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Is Fake News Old News?

Catarina Dutilh Novaes and Jeroen de Ridder

A well-functioning liberal democracy needs a public sphere of rational discourse in which informed citizens participate in reasonable debate about political decisions. To exercise their political responsibilities, citizens must have access to reliable information, at least part of which comes from journalism and the press (sometimes referred to as the ‘fourth power’ or ‘fourth estate’ in a democracy). In light of recent political events in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere, it is understandable that many have expressed concerns about how the (alleged) proliferation of fake news, misinformation, and propaganda threatens to undermine democracy. Indeed, alarmistic complaints that we have now entered a post-truth era have become a staple of recent nonfiction writing (e.g. D’Ancona 2017; Davis 2017; Kakutani 2019; McIntyre 2018).

These concerns suggest that things were substantially different (in fact, *better*) before, and that recent years have witnessed far-reaching changes in political misinformation and disinformation—a flood tide of fake news. In this chapter, we address the question to what extent contemporary fake news really is a novel phenomenon. We begin by delineating the sort of fake news that will be central in our investigation. Section 2 presents three models, or strategies, for the production and proliferation of fake news. All three strategies have been employed during various periods in history and are thus compatible with pre-internet technology. This gives us reason to think that contemporary fake news isn’t radically different or novel, at least in some respects. In Section 3, we look at a number of further features of contemporary fake news which may account for its novelty: (a) content, (b) wide proliferation, circulation, and increased influence, and (c) modes of production, distribution, and consumption. We will show that, as far as the historical and empirical evidence goes, we have little reason to think features (a) and (b) set contemporary fake news apart from its precursors. Aspects of (c), however, do: the Internet and social media have changed the ways in which fake news can be produced, distributed, and consumed; and various actors have exploited these new possibilities to great effect.

Our answer to the question whether fake news is old news is thus carefully qualified. In many ways, contemporary fake news is nothing new, and suggestions that we have entered a post-truth era where alternative facts run rampant are wrong—at least in the sense that there has never been a ‘truth era’; disinformation

and propaganda were widespread phenomena in the (pre-internet) past, too. Nonetheless, contemporary disinformation and propaganda—in the form of fake news—have cleverly adapted to the commercial and technological possibilities of the online media environment, and so we are right to be concerned about the political effects of these new developments.

1. Definitions of Fake News and the Scope of this Investigation

The recent history of the term ‘fake news’ can be traced back to journalist Craig Silverman, whose first public use of the term in a 2014 tweet referred to the ‘fake news website’ National Report, which had broadcast a fabricated story of an Ebola outbreak in Texas (Silverman 2017). To his dismay, a few years later the term was appropriated by Trump and his supporters precisely to discredit the legitimacy and reliability of mainstream news organizations whenever they published a news item not to their liking—that is, a complete inversion of Silverman’s original usage. In other words, in a short period the term ‘fake news’ has acquired multiple, even opposite meanings.

In the recent philosophical literature, much attention has been paid to proposed definitions of the term ‘fake news’ (Brown 2019; Fallis & Mathiesen 2019; Gelfert 2018; Levy 2017; Mukerji 2018; Rini 2017; Søe 2019). This is not surprising, as conceptual analysis (in particular in formulations of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as X) is widely thought to be one of the main contributions that philosophers can make. But for this exercise to be fruitful, the presupposition must be that there is in fact “a certain fairly coherent social phenomenon” (Pepp et al. 2019, 68) that is picked out by the term ‘fake news’. This presupposition has been contested in particular by Habgood-Coote (2019) and Coady (2019, and Chapter 3 in this volume), who refer to a number of other authors (philosophers and journalists) who question the possibility and/or usefulness of defining the term ‘fake news’.

We side with Habgood-Coote and Coady in questioning whether there really is a sufficiently stable, coherent phenomenon that is picked out by the term ‘fake news’; instead, there seem to be rather heterogeneous uses that are picking out different phenomena. Thus, instead of departing from a general definition of fake news, we will focus on the following phenomenon: coordinated, deliberate efforts to manipulate public opinion by spreading false, misleading, or confusing messages posing as pieces of journalism, in particular but not exclusively in political contexts, also known as propaganda (Stanley 2015).¹ Examples are news-like

¹ Two other phenomena that are frequently associated with the term fake news are: (1) Clickbait, i.e. news-like stories (often, but not necessarily, false) produced primarily for the financial profit of the producer and not to inform consumers. Examples include yellow journalism (Samuel 2016), UK

stories produced and disseminated by websites that masquerade as serious news outlets, often with a domain name mimicking real newspapers,² by extreme right-wing or left-wing websites, or by so-called troll factories (Pomerantsev 2019), but also the tobacco industry's organized campaign to discredit scientific findings linking tobacco consumption to cancer (Michaels 2008; O'Connor & Weatherall 2019; Oreskes & Conway 2010).

In what follows, we thus address the question how novel this phenomenon is. An important goal for us is to connect the recent literature in analytic epistemology on fake news to the older, more developed literature on propaganda. We believe that the phenomenon of fake news is an instantiation of a much broader class of phenomena, and that attending to earlier analyses of these phenomena, propaganda in particular, is crucial if we are to attain a better understanding of these recent manifestations that are typically referred to as 'fake news'.³

2. Manipulation of Public Opinion: Three Models

In order to address the question of the putative novelty of current strategies of manipulating public opinion, in particular by means of purported news items, it will prove useful to distinguish three models of manipulation of public opinion primarily for political purposes. (We set aside advertisement and marketing, which are also well-established forms of manipulation but for the purposes of selling products or services.) These three models are abstractions that may never be instantiated in their pure form in the real world. Moreover, in practice they function as extremities in a spectrum rather than as clear-cut categories; concrete situations will typically instantiate each of them to different degrees. Nevertheless, they offer a convenient vantage point to address the question of how novel the phenomenon of fake news really is, in particular because the view that Models A and B are things of the past, whereas Model C is a recent phenomenon—a real

tabloids, and the fake stories supporting Trump's 2016 candidacy that were concocted by Macedonian teenagers not because they favoured Trump, but because they generated most clicks and profit for them (Silverman & Alexander 2016; Subramanian 2017); and (2) conspiracy theories, such as 'Pizzagate' (Robb 2017) and the still popular theory that the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center were an inside job orchestrated by the US government (Bell 2018). We will not address these phenomena here.

² The fact-checking website PolitiFact provides an overview of such websites, many of which are by now defunct: <https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/apr/20/politifacts-guide-fake-news-websites-and-what-they/>.

³ An anonymous referee objects that our focus is too broad, and that we thus fail to focus on 'real' fake news. We disagree; we believe that a broader focus is precisely what is required to locate and understand fake news within a larger family of related phenomena. A recent instance of an approach similar to ours is Habgood-Coote (2020), who discusses fake news in connection with fascist and authoritarian discourse.

novelty—appears to be widely held, if casual conversation is any indication. We will contest both aspects of this position.

For each of the three models, we will also discuss the extent to which knowers in each of these environments still preserve some degree of *epistemic autonomy*. There is a traditional strand of thinking about autonomy that conceives of it a complete epistemic *self-reliance*. But this is unrealistic for all of us. Knowledge production and circulation is very much a social affair—we depend on others in various and sundry ways for much of what we know. To think that thoroughgoing self-reliance is desirable even as an ideal is untenable (Zagzebski 2012). What is required instead is a *relational* approach to autonomy (Grasswick 2019, 200–2), which is consistent with the fact that much of what we know, we learn from others. From this perspective, epistemic autonomy is not incompatible with epistemic dependence. In fact, in some cases epistemic autonomy will *require* epistemic dependence. The purportedly autonomous agent who trusts no one else’s word is an irrational dogmatist (Fricker 2006). Instead, the opposite of epistemic autonomy is *epistemic heteronomy*: the condition of being epistemically under the domination of forces outside of the individual (Grasswick 2019, 202ff.).

Indeed, we submit that it is better to think of epistemic autonomy as a form of *self-governance*: when exercising epistemic autonomy, one engages one’s own reasons, thus obtaining suitable justification for one’s own beliefs (or disbeliefs or withholdings) (Zagzebski 2012). Self-governance (or at least the sort of self-governance worth pursuing) requires more than merely having options. It also involves having reasonably accurate information or at least justified beliefs about one’s options. Thus, there is an epistemic condition on epistemic autonomy: making up one’s own mind about what to believe requires access to the evidence for and against one’s belief-options.⁴ Prima facie, the epistemic autonomy of knowers living in environments saturated with fake news will be compromised, because much of what counts as fake news is intended to manipulate public opinion. However, we will see that the implications for epistemic autonomy are different for each of the three models.

2.1 Model A: Pleasing and Seducing the Audience

This model of manipulation of public opinion is as old as democracy itself, at least if Plato is to be believed on the state of Athenian democracy around his lifetime. It simply consists in politicians making assertions with the purpose of pleasing the audience—and thus obtaining their votes—rather than making truthful statements. According to Plato (e.g. in the *Gorgias*), this is exactly what rhetoricians

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for alerting us to the importance of making this explicit.

taught their students to do, who then went on to apply the knack they had learned from the rhetoricians in order to manipulate voters in the Assembly. For Plato, the discourse of the rhetorician is no more than a form of flattery, comparable to pastry baking and cosmetics, which may be pleasant at first but is ultimately detrimental. The rhetorician is like a pastry chef, who offers delicious but unhealthy treats, whereas the philosopher is like a true doctor, who restores the health of a sick person by aiming at truth, even if the treatment itself is rather disagreeable. Crucially, when offered the choice between the doctor and the pastry chef, people will often choose the pastry chef (Moss 2007).

In the *Republic* (Book VI), Plato offers an epistemic argument against democracy, which depends on the assumption that voters are easily fooled by seductive but misleading discourse. In a democracy, he argues, those who are experts at garnering votes and nothing else will eventually dominate politics, instead of those who have the required knowledge to govern (the presupposition being that these two classes do not overlap). Most voters do not have sufficient discernment when it comes to issues of governance, but in order to win office or get a piece of legislation passed, politicians must convince the ignorant so as to obtain their support. And so, experts in manipulation and mass appeal will resort to easily digestible messages so as to obtain political power, whereas those with actual knowledge on how to govern but lesser rhetorical skills will not stand a chance.

Recent events in world politics have confirmed that voters are susceptible to false or misleading messages that play into deep-seated sentiments or prejudices (Goodin & Spiekermann 2018, Epilogue). A revealing example is the Brexit referendum in 2016, in particular the infamous Leave slogan: “We send the EU £350 million a week. Let’s fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave.” Leading Leave figures repeated the slogan incessantly, and despite the fact that those with actual knowledge of public finance had repeatedly shown it to be false—thus a quintessential political instance of ‘fake news’—its grip on voters remained powerful.

To what extent voters are indeed susceptible to manipulation by means of seductive but misleading discourse is ultimately an empirical question. A number of well-known results in social and cognitive psychology lend further support to this claim. First, the robust phenomena of confirmation bias, myside bias, and related cognitive tendencies indicate that humans like to hold on to their long-standing beliefs, and thus seek and interpret evidence in ways that minimize revisions, e.g. by avoiding or discrediting strong evidence against their deeply held beliefs (Nickerson 1998). Secondly, the phenomenon of identity-protective cognition refers to the tendency of culturally diverse individuals to selectively credit and dismiss evidence in patterns that reflect the beliefs that predominate in their social group (Achen & Bartels 2017; Kahan 2017), leading to what is sometimes described as ‘tribal politics’. Thirdly, there is much empirical evidence suggesting that we are poorly equipped to detect lies and deception in general, as our default assumption towards other people is that of honest communication; in

a provocative slogan, “we are hardwired to be duped” (Levine 2019; see also Michaelian 2009; Shieber 2012).⁵

But importantly, in Model A, those producing seductive messages to lure voters *do not actively interfere with the messages being sent by others*.⁶ Essentially, they still act within the basic tenets of deliberative democracy, which protects free speech (barring outrageous lies in the form of libel or hate speech). In other words, they do not actively interfere with the general structure of the relevant information ecosystem, other than by broadcasting their own messages. These messages, then, can be countered by similarly seductive messages from other political figures reaching the same target audience but with very different content. This should ensure balanced public debates and a certain degree of autonomy⁷ for the receiver of these opposing messages in deciding which of them appears more appealing to her, as there is the possibility of discussion and dissent to triangulate (this is one reason why competing voices matter). In this model, knowers can identify credibility markers more or less reliably (even if imperfectly), and can identify and rely on authoritative trustworthy sources (experts, objective journalism, social institutions). This is so even if the circulation of misleading messages in itself constitutes a form of epistemic interference that, in an ideal world, would not occur. (We should perhaps clarify that our investigation here can be described as an exercise in *non-ideal social epistemology*. In particular, the quasi-normative conclusions we draw take the circulation of misleading messages as a given.)

What this model also makes clear is that within liberal democracy there is ample space for political manipulation through the propagation of anti-democratic messages camouflaged as democratic discourse (Stanley 2015). In fact, in the words of historian Robert Moss (1977, 12), “democracy can be destroyed through its own institutions”, as witnessed by the fact that many of the totalitarian regimes of the last century came into power democratically. More generally, the model suggests that persuasiveness rather than truthfulness is the guiding principle for political discourse in a democratic system, which aligns exactly with Plato’s main criticism of democracy.

How does the ideal of epistemic autonomy fare in environments where persuasion rather than truthfulness reigns? Clearly, the presence of misleading or outright false persuasive messages makes it harder to satisfy the epistemic condition on epistemic autonomy. This will be true in all three models under

⁵ The extent to which humans are gullible and easily duped, or instead can competently exercise epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al. 2010), remains controversial. For example, Hugo Mercier (2020) argues that we’re quite good at exercising epistemic vigilance. (One of us has an ongoing (friendly) disagreement on these issues with Mercier and Sperber, including in print.)

⁶ This is a key difference with Model C, to be discussed below: even if the outcomes might be similar, the details of the mechanisms for epistemic manipulation are different.

⁷ Our claim is comparative rather than absolute: there is *more* room for epistemic autonomy in Model A than in Models B and C, even if epistemic autonomy is not fully guaranteed in Model A, given the circulation of misleading messages.

discussion—they are, after all, models that describe strategies for manipulating the public opinion through misinformation. In Model A, however, knowers do retain a fair amount of epistemic autonomy, even though they are bombarded by persuasive discourse coming from different corners. Precisely because diverse messages in support of different positions in the political spectrum are being broadcast, the receiver can, in principle, judge their credibility, assess the reliability of their sources, weigh them against each other, and thus come to her own conclusions as to which of them is more trustworthy. This is not to say that a knower cannot be tricked into believing falsehoods in these circumstances; but at least she is free to draw her own conclusions, within the wide range of messages that she receives. Clearly, careful exercise of judgment about whom to trust becomes more and more important in this model, given the conflicting messages being broadcast by different sources.

2.2 Model B: Propaganda and Censorship

In the second model, political figures continue to broadcast messages to promote their own causes and strengthen their position, but they also exercise power to block the production and dissemination of dissenting messages. This model is most clearly instantiated in totalitarian regimes where those in power control the means of production and dissemination of media top-down, such as in the USSR (especially during the Stalin period), Nazi Germany, and more recently in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, Russia, and China (albeit to different degrees). ‘Propaganda’ is the term commonly used to refer to state-produced media content that is intended to bolster support for the leaders and to depict negatively anyone who diverges from the dominant ideology (domestically or internationally).⁸ Crucial in this model is the wide use of censorship to prevent the production and dissemination of dissenting, critical messages, represented by bans on books, newspapers, art, etc. with ‘subversive’ content (e.g. the Nazi book burnings). Moreover, in order to keep track of what people think and the content they produce and consume, totalitarian regimes will also typically rely on an extensive spying system.

In both Nazi Germany and the USSR, state-sponsored propaganda was an essential component to ensure compliance and obedience from the masses. The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda led by Joseph Goebbels

⁸ There are many definitions of the concept ‘propaganda’ available in the literature. Here, we adopt the following working definition: “Communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with political goals of the propagandist” (Benkler et al. 2018, 29). One important contribution in Stanley (2015) is to show that propaganda thus understood is also pervasive in democratic societies, not only in the totalitarian contexts that are often thought to be the primary loci for propaganda.

(one of the greatest propagandists in world history) was created in 1933, a few months after Hitler came to power, and was tasked with the job of centralizing and controlling all aspects of German cultural and intellectual life. It acted on two main fronts: production of media glorifying the figure of Hitler and Nazi ideology more generally, and censorship of any dissenting message or content (Welch 1993).

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is still the philosophical *locus classicus* for an analysis of the two main instances of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, Nazi Germany and the USSR. Arendt emphasizes in particular the power of propaganda to manipulate the masses into compliance, and the fact that truthfulness itself becomes a void concept. The operating principle is rather that of *consistency*; as long as the overall narrative remains consistent and ensures a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves,⁹ people are generally unable to resist the allure of propagandistic messages, especially as their overall sense of truth and falsity is already severely undermined.

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true.¹⁰ [...] Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.

(Arendt 1968, 80)

Thus understood, fake news propaganda is the bread-and-butter of totalitarian, autocratic regimes, coupled with a situation of scarcity of information and content that results from the active censorship of any message perceived as contrary to the dominant ideology. This involves both curtailing the production of such messages domestically (by silencing opponents; by persecuting, imprisoning, exiling, or even killing dissidents) and controlling the influx of messages from outside. Of

⁹ This is a crucial point: the epistemic environment has to be suitably engineered to give rise to the kind of situation described by Arendt. We are thus not claiming that the allure of propagandistic discourse is the same across different epistemic environments.

¹⁰ Tellingly, the phrase “everything was possible and nothing was true” was picked up by Peter Pomerantsev as the title of a book chronicling his experiences working in Russia as a TV-producer in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Pomerantsev 2014).

course, this level of manipulation of the information ecosystem is only fully enforceable in political circumstances of high concentration of power, and is thus incompatible with liberal democracy.

However, somewhat similar situations can also arise in democracies, through the systematic production and maintenance of large-scale media echo chambers: social epistemic structures “in which other relevant voices have been actively discredited” (Nguyen 2018, 2). The right-wing media bubble currently in place in the United States appears to be an example of this (Benkler et al. 2018; see also below). Even so, the model is hard to enforce and maintain in situations where some level of access to uncensored internet and social media is a given. Doing so requires constant efforts of suppression on the part of those in power. Even though their information diet may be just as biased and one-sided, there remains a crucial difference between a Chinese citizen who lacks access to an open internet and an American citizen who spends all his time reading extreme right-wing media outlets. Whereas the latter faces no external impediments to changing his news consumption, the former really has no easy options to do so.

With respect to epistemic autonomy, what Arendt’s description accurately captures is the fact that one of the main goals of totalitarianism is to suppress epistemic autonomy on the part of individuals: those in power attempt to control and manipulate not only what individuals *do*, but also what they *think and believe*. In other words, totalitarian leaders seek to submit individuals to epistemic heteronomy. If Arendt’s analysis is correct, they have sometimes succeeded in doing so.

However, the mere fact that massive resources of time, money, etc. must be diverted to propaganda and censorship in such situations suggests precisely that the pull of epistemic autonomy remains strong. In totalitarian regimes, groups of individuals come together to resist oppression, both political and epistemic. They undertake interventions such as promoting the illegal circulation of forbidden material, at great risk for themselves (as described by Pomerantsev (2019) about his own parents, free thinkers living under the USSR communist regime). Indeed, the idea that, in oppressive situations, epistemic autonomy can be squelched completely seems to underappreciate the potential for epistemic resistance of the oppressed (cf. Medina 2012), which has manifested itself consistently across times and ages.

2.3 Model C: Disinformation by Epistemic Pollution

The third model to be considered includes, as the previous two, the production and dissemination of propagandistic discourse, but is chiefly characterized by sustained efforts to pollute the information ecosystem. While in Model B the sender of propagandistic messages also actively works to block the production and dissemination of alternative messages, in this model she instead saturates the

information ecosystem with ‘noise’ so as to interfere with or even prevent the reception of these alternative messages by the target audience.¹¹ A review of Peter Pomerantsev’s *This is Not Propaganda* (Pomerantsev 2019), a book on the various ‘information wars’ of recent years, sums it up well:

Those rights [to read, to write, to listen to and to say whatever one wishes] now exist almost everywhere, but more information has not necessarily meant more freedom. While autocratic regimes once controlled the narrative by silencing opponents, they now seek to confuse their populations by bombarding them with false information, half truths and competing narratives. It’s a strategy that Pomerantsev describes as “censorship through noise”, or as one of his interviewees, law professor Tim Wu, puts it, states have moved from “an ideology of information scarcity to one of information abundance”. (Bloomfield 2019)

While it is tempting to assume that this is a recent phenomenon intrinsically related to the rise of the Internet, an infamous example from recent but mostly pre-internet history suggests otherwise: the disinformation campaign waged by the tobacco industry to counter and neutralize the dissemination of robust scientific findings linking tobacco consumption with a much higher risk of developing lung cancer (Michaels 2008; Oreskes & Conway 2010). The key principle of the campaign consisted in casting doubt on these scientific findings, and amplifying the reach of the occasional scientific studies (often funded by the tobacco industry itself) that failed to identify a correlation between tobacco and cancer: “to find, fund, and promote research that muddied the waters, made the existing evidence seem less definitive, and gave policy makers and tobacco users just enough cover to ignore the scientific consensus” (O’Connor & Weatherall 2019, 95). (Similar strategies have been deployed by climate change denialists supported by the fossil fuel industry.)

Yet it cannot be denied that the reach of ‘information warfare’ has intensified in the last decade, dovetailing with the increased influence of social media that makes the manipulation of dissemination channels much easier. A number of authors attribute the spread of disinformation campaigns specifically to Russia under Vladimir Putin. As the ‘losers’ in the Cold War, already in the 1990s, new strategies for the manipulation of public opinion were being developed in Russia (Pomerantsev 2019). Pseudo-journalistic content, or fake news, forms an essential component in these strategies. As described by historian Timothy Snyder,

¹¹ In the words of Steve Bannon, arguably the foremost contemporary propagandist: “The Democrats don’t matter, the real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit” (quoted in Illing 2020).

[The term ‘fake news’] sounds like an American invention, and Donald Trump claimed it as his own; but the term was used in Russia and Ukraine long before it began its career in the United States. It meant creating a fictional text that posed as a piece of journalism, both to spread confusion about a particular event and to discredit journalism as such. [These] politicians first spread fake news themselves, then claim that all news is fake, and finally that only their spectacles are real. The Russian campaign to fill the international public sphere with fiction began in Ukraine in 2014, and then spread to the United States in 2015, where it helped to elect a president in 2016. The techniques were everywhere the same, although they grew more sophisticated over time. (Snyder 2018, 11)

One of the main components of these strategies is discrediting traditional sources of information such as mainstream media and scientists and scholars, thus creating an environment of epistemic uncertainty where people feel they can no longer trust those who they hitherto took to be reliable sources. It is precisely at this juncture that the label ‘fake news’ can be weaponized to discredit traditional journalistic reporting, and thus to pave the way for ‘alternative facts’ and narratives that reinforce specific purposes and ideologies. Once the public comes to believe that “nothing is true and everything is possible” (entering a state of epistemic confusion similar to that of those living under totalitarian regimes as described by Arendt), they will limit their attention to information channels that they take to be reliable, which are typically those that confirm their world views. In the United States, for example, it appears that the right-wing information ecosystem is now almost entirely insulated from other media environments, including from the center-right, which has led to radicalization and made its audience more susceptible to foreign and domestic propaganda (Benkler et al. 2018), given the lack of exposure to counter-evidence and different narratives. Indeed, it was often remarked that Fox News effectively functioned as Trump’s own ‘propaganda ministry’.¹²

To what extent can individual knowers remain epistemically autonomous in these circumstances? It’s complicated. On the one hand, because the information ecosystem is flooded with all sorts of information, individuals are forced to make up their own minds and exercise their epistemic autonomy in deciding whom to believe and what to take seriously. In this sense, individuals retain a minimum of autonomy in Model C and it becomes even more crucial to exercise autonomy

¹² Which is not to say that there’s no ‘propagandistic’ journalistic content produced in left-wing media. See, for instance, Frank (2016) for a penetrating analysis of the *Washington Post*’s propagandistic coverage of Bernie Sanders, or Coady (2019), who points out that NPR, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* intentionally refrained from using the term ‘torture’ to describe interrogation techniques that clearly were torture, on the grounds that doing so would amount to choosing political sides. But Benkler et al.’s (2018) data show that the phenomenon is significantly more prevalent and persistent in US right-wing media. Thanks to an anonymous referee for nudging us to consider this point.

responsibly. On the other hand, Model C actively and systematically undermines the resources required to exercise epistemic autonomy responsibly. The trustworthiness of credible sources is attacked, and that of untrustworthy sources artificially inflated; false and misleading messages are introduced as if they come from genuine experts; 'both sides of the issue' are presented as equally worthy of a fair hearing, even when expert opinion clearly comes down on one side. As a result, it becomes harder and harder to use higher-order evidence to allocate trust responsibly and to judge the reliability of messages. In other words, Model C perverts the ideal of epistemic autonomy to undermine itself. Tellingly, *Russia Today*, the Russian government-backed international TV station, has as its slogan 'Question More'; this spurious appeal to epistemic autonomy by a premier purveyor of misinformation embodies the thinking behind Model C.

Consider testimony: the exercise of epistemic autonomy in accepting testimony consists primarily in being discriminating regarding whom we trust (Fricker 2006). But in Model C, propagandists artificially create a perception of untrustworthiness regarding some sources, while artificially inflating the apparent credibility of others. So it seems that, by manipulating allocations of credibility, propagandists really impose a state of epistemic heteronomy onto the agents in question, as they temper precisely with what should ensure the epistemic autonomy of receivers of testimony (their ability to distinguish trustworthy from untrustworthy sources). What's more, since the interventions in question are more veiled than the active censorship in Model B, these processes of epistemic manipulation are more insidious and thus potentially more dangerous than in Model B. Taken to its extreme, then, Model C leaves individual knowers with a phantom of epistemic autonomy: they might feel they are autonomous, whereas in reality they are epistemically heteronomous.

To conclude this section, we have argued that different strategies where fake news (in particular in the form of stories that falsely present themselves as journalistic content) figures prominently may be adopted for the propagation of messages that support the causes and strengthen the position of certain (political) actors. Contrary to what appears to be a popular belief, all three models have been instantiated in the past and continue to be instantiated now. Model C, in particular, which comes closest to descriptions of the current so-called 'post-truth' era, is not an entirely novel phenomenon. But, as we will see in the next section, current technologies seem to enhance the reach and scope of strategies falling under Model C.

3. The Putative Novelty of Fake News

As the above three models show, fake news isn't new. That is to say, while the widespread use of the term 'fake news' may be new, the phenomena to which it

refers have been with us for much longer. We can see this even more clearly by considering a few characteristics of contemporary fake news which are sometimes casually put forward as accounting for the novelty of fake news.

3.1 Content

The *content* of much contemporary fake news fits seamlessly with historical attempts to manipulate public opinion. Politicians and their spin doctors and enthusiastic supporters cater to voters' preferences and social identities to please them. They present their own views, policies, actions, personalities, and lives in a favourable light—not shunning the use of falsehoods, deception, or 'bullshit' in Frankfurt's (2005) technical sense. At the same time, the views, policies, actions, personalities, and lives of political opponents are discredited through false or one-sided information.¹³

Historians report that already in seventeenth-century England, so-called 'news-books' were published containing sensationalistic false content about war victories and defeats, or even the death of kings, as well as supposedly personal letters with false reports about various events (Young 2016). These venues came and went quickly. The same was true of so-called 'yellow journalism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the USA (Samuel 2016). It was known for its dependence on

the familiar aspects of sensationalism—crime news, scandal and gossip, divorces and sex, and stress upon the reporting of disasters and sports; [...] the lavish use of pictures, many of them without significance, inviting the abuses of picture-stealing and 'faked' pictures; [...] and] impostures and frauds of various kinds, such as 'faked' interviews and stories. (Mott 1950, 539, quoted in Samuel 2016)

Clearly, all of this sounds eerily familiar, including even the use of misleading pictures and fake quotes, even if current technologies allow for more sophisticated forms of forgery (such as 'deep fakes').¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Robinson et al. (2018) for an overview of common strategies.

¹⁴ For some of these historical examples, it isn't clear whether they fall in the category of politically motivated propaganda or pure profit-seeking 'clickbait'. Most likely, the two have always co-existed and the line between them isn't always sharp. One interesting historical example with tremendous political consequences was the 'Dreyfus affair' at the end of the nineteenth century, where the spread of misinformation by the press played a prominent role.

3.2 Proliferation, Circulation, and Influence

A widely shared BuzzFeed piece (Silverman 2016) showed that fake news stories outperformed real news in the final months leading up to the 2016 US election. The Cambridge Analytica scandal has received a lot of attention, and several journalists writing for reputable news outlets (e.g. Cadwalladr 2018; Rosenberg et al. 2018; Wong 2019), in addition to whistleblower Christopher Wylie himself (2019), have floated the suggestion that micro-targeted political ads may have helped Trump win the election. Analysis of Twitter data suggested that falsehoods travelled faster and further than truths (Vosoughi et al. 2018). Perhaps, then, the novelty is that there is much more fake news than before, circulating more widely, and exerting significantly greater influence on the general public.

However, recent empirical research reaches more sobering conclusions. The empirical evidence suggests that fake news is mostly consumed by a small subgroup of heavy internet users (Nelson & Taneja 2018), that it is typically shared by older conservative voters (Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess, Nagler, & Tucker 2019), and that its influence is too small to change election outcomes (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Broockman & Green 2014).¹⁵ Moreover, fake news consumption appears to have decreased between 2016 and 2018 (Guess et al. 2019). It's also doubtful that many people truly live in online news bubbles; news diets tend to be relatively diverse (Fletcher & Nielsen 2017; Guess et al. 2018; Nelson & Webster 2017). Of course, it remains extremely difficult to filter out and estimate the exact effects of information consumption on beliefs, attitudes, and behavior; it may well be that further research will ultimately contradict these findings, and that looking at the phenomenon on a more global scale leads to different conclusions. But we can at least say that, at this point, there is no decisive evidence that the circulation and influence of fake news have grown considerably in recent years, at least not in the USA and Europe.¹⁶

3.3 Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Finally, the novelty of fake news might be found in the underlying technologies for producing, distributing, and consuming it. This is independently plausible

¹⁵ Of course, these findings are all specific to the countries studied. In other countries, the spread of fake news seems to have had a considerable influence in election outcomes, such as in the Philippines (Pomerantsev 2019) and Brazil. At the 2018 presidential election in Brazil, for example, the spread of fake news through WhatsApp groups seems to have had considerable impact (Scarabeli 2019).

¹⁶ One caveat: the studies cited do not distinguish between the different uses of 'fake news' that we distinguished above and some combine propaganda, clickbait, and conspiracies in their operationalization of 'fake news'. (Thanks to Hein Duijf for noting this point.) This doesn't threaten our claims, however. If the spread and influence of the combined categories is relatively limited, the same will be true for one subcategory.

anyway, since the rise of the Internet and social media form the most noticeable shift in the news and journalism landscape. (It's not as if human psychology or the general incentives of commercial markets have undergone major changes in recent years.)

A popular account of the influence of the Internet goes as follows. The Internet has made the production of content that is available to a (potentially) worldwide audience much easier. In comparison with the efforts and costs involved in printing a physical newspaper or magazine, the efforts and costs of setting up a website, blog, or social media account are almost negligible. Access, moreover, is often free rather than paid, at least for anyone with an internet connection, consumption is non-exclusive in the sense that no printed copies are necessary, and content can easily remain available for virtually unlimited amounts of time. Features such as these were what led people to express high hopes about the web's potential to enhance freedom, equality, public discourse, and democracy in the early days of the Internet. The Internet was supposed to turn the world into a global village (McLuhan 1964) and act as the great equalizer in the worldwide marketplace of ideas, information, and knowledge, finally realizing the Millian ideal of free exchange of ideas (Mill 1999). Online, everyone's voice would have an equal chance of being heard, everyone could contribute to the conversation, and everyone could simultaneously be a journalist, news consumer, engaged citizen, advocate, and activist.¹⁷

Very little of this has actually materialized. To be sure, the technical possibilities as such are there—it is still true that anyone can easily put content online and share it with the world, in particular through social media. The point is that the online world has created new forms of inequality, formidable barriers of entry, and virtual monopolies on services and platforms. The influence of tech giants on what gets seen and shared online is hard to overestimate: Google sets the order of search results, YouTube's algorithms throw up recommendations for what to watch next, Facebook's news feed prioritizes your friends' messages, most of our news comes from major outlets rather than local or independent sources, and so on. In his recent book on the online attention economy, the political scientist and media scholar Matthew Hindman paints a gloomy picture:

The number of [news] outlets may have expanded, but the public sphere remains highly concentrated. The number of journalists has plummeted and “fake news” has multiplied, but digital media are just as dependent on a few corporate gatekeepers as ever. Building a consistent news audience remains hugely expensive. The attention economy has doomed most of our civic hopes for the web.

(Hindman 2018, 13–14)

¹⁷ Matthew Hindman (2009, ch. 1) cites a wide range of sources from academia, journalism, politics, public administration, and law who expounded views like the above.

Others concur. Communication scientists Eiri Elvestad and Angela Phillips (2018) list the following items among ‘myths of the social media era’ debunked by empirical research: ‘News personalization will improve plurality, diversity, and ultimately democracy’, ‘the role of the journalist is merging with the role of the audience’, and ‘the many are smarter than the few’ (meaning that relatively few tech and media giants wield outsized power on what online news gets produced, shared, and consumed). Understanding in what ways the Internet fails to be the democratizing information paradise that people had hoped for does, however, provide insight into what may be distinctive of recent online fake news production and dissemination.

First, contrary to the promises of the early Internet, getting content (including propagandistic fake news) not only out, but actually seen regularly by sizable audiences over longer periods of time—which is required to influence the public opinion in any significant way—requires sustained time and effort and is thus expensive. Russia, as well as the American right, have understood this best, it seems. As both Snyder (2018) and Pomerantsev (2019) document in detail, Russia has invested heavily in information warfare over the past decades by creating and operating fake news websites, fake social media accounts, troll farms, armies of bots, and more. The American right has similarly invested heavily in expanding and transforming its already powerful offline media empire into an online media universe.¹⁸ Benkler et al. (2018) show how this has resulted in a large and mostly isolated echo chamber in which fake news and highly partisan content can be produced by extreme websites of the likes of, e.g. Alex Jones’s Infowars, to be then gradually picked up by slightly more legitimate-seeming journalistic outlets such as Breitbart, Daily Caller, and Fox News. All of this content, of course, is shared and promoted on social media platforms. Some of it may eventually make it out of the right-wing universe into more mainstream media, if only to be rebutted or commented on.¹⁹ One novel aspect of recent fake news, then, is not that a lot of money is spent on producing and distributing it; rather, it is that its production and dissemination have adapted to the technological and commercial possibilities of the Internet and social media technology.

Secondly, we’ve noted above that propagandistic fake news has always catered to the preferences and baser instincts of news audiences. What is novel, however, is how recent purveyors of fake news have exploited opportunities opened up by social media platforms and, specifically, tinkered with big data and the algorithms

¹⁸ Benkler et al. (2018) locate the origins of this media environment in the right-wing talk shows that proliferated in the final decades of the twentieth century. Several journalistic reports suggest a strong influence of the libertarian former hedge-fund manager Robert Mercer behind the scenes (Cadwaladr 2017; Mayer 2017).

¹⁹ Again, our singling out the *right-wing* media universe here isn’t a matter of personal political preferences on our part; Benkler et al. (2018) make a point of emphasizing how their research shows that the kind of systematic online network propaganda created on the right side of the American political spectrum simply isn’t mirrored on the left.

by which these platforms order, prioritize, distribute, boost, and recommend various kinds of content. As before, this requires understanding of human psychology in order to determine what sort of content will appeal to people. But, now, in addition, it also requires technical knowledge of how the relevant algorithms work in order to game them into boosting specific content.

There are two sides to this. One concerns the human–platform interaction. New platforms do not have clear norms for how users behave on them and, to the extent that norms emerge, they can change quickly. As a result, the barriers for sharing misinformation have lowered. For example, many used to quote the phrase ‘retweet isn’t endorsement’ in their Twitter bio. But if not endorsement, then what? What does it mean when people retweet or subtweet someone else’s message? It can mean many things, ranging from endorsement to rejection, to irony, jokes, virtue signalling, expressing one’s social identity, moral grandstanding, etc. (cf. Rini 2017, 49; Sullivan 2019). In contrast with good old-fashioned lying or deceiving people, online sharing of misinformation comes with inbuilt plausible deniability. One can always back-pedal, saying it was just a joke, irony, cynicism, or ‘something to think about’.

The second side has to do with the workings of the algorithms behind internet platforms. Their technical details are often proprietary information and can change frequently,²⁰ but some basics should suffice to illustrate the point. Google’s PageRank orders search results based, in part, on the amount of incoming links to a webpage (Page et al. 1999). If you want a website to show up higher, it needs to be linked to by many other sites. Creating a large enough network of mutually referring websites thus helps to promote your content in the order of search results. Facebook’s news feed algorithm takes into account, among many other factors, the amount of engagement posts generate (reactions, shares, comments). To artificially boost content, then, you not only make use of the traditional features that make fake news appealing (recall the discussion of yellow journalism and tabloid journalism above); you can also set up fake accounts and bots to engage disproportionately with certain posts. Most social media platforms prime for engagement based on affective responses: ‘likes’, ‘loves’, up or down votes, or Facebook’s more fine-grained emoticons.²¹ Hence, they set users up for ‘hot cognition’ (Lodge & Taber 2005) and ‘emotional contagion’ (Hatfield et al. 1993; Kramer et al. 2014), which are known to produce stronger behavioral effects than mere ‘cool’ analysis and critical thinking and deliberation. YouTube’s algorithms are optimized to maximize ‘watch-through’: to get people to watch videos for as long as possible so that more ads can be shown. This can turn YouTube into a

²⁰ Hindman (2018, 177–8) suggests that this is why Russia and China in particular have used hacking and espionage to obtain insider knowledge of social media algorithms.

²¹ Thanks to Alessandra Tanesini for alerting us to this.

‘radicalization machine’: drawing users to ever more extreme videos because that keeps them hooked (Chaslot 2019; Lewis 2018; Roose 2019).

In conclusion, a second aspect that appears novel about contemporary fake news is how it cleverly exploits the opaque and evolving behavioral norms on the Internet and social media platforms, as well as their technical possibilities. Both the kind of content that is produced²² and its modes of production and dissemination are aimed at exploiting these norms and possibilities, in order to maximize reach and impact.

4. Conclusion

We started by describing three models for spreading politically charged messages with the purpose of supporting the causes of (political) actors. Initially, we focused on structural features of each of these models rather than on the specifics of *how* each of them is implemented. Model A consists in broadcasting alluring messages while not actively interfering with the dissemination of similar messages by other actors; this stays closest to the ‘standard’ model for liberal democratic discourse. Model B involves active suppression and undercutting of alternative messages, in particular through censorship. Totalitarian regimes such as in Nazi Germany and currently in China are typical (but not the only) instantiations of this model, which operates on the basis of *information scarcity*. Model C goes in the opposite direction by implementing strategies of *information abundance*, or ‘censorship through noise’ (Pomerantsev, 2019). In all three models, fictional stories posing as pieces of journalism—fake news—occupy a prominent position. The models are not mutually exclusive, and specific actors may well engage in mixed strategies. Russia, for example, tends towards Model B domestically but employs Model C internationally.

Various historical and contemporary examples showed that all three models can be, and have been, instantiated with different kinds of technologies for information dissemination. This means that disinformation campaigns and so-called ‘post-truth politics’ as such are not novel phenomena, neither with respect to the kind of content produced, nor, as far as recent empirical evidence shows, in terms of proliferation, circulation, and influence.

However, with respect to production, distribution, and consumption, we argued that digital media and the Internet afford a number of technological possibilities that change the informational landscape: epistemic networks have

²² To prevent misunderstandings: this does not invalidate the first point made above that the content of contemporary fake news closely resembles that of older forms of misinformation and propaganda. Our point is that sensationalism and catering to people’s preferences and identities is carefully tailored to features of the algorithms that determine what people get to see online.

always existed, but structural differences between networks (e.g. analogue vs. digital) change the ways in which information is produced, distributed, and consumed. These technological possibilities provide access to a virtually infinite range of messages on the Internet, which makes Model C easier to implement than before, whereas Model B becomes more difficult to implement and enforce (though not impossible, as the case of China shows). As for Model A, if everyone else (both domestically and internationally) is engaging in Model C strategies, those who stick to the democratically more acceptable Model A will be disadvantaged. The troubling conclusion seems to be that, in an arms race, everyone will be pushed towards Model C information warfare, whether they want to or not. This poses a dilemma for the supporters of traditional democratic values: should they 'go high where others go low', or should they adopt the same 'dirty tricks' to overturn or at least counter political actors with anti-democratic tendencies?

In sum, we propose a cautious and qualified conclusion concerning what's new about contemporary fake news: much of its features resemble older forms of fake news and propaganda very closely. But two aspects seem novel: (1) the adaptation to the commercial and technological possibilities of the Internet and social media for distribution and consumption and (2) the clever use of big data, algorithmic boosting, and troll farms or fully automated social media bots.

We think this qualified account offers a number of advantages in comparison with other recent discussions of fake news. In particular, it allows us to both reject alarmism about fake news *and* to support calls for investigating and monitoring these developments closely (as the European Union, for example, is already doing).²³ On the one hand, we can side with those who reject the recent alarmism over fake news and 'post-truth politics' by emphasizing that propaganda, misinformation, and other phenomena closely resembling contemporary fake news have been with us for quite some time before the advent of the Internet (at the very least since the twentieth century and arguably even well before). On the other hand, though, we can also support those who call for more scholarly attention, public scrutiny, and perhaps even regulatory policy and legal measures pertaining to disinformation campaigns and the role of fake news therein. A number of democracies in the world are under threat (e.g. Brazil, India, Poland, Hungary), and there's quite some evidence supporting the claim that online disinformation campaigns play a significant role in these developments. The digital media environment has created distinctively new possibilities for fake news and other forms of disinformation to influence the public opinion; it is crucially important for the health of democracy that we grapple with these novel developments.²⁴

²³ Report 'Tackling online disinformation': <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation>.

²⁴ Thanks to Elias Antilla, Heijn Duijf, Thirza Lagewaard, Chris Ranalli, Merel Talbi, and Alessandra Tanesini for discussion about the chapter and to the editors of this volume and two anonymous referees for valuable comments on an earlier version. Jeroen de Ridder's research for this

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