREAKING: Buckingham Palace announces the death of Queen Elizabeth II at the age of 90. Circumstances are unknown. More to follow'. The tweet is obviously believable: 90 years is not an unexpected age for a death. Those in the know would realise, of course, that an announcement from Buckingham Palace would give some details of the circumstances, but most would also know that BBC are likely to be the first principal media to communicate the story. The BBCNewsUKI account was fake (Taylor, 2016). But a different story had happened earlier – in June 2015 a BBC journalist had accidentally tweeted 'Queen Elizabeth has DIED. @BBCWorld'. The tweets were quickly retracted with an apology; later reports stated the BBC had been carrying out a rehearsal for announcing the Queen's death and the journalist had mistakenly posted it as if real news (Winchester, 2015). Naturally, the tweet was viral before it could be stopped, and it is only by the virality of a retraction and explanation that the public were informed of the facts. While the 2015 incident was an accident and the 2016 incident a fake news hoax, in both cases there is a real risk beyond wounded feelings, upset royal fans or a concerned Buckingham Palace: share markets, valuation of currency, and everyday people's travel and business plans are usually instantly affected by the news of the death of a major figure, world leader or, in this case, a head of state.

In this opening chapter, we begin by discussing some of the first-level definitions of fake news before building on them in more detail in later chapters. We provide the theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of fake news,

not as an alien concept that has infiltrated our forms of communication, but as arising out of cultural formations that were already in play. We present a run-down of the later chapters and address the core arguments of this book: that to apprehend and make sense of fake news, we need to consider it from a range of perspectives that account for how changes to cultural and communication practices, developments and uptake of digital communication methods, shifts in the understanding of truth and meaning, and frameworks that encourage conspiratorial thinking and negative attitudes towards minorities all come together to play a role in the rise of fake news as a social problem. It is only by taking it to task as a core element of contemporary culture that we can begin to find ways to remedy fake news and address the future of communication ethics.

Cultural Circulation of Fake News: Disinformation, Misinformation and Risk

In Chapter Two, we present a typology of the different aspects, angles and forms of fake news, although a brief summary of some of these is important to unpack here before we can begin to theorise the cultural conditions that enable the production, circulation and conceptualisation of fake news. If fake news is that which we define as false content dressed up to look like, or be misread as, news, then it is important to make sense of it in terms of the complex meanings and practices that constitute disinformation, misinformation and what has recently begun to be called ‘post-truth’.

We differentiate *disinformation* (deliberate false content) from *misinformation* in this book. Misinformation is typically understood as false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is disseminated regardless of whether or not there is an intention to deceive (Lazer et al., 2018). That would include a person on-forwarding disinformation content because the user genuinely believes that content to be true. Where this matters for fake news, however, is in the blurring between legitimate news sources and the *facts* of disinformation and misinformation. As journalistic routines become further stretched by the neoliberal demands in profit-making news enterprises that seek to reduce expenditure and labour costs, journalists who may be investigating misinformation that has circulated via Twitter, for example, have less capacity and time to fact-check, gain alternative interview quotes or otherwise assess the veracity of the content before on-sharing with the brand power of their news masthead. The field of news as the record of fact is dismantled unwittingly not by the fact of disinformation, but by the problem of the rampant circulation of misinformation.

One of our favourite examples of the relationship between disinformation, misinformation and fake news is a piece of content circulated heavily on Facebook in early 2021. In the style of a magazine or feature article, it is content that claims Australian singer Olivia Newton-John is promoting a line of hemp gummies (sugar treats containing cannabidiol or CBD) and is now under attack by pharmaceutical companies looking to close down her alternative medicine. The article, titled ‘Big Pharma In Outrage Over Olivia Newton-John Latest Business Venture – She Fires Back With This!’ purports to be from *People* magazine, using

the well-recognised *People* logo at the top of the web page. The first giveaway that this might be fake news for the discerning reader is that it incongruously is a site page at the URL <https://womensclothingbeauty.com/>. The article presents information claiming that Newton-John's start-up selling CBD lollies as a pain relief and health supplement has taken off, that as CEO of this company she is struggling to keep up with demand, and the Bayer and Purdue (two major pharmaceutical companies) are 'furious after seeing a massive dip in their sales, calling for Oliva Newton-John to be indicted ...' This fake article goes on with content claiming Newton-John has appeared on television to state she will not be intimidated by these companies. The article then gives a run-down on the alleged health value of hemp gummies (for pain relief, for reducing blood glucose among persons with diabetes, to reduce anxiety, to help quit smoking). Shifting more into advertorial half-way down, the content gives testimonials for Olivia Newton-John's hemp gummies from Hugh Laurie, Colin Firth, the late Sean Connery and Dame Maggie Smith. The bottom of the page contains an advertisement (limited time special offer) for jars of hemp gummies and some Facebook or Twitter style comments feed giving generic endorsements from everyday people.

From the perspective of scholars, of discerning readers, and of people critically engaged in health discourses, this fake news piece is hilarious. From the perspective of engaging with health communication risks, however, it is worrying. How does it work? The content begins as disinformation – a deliberate attempt to trick people into believing a popular, ageing singer has branched out into health supplement development and supply. It relies on a particular kind of discourse that claims adversity between this company and major pharmaceutical companies, primarily to appeal to a particular audience: those who are likely to disavow 'big pharma' and keen to see it punished, fail or make a loss. It uses language to appeal to the existing adherents of non-pharmaceutical health supplements, while relying on celebrity endorsements. It targets an older market (those reasonably more likely to experience arthritic pain, diabetes, etc.) and uses celebrities from a similar age group. Claiming to be a feature from both *People* and *Time* magazines, it covers the celebrity gossip and current affairs readerships. The fake news story was disseminated on Facebook as a paid-for advertisement, relying on Facebook's newsfeed algorithm to send it to particular feeds. This is the point at which it has the potential to become *misinformation* – when with a click one user passes it on to another user, likes it, unwittingly endorsing it, or perhaps in some cases openly recommending it (before ever making a purchase). If the combination of disinformation and misinformed viral on-pushing are successful, the story becomes fake news, recognised by some readers as fake (and perhaps reported to Facebook) but nevertheless read by a portion of readers mistakenly *as if* a real article. If it appeals, if the criteria are right, a problematic health product will be purchased in favour of prescribed medicine. And that puts lives at risk.

Fake News as Cultural Emergence and Cultural Crisis

Fake news has sometimes been described *as if* it is an alien phenomenon that is disrupting our otherwise ordinary, normal or timeless news, information and

truth practices. Often associated with the problematic election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, it has also occasionally been assumed that the problem of fake news will go away when Trump, people behind disinformation, and poor practices of dishonesty also go away, and when social networks lift their game in developing tools that will prevent the circulation of non-factual information (effective tools for this purpose do not yet exist, and may never do so given the impact this has not only on non-factual content but on opinion, personal stories, viewpoints and other kinds of speech.) While the idea that fake news is something from outside our contemporary culture that can be excised is a very pleasant ideal, this way of thinking utterly neglects the fact that fake news is an emergent problem grounded in contemporary culture – a culture that makes, constitutes and sets the conditions for the rise of contemporary fake news, rather than simply one that is problematically ‘infected’ by it.

To make sense of this emergence, we can rely on some of the early cultural studies analyses of Raymond Williams (1977) to help make sense of how different new configurations come into being not from outside but from within contemporary culture, how they present new challenges to dominant, ordinary practices that have come to seem ‘normal’, and how new practices themselves may be either subsumed as part of our dominant norm or even replace the known ‘wisdom’ of the existing media and information dissemination practices.

Fake news, in a cultural perspective, is not merely a challenge to more ethical practices of information-sharing, networking and disseminating news, nor is it simply a new iteration of propaganda, biased news-writing or hoaxes. Rather, in Raymond Williams’ culturalist terminology, it can be understood as the cultural production of a new ‘structure of feeling’, describing the public consciousness of a particular historical moment in regard to a particular group or setting within a cultural milieu. It is useful to think about this in terms of Williams’ (1977) distinctions between the *residual*, the *dominant*, and the *emergent* (pp. 122–125). All three frameworks are part of the broad structure of feeling of a culture, but they function in somewhat different ways.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, we might argue that there are several extant ‘residual’ attitudes towards news and information. For Williams, the residual is not ‘archaic’ or wholly located in the past – we might say that recording information on stone tablets, or using only horseback couriers to share news or even the telegram are archaic, and have absolutely no functional value in contemporary society. Indeed, the infrastructure and knowledge frameworks for these practices are no longer in place. The residual, however, describes certain practices, meanings, values, experiences and ways of being that operate today but cannot be expressed or understood in terms of dominant culture. We could suggest, for example, that community group newsletters that are printed and mailed out are part of the residual practice of news-sharing and dissemination. They exist, they are undertaken by many non-profit groups, they have eschewed the value of digital media for dissemination or sometimes deliberately not taken advantage of its affordances in order to appeal to a particular set of tastes and audience practices.

Likewise, in many cases, community newspapers serving migrant and foreign-language communities play a vital role in the lives of everyday readers

(Cover, 2013) but are not fully assimilable to the contemporary liberal-capitalist profit-making news production environment. Such residual practices continue, for Williams (1977), because the dominant cannot go too far in excluding or eradicating the residual without drawing attention to the hegemonic practices of the dominant (p. 123). For example, local community print media continues to be funded and supported by governments not necessarily because it fits within dominant neoliberal platforms – often it is barely profit-making and supported by grants – but because in letting that part of the media sector disappear there is a greater risk of dissatisfaction with the practices and motivations of ‘mainstream’ news media. When we see arguments about the utility and significance of the community media sector or, for example, government funding regimes that prop up community media through grants that are not accessible by major media players, we are witnessing the interplay between the residual and the dominant.

Raymond Williams spent less time defining how the dominant cultural structure is constituted, although we might consider this to be the culture of liberal-capitalist media and communication. This is not simply one element or aspect of news in everyday life, but incorporates a range of practices that emerged at different times and co-exist (not always happily) in the everyday lives of readers, journalists, content producers and those who profit from them. An example is the contemporary print newspaper as it emerged in seventeenth century Europe (subsequent to the printing press and in the context of both nationalistic and middle-class developments) and found profit through a mix of sales and advertising. Read on a daily or weekly basis by those who had it delivered, those who purchased it from a location, and those who later read online version on publications’ websites became the dominant news practice within the culture of news consumption. This dominance has not, of course, gone unchallenged by news and media dissemination practices that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, including the rise of the blogosphere, and the production of news content by new actors such as social networks and search engines, and the increasing shift to distribution through feeds rather than the ‘pull’ mechanism of deliberate site visits. The relative rise of direct publication of news agencies such as Reuters and Associated Press is another challenge.

Finally, the practice of consuming news through social media feeds that rely on a combination of user data and cookies to target specific content to specific groups of readers is another formation that emerged over the past two decades and has come to be normative as part of the dominant landscape or ‘matrix’ of news media production and consumption practices. Many aspects of this emergence have been, of course, subsumed by savvy corporate news outlets to form part of the transformation of the dominant. In that sense, the dominant incorporates an unhappy, tenuous alliance of products, platforms, company, regulatory practices, readership practices, tastes, appreciations and criticisms – all of which centre on the conversion of content into profit and the adaptation of audiences, readers, viewers and users’ attention into a commodity, itself on-sold to advertisers and sponsors.

Importantly, a major part of the dominant structure of feeling includes both trust and distrust of news in its many forms. *Trust* in news sources has been the

key element in the dominant culture of news consumption. Among scholars, it incorporates practices of citing news articles as fact in order to underpin an argument, which may mean a temporary suspension of the critical project of news critique. Among other everyday readers, it involves everything from the practice of uncritical reading and belief in the information communication in a news article, to sharing it on social media, discussing the news with friends and family and taking clippings or screenshots of news – that is, the everyday intended use of the dominant media regime.

At the same time, practices of distrust are sometimes more nuanced and include both scholarly and lay criticism of bias, critiques of the entire profit-making news regime, preferences around quality, taste and content, adversarial debates about publishers, criticism of individual journalists. A long and theoretically powerful scholarly critique that understands all communication to be marked by polysemy (multiple meanings, multiple ‘truths’) has underscored the need for a democratic public to be wary of any perception that a news outlet speaks a monolithic truth. This critique sits alongside the equally important guardedness over any communication understood to benefit an establishment, an inequitable socio-economic status quo, governance regimes, disciplinary practices and other activities that set agendas and promote gate-keeping that has traditionally prevented the equal circulation of alternative viewpoints. Such criticisms have been core approaches to media and communication within the political science, humanities, sociology and cultural studies critique of media, communication and language since the 1970s. Taught in many university courses and debated in ever greater depth among scholars in journal articles, books and at conferences, a critical approach grounded in anti-institutional and anti-establishment thinking is a core element in the academic pursuit of more just, more ethical and more equitable ways of organising society.

The fact that trust and distrust co-exist does not undo the dominant media framework or leave it unstable. Social structures are not marked by a universal one-sided perspective, but by frameworks of debate. However, within that disagreement are the seeds for the emergence of fake news. By this, we don’t mean the emergence of individual actors in fake news, whether those who might be producing or sharing it, fake news factory farms, hoaxers or others. What we are talking about is the emergence of the conditions that both constitute fake news and make it an issue. For Williams, the emergence differs from both the residual and the dominant. He describes the emergence as being marked by new articulations that arise not as processes isolated from the dominant but from new configurations of knowledge, meanings, values, practices and relationships. That which is emergent is not necessarily fully oppositional to the dominant, but may include ‘elements of some new phase of the dominant culture’ as well as those which are depicted as ‘substantially alternative’ (p. 123). In other words, a new emergent process does not come about in isolation, but *through* the dominant in ways which also leave it open to reincorporation (p. 124) or sometimes to being depicted as an oppositional threat to the dominant and thereby excluded or suppressed (p. 126).

Here we might describe the current phase of everyday capacity to generate fake news which has the look and feel of a real news story but is deliberate