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## Fake News and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## **Fake News and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Introduction**

Defining forces of our time have been political polarization and a global public health crisis, each exacerbated and intertwined by social media and media oversaturation. We find ourselves in self-reinforced and curated information environments. Tackling the pandemic has been accompanied by the need to address a *disinfodemic*. With misinformation and misleading information being propagated around the world using memes, data, charts, photos, tweets, infographics, posts, and articles, an understanding of the mechanisms and changing communication landscape is essential for industry, and government initiatives dealing with the dangers of fake news.

There is an old saying attributed to Mark Twain, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." Today interdisciplinary experts study the spread of misinformation. Fake news is not a new phenomenon. In the good old days there was misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and selective information. The motivation behind false information ranges from the malicious to well-intentioned uncritically circulated false, potentially dangerous, information. Is there something unique about inaccurate information environment today? Media cocoons, filter bubbles, echo chambers and confirmation bias have received much attention by media studies scholars, but does this adequately explain the growing pollution of the information environment? What role does algorithmic personalization play? The aim of this article is to open a conversation with each contributor offering a different perspective through which to examine the current information ecosystem so susceptible to disseminating false information.

### **Misinformation, disinformation, and political loyalties on COVID-19: Russell Chun**

A little more than a year after it began, the COVID-19 pandemic has infected more than 100 million people and killed more than two million worldwide. Yet, the rise in mis/disinformation surrounding COVID-19 is recognized as a threat just as dangerous as the pandemic itself. Medical and scientific journals, normally focused on research, have been forced to address the scourge of fake news. The British journal *Lancet* (2020) published an editorial that bemoans the impact misinformation is having by "diluting the pool of legitimate information" and undermining the trust in the scientific community and institutions.

In his remarks at the Munich Security Conference, Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of the World Health Organization (WHO)

sounded the alarm by saying, “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous” (Ghebreyesus, T. A., 2020). While we don’t know if fake news spreads faster than the virus, we do know that lies spread faster than the truth (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral 2018). And although his term “infodemic” has gained prominence only recently, it isn’t new. The word was coined in a 2003 *Washington Post* op-ed to describe a similar situation the world faced with the SARS outbreak in China.

Political scientist David Rothkopf (2003) argued that misinformation exacerbates the outbreak. “[Misinformation] has implications that are far greater than the disease itself. That is because it is not the viral epidemic but rather an ‘information epidemic’ that has transformed SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, from a bungled Chinese regional health crisis into a global economic and social debacle.... [T]he information epidemic—or ‘infodemic’—has made the public health crisis harder to control and contain.”

The recent misinformation landscape faced with COVID-19 is far more dire than the one we faced with SARS. While the world saw less than 1,000 deaths from the 2003 SARS outbreak, COVID-19 has proved to be two thousandfold more deadly. The misinformation we are seeing is also less about a bungled response from a bureaucratic state. The issues span the gamut from misconceptions about the nature of science to conspiracy theories embraced by major mainstream political leaders.

Misinformation differs from disinformation in the intention of the one who disseminates it. Misinformation is inadvertent sharing of false information which the sharer believes is true, whereas disinformation is deliberate sharing of false content with the intent to do harm or for political or economic gain. (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017). In the case of COVID-19, a big source of misinformation appears to have been caused by early scientific conjectures and confusion from the scientific community itself. In March 2020, scientists in France warned against taking ibuprofen with coronavirus symptoms (Moore, Carleton, Blin, Bosco-Levy, & Droz 2020). The World Health Organization, European Medicines Agency, and other European and UK agencies urged caution, only to reverse their decision after more evidence and research emerged.

Similarly, hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug, was an early promising treatment for the coronavirus authorized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and promoted heavily by political leaders such as former President Trump and President Bolsonaro of Brazil along with celebrities such as Dr. Mehmet Oz. In May 2020, however, the British medical journal *The Lancet* published a study that cast doubt on the effectiveness of the drug and claimed it increased the risk of death (Mehra, Desai, Ruschitzka, & Patel 2020). The study resulted in the WHO and other groups to immediately halt their research on hydroxychloroquine. Soon after

however, doubts about the study surfaced, and following independent reviews, *The Lancet* was forced to issue a retraction of the study.

These examples highlight the confusion of the back-and-forth, contradictory stances from the scientific community, which give fuel to charges of “fake news” from a weary public increasingly distrustful of institutions (Rainie & Perrin 2019) and the media (Swift, 2016). While the high noise-to-signal communication environment echoes the fake news phenomena, the confusion is rather a reflection of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of science and muddied by political leadership.

The hydroxychloroquine and ibuprofen stories are legitimate science-based controversies stemming from different interpretations of data, early anecdotal conjectures, or conflicting evidence and studies. Lost amid the din of competing political voices that pit popular opinion against medical professionals is the fact that science is an iterative, self-correcting process. Newer studies disputing previous studies isn’t evidence of “fake news,” but evidence of the scientific process at work. Hence, “fake news” is not an appropriate description for the contradictory scientific messaging. Nevertheless, the production and communication of medical knowledge can be still seen as a “political” event, subject to many of the same forces and challenges of public and political participation (Berlivet & Löwy 2020).

President Trump’s endorsement of hydroxychloroquine, even in the face of unsettled science, demonstrates a crucial dimension in fake news. Political tribalism plays a critical role in the acceptance of mis- and disinformation. As Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University put it, “information is downstream from identity” (Rosen, 2021). We place more weight and credibility on information from our peer networks and from those with whom we identify than in the integrity of the information itself. In particular, those who identify with conservative groups are more likely to accept and spread misinformation. Researchers at Harvard concluded that the predominately Republican viewers of Fox news are directly linked to those who embrace conspiracy theories and inaccurate information (Park, Park, Kang & Cha 2021, Jamieson & Albarracin 2020), leading to higher rates of COVID infections.

Consider specific examples of mis- and disinformation on COVID-19. One of the more prominent early conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus is the idea that 5G networks—the fifth generation of wireless communications—are responsible. In 2019, the YouTube channel Yebo published a video claiming to feature a whistleblower warning about the dangers of 5G networks. It became the most shared video on Facebook with more than 4 million views on YouTube (Broderick, 2020). Most noticeably, the man featured in the video wears a hat with the “Make America Great Again” logo, a clear symbol of his tribal loyalty to then President Donald Trump and the Republican party. His identity becomes as important as his

message, and those who align themselves with this political group can signal their own belonging by sharing the misinformation. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) of First Draft News remind us that communication is not just an exchange of information, but one that serves a ritualistic function, a view advanced by communication theorist James Carey. When communication is viewed as a ritual, the communication act is linked to notions of “sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith” (Carey, 2009).

If our group loyalties determine our behavior in communication, it’s useful to examine the characteristics of the group. Perhaps one of the most dangerous traits of the Republican party, especially as it relates to COVID-19 misinformation, is a strain of anti-intellectualism often couched in freedom of thought and independence from authority. The conservative movement has also historically shunned “elitists” in the ivory tower and mocked intellectuals for their perceived detachment from the on-the-ground realities of the “ordinary” people (Bartlett, 2020). But the “country-boy politics” (a term Republican George W. Bush used) that allow Donald Trump and his party to draw power from populism also fuel the skepticism and outright rejection of scientific expertise in favor of conspiracy theories and misinformation. Almost a third of all Americans (with far more Republicans than Democrats) mistakenly believe that COVID-19 was engineered and released by a lab in Wuhan, China (Schaeffer, 2020).

Ignoring scientific evidence and rejecting public health officials, Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas noted what he considered to be a more important criterion in evaluating information about the supposed Wuhan origins of the virus, tweeting, “...common sense has been my guide...Not ‘the models.’ Not so-called ‘public-health experts.’ Just common sense” (Cotton, 2020a). He continued to propagate the misinformation by appealing to one’s own “common sense,” writing in the Wall Street Journal, “this evidence is circumstantial, to be sure, but it all points toward the Wuhan labs... Americans justifiably can use common sense to follow the inherent logic of events to their likely conclusion” (Cotton, 2020b). The irony should not be lost that those who advocate common sense and the freedom to think for oneself are themselves so heavily influenced by the groupthink effect of tribal loyalties.

The misinformation about COVID-19 unfortunately finds new legs when it gets picked up and amplified by foreign adversaries such as Russia. What may have been *misinformation* then becomes *disinformation* because the new actor propagating the information has deliberate intentions to do harm. The theory that 5G networks caused COVID-19 was pushed by RT America, the broadcast news station formerly known as Russia Today. RT America is a declared instrument of the Kremlin—a “coordinated Russian state platform” according to Senate Intelligence. A declassified report from the Director of National Intelligence (2017) emphasized RT America’s

“importance to the Kremlin as a messaging tool” whose goal is to direct a “campaign to undermine faith in the US Government.” What’s remarkable is not that Russia is amplifying fake news to sow discord, division, confusion, and distrust toward our institutions, but that they no longer have to make up the lies themselves. There’s already fertile soil for misinformation created here domestically. Russia pivoted “from selling fiction to selling spin...the tactic meant amplifying lies America was already telling itself” (Linvill & Warren, 2020).

The lies we tell ourselves make it easier to accept additional lies. If you reject evidence that 5G did not cause COVID or that COVID was not created in a Wuhan lab, then you’re more likely to reject scientific evidence that masks and social distancing reduce viral transmission or that COVID really is more dangerous than the flu. Lies build upon lies and spread the pandemic. With misinformation exacerbating the pandemic, the pandemic, in turn, drives many to the political fringes (Fisher, 2021), creating a viscous positive feedback loop. COVID lockdowns lead to fear and social isolation that fuel extremism, where misinformation tends to breed. Recognizing how the pandemic and infodemic are intertwined can be the first step in addressing both.

What solutions could break this cycle where the pandemic and infodemic feed each other? Research suggests that we need to do more than provide simple refutations of misinformation. Denying that something is not true only repeats the lie. Purveyors of misinformation and disinformation know this and leverage the fact that mainstream media will pick up a conspiracy theory from an obscure Reddit or 4Chann thread in order to expose it. But in doing so, the media gives it oxygen to survive and thrive. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) warn journalists that “agents behind disinformation campaigns see media amplification as a key technique for success. Debunks themselves can be considered a form of engagement.”

One alternative, proposed by linguist George Lakoff and advanced by Jay Rosen, uses a “truth sandwich” method, which involves starting off with the truth, then indicating the lie, and then finishing off by reiterating the truth (Lakoff, 2018). By doing so, audiences’ initial and lasting impressions are of the truth, and framing rebuttals in such a manner helps them avoid dwelling on the misinformation in the middle. Lakoff’s idea is an outgrowth of his linguistic work on framing debates that acknowledges how denials can have the opposite intention (e.g. “don’t think of an elephant” makes you think of an elephant) (Lakoff, 2014). Social scientists have also observed that when a simple debunking is made, a gap in a person’s mental model is created. When no alternative to the debunking is offered, we often persist in believing the original wrong information because we prefer an incorrect model over an incomplete model, a phenomenon known as the “continued influence effect” (Johnson & Seifert, 1994). The implication for misinformation is clear. Affirming the truth (“Scientists conclude that COVID

originated in animals”) is more effective than debunking the lie (“COVID did not come from a lab in China”).

Debunking, however, is most effective when done by those in the same peer networks that promulgate the misinformation. Those in-group members have more influence in the reception of the message than mainstream media, who may have already been dismissed and branded as untrustworthy. That was exemplified in 2008 by the way then Republican presidential candidate John McCain corrected misinformation from a supporter about his Democratic rival Barack Obama at a televised townhall-style campaign rally (Associated Press, 2008). After a supporter called Obama an Arab, a persistent conspiracy theory that questioned Obama’s citizenship, McCain took the microphone away and refuted her assertion with, “No ma’am. He’s a decent family man, [a] citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.” Combating the COVID infodemic needs similar truth-telling, not just from the media, but from those in positions of authority in groups which have been most likely to spread misinformation. Republican Senator Mitt Romney said it plainly about misinformation in the 2020 Presidential election, but is equally applicable to COVID misinformation: “The best way we can show respect ... is by telling them [their conservative constituents] the truth. That is the burden, and the duty, of leadership” (Romney, 2021).

### **The Market Model and Today’s Media Tribalism: Was “Fake News” a Natural Outcome of the “Give the People What They Want” Commercial System? Mario Murillo**

The tragedy that occurred in Washington, DC., on January 6, 2021 was described by commentators as one of the darkest moments in our national experiment with democracy. The violent incursion of the Capitol by thousands of Trump supporters was sparked by widespread, yet false claims about a stolen election, promoted for months by the former President in his public pronouncements and his social media channels. These lies found a reliable echo chamber in the right-wing corporate media ecosystem – Fox, affiliates of Sinclair Broadcasting, One America News, and a countless array of local and national voices that rhetorically agitate listeners every day on political talk radio (Grynbaum, M., et al, 2021). Nevertheless, it was social media that received the majority of the public backlash after the riot.

The resulting poll numbers showing upwards of 80% of the Republican base believing the 2020 elections were rigged against Donald Trump should not be surprising.<sup>1</sup> It is the lucrative dividend of a recurring investment in an apocalyptic narrative by right wing media that began more than three decades ago, one that explicitly indicts the “corrupt” liberal establishment for its unpatriotic assault on fundamental U.S. values. The belief that Satan-loving Democrats, “femi-Nazis,” tree-hugging environmentalists, and a good

chunk of black and brown folks will unrepentantly take over the country someday - unless righteous, freedom-loving Americans stand up and fight - has been the relentless mantra of the most extreme yet successful commentators of the right, including the late Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, Michael Levin and countless others who were unleashed by the deregulatory media policies of Ronald Reagan. The commercial success of their uncompromising, hyper-partisan approach, loose on facts but heavy on rage, was eventually emulated on prime-time cable, specifically on Fox News in the 1990s, filling what its defenders described as a market demand to "counter-balance" the "liberal" news media (Douglas, Rosenwald). In other words, the current disconnect from reality by a large percentage of the population should not be seen as a phenomenon resulting strictly from what today is erroneously called "fake news." In many ways, given the history of our media regulatory policy, we should have seen this political crisis coming long ago.

True, the storming of the Capitol by Trump-inspired mobs marked a new low-point in the downward trajectory of our decaying political culture, and although the collapse of our democratic system did not fully materialize on that January day, clearly there is still potential for more damage to occur and things to get worse in the foreseeable future. But maybe there is a silver lining in the current crisis: the sudden realization amongst a broad cross section of the U.S. public that the rupture in our public sphere is so profound, we will never recover from it, unless we fundamentally shift our way of communicating to one another, and take steps to address the structures that have the United States "drowning in lies."<sup>2</sup>

Despite its limitations as a theoretical frame, it is useful to consider the broad concept of the "Public Sphere" to demonstrate how advocates of the anti-regulation, pro-corporate, consumer-driven commercial system - in the name of free speech and anti-government intrusion in the media - essentially got what they asked for in today's political and cultural crisis manifested most visibly in the rise of "fake news." The crisis engulfing our media system, characterized by a tribal distrust of the institution of journalism and a complete collapse of open spaces for deliberative dialogue and engaged debate based upon universally agreed-upon facts, allows for propaganda, "fake news," and outright lies and distortions to dominate the public discourse and shape our politics.

This is not simply about responding to the explosion of so-called "fake news" - that is, the troll-driven, deliberately false, often hateful implicit and explicit narratives flooding social media and inevitably echoed by the traditional, "legacy" media channels of cable networks, newspapers, and talk radio.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is time to reconsider the entire market-based model of communication that is considered sacred in the U.S., which since its consolidation in the 1930s, has had a gradual but consistent corrosive effect on the nation's public sphere (McChesney).

For 100 years, an array of scholars, educators, journalists, regulators and media reform activists have warned us about the potential threats that the hyper-commercial, for-profit, market-based media system posed to democratic communication. Their concerns have been coupled by an open and consistent call for a public service-oriented media system in the U.S. that would function as a guarantor of a sustainable, vibrant democratic political culture where deliberative dialogue about the major issues facing the nation would be the foundation of our collective welfare (McChesney, Pickard, Croteau/Hoynes). Unfortunately, their warnings have been ignored, muted or openly rejected by assertions of corporate executives, media titans, and politicians that free market principles must be at the heart of our media policy, even as evidence of the market's failures are all around us. Media scholar Victor Pickard calls them "structural pathologies" that prioritize "profit over democratic imperatives," leading to an embrace of dangerous politics in the interest of capturing audiences. (Pickard, 2019).

This observation about the market model is not meant to ignore the unique, very dangerous levels of misinformation that we're now susceptible to today due to the exponential rise of social media as a vehicle to disseminate disinformation on such a wide scale. However, the critique of the market model draws attention to long-standing aspects of our commercial media system that have also allowed for this kind of discourse to be accepted as the norm.

Clearly, today the nefarious practice of spreading conspiracy theories, false information, and hate speech through these new channels have detrimentally impacted many aspects of our everyday lives in ways we could not have imagined even ten years ago, when, as Thomas Edsall writes in the *New York Times*, "the consensus was that the digital revolution would give effective voice to millions of previously unheard citizens."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, given social media's rapid proliferation in recent years, building critical defenses around these contemporary practices, and understanding how they are employed by individuals and organizations in their daily mobilizing campaigns is essential for democracy to have a chance for survival. Furthermore, understanding how people/audiences/publics receive and eventually process this false information could serve as important antidotes to the venomous torrent of harmful messages that permeate social media, creating our contemporary "crisis of knowledge."<sup>5</sup> It is not hyperbole to say protecting oneself from these unscrupulous message creators is a matter of life and death, as we saw clearly with the massive levels of dangerous disinformation, ie "fake news," that was distributed almost daily during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (the focus of our NYSCA 2020 panel). The growing calls for government regulation of the Facebooks and Twitters of the world, from both the left and the right, are a reflection of how urgent the situation is.

The call for stronger regulatory mandates on social media tech giants may need to extend to all of our mass communication systems, including our broadcast and cable services. In many ways, we're seeing history repeat itself when officials today warn of the excessive power these tech companies have accumulated, something media reformers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century argued about the emerging networks. In focusing so much of our attention today on tech giants and social media, we avoid raising questions about the other ubiquitous media firms that for too long have had a free reign to do whatever they want in the name of open markets and a free press. Any attempt at government regulation of these powerful entities was always and is still considered to be free speech blasphemy, the first steps towards tyranny – that is, state control over a free press, free expression, and a free people (Bazelon).

In defending the invisible hand of the marketplace as the primary guarantor of a free, open and democratic media system, the earliest commercial broadcast networks unknowingly laid the groundwork for the tribal media culture we are harvesting today, one where "fake news" is embraced as truth by gullible audiences, and the fundamental values and practices of journalism are viewed as suspect and untrustworthy. The aggressive anti-regulation stance taken by the large, national (and later transnational) corporate media conglomerates since the 1930s, in defense of an elusive marketplace of ideas and freedom of speech, eventually unleashed a number of processes, concrete policy decisions, and regulatory actions that were considered necessary for the corporate bottom line, (ie profits), but not so good for strengthening the democratic communication system needed to nurture a viable, vibrant public sphere.

Proponents of the market model of media have argued that government regulation of mass communication would not be necessary because the public interest will be served best by private entities responding to people's demands and desires: in other words, give the people what they want. Yet over the past several decades, this approach has not always resulted in democratic outcomes when it comes to the news and information media, as one can see from this abbreviated list:

- the commercial system's complete dependence on advertising, forcing media firms to deliberately shape content to attract eyes and ears;
- the consolidation of the broadcast media into an entrenched oligopoly made up of a few powerful networks;
- the high ownership concentration that emerged in the 1980s and 90s that led to a dramatic reduction in localism in radio (Hilliard/Keith),
- the rescinding of the Fairness Doctrine in the name of free speech rights of broadcasters;

- the systematic dismantling of local, national and global news divisions and other cost-cutting measures designed to increase profits for shareholders;
- the shuttering of hundreds of local newspapers across the country due to dropping ad revenue.

Neither the proponents nor the vocal critics of the laissez faire system of media policy could have envisioned the exact delivery mechanism of today's "fake news." After all, who would have thought 100 years ago – or even fifty years ago - that we would all have a hand-held apparatus in our pocket strategically designed to connect us – indeed addict us - to everything in the world that we liked, embraced, were curious about, or had some kind of ties to, through video, images, audio, and text, a device in many ways much more powerful than a printing press or radio tower? It's "give the people what they want" on digital steroids, allowing captivated audiences to come back for more and more, on demand, without any filters or gatekeepers, while allowing them to share this content to thousands, if not millions of like-minded consumers.

The advocates of the media reform movement were sounding the alarm bells about the commercial market model being consolidated in the 1930s because they understood that viewing news, public information and other media content as a consumer product no different than deodorant soap or breakfast cereal was a recipe for undemocratic outcomes that could be just as problematic for free speech as it would be in a more totalitarian context (Copps/Common Cause; Croteau & Hoynes, Bazelon). These same, basic concerns were raised by other voices again and again over the decades, although they were consistently drowned out by the deep pockets and loud objections of the corporate capitalists running our media industries.

There is considerable literature based on historical research of the public record by a number of media scholars who have examined the development of the broadcast industry in the United States which draws attention to these unheeded warnings and demands (McChesney, Pickard 2015). For example, there was the legislative fight over the Communications Act of 1934 that ultimately favored the commercial broadcasters over the media reform advocates and educators that were highly critical of the growing commercialism of the airwaves. Media historian Robert McChesney describes in great detail how the commercial market model of broadcasting was not a given when radio first emerged in the 1920s as a powerful new electronic medium. He demonstrates how there was a large movement among educators in particular who viewed radio as an essential tool for public education and strengthening democratic discourse. They warned of the threats that democratic communication faced by a media system built solely on the profit motive (McChesney).

By the 1940s, an activist FCC attempted to introduce some standards for public interest broadcasting through its report *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees*, known popularly as "The Blue Book." It was an open call to require radio broadcasters to abide by a number of public service requirements in order to maintain their licenses (Pickard, 2015). In the end, it was rejected by industry and its allies in Congress as "censorship" of radio led by "sophomoric professors, selfish special interests, power-crazed bureaucrats, and irascible legislators (Pickard, 2015)."

In 1944, the Hutchins Commission was convened to look into the function and responsibilities of the U.S. press. After three years of comprehensive interviews with representatives of the news industry, including advertisers, editors, journalists, and the public, the commission outlined a series of recommendations that recognized the need for the press to provide public service content for the community to clarify societal goals and values. Their report was a recognition of the important function a mass communication system in any country plays in developing a culture of public deliberation and participation in matters of common concern, that is, building citizenship. The commission's recommendations were also wholeheartedly rejected by the corporate interests that made up our news media (Pickard, 2015).

The gutting of the Fairness Doctrine in the 1980s by President Reagan was perhaps the best-known policy decision of the past four decades that favored big business principles over even limited regulation of the public airwaves, resulting in a dramatic shift in the media marketplace of ideas. Backed by conservative political leaders, the commercial broadcasters convinced the anti-big government Reagan Administration to terminate existing measures aimed at making sure broadcasters would cover important issues in the communities they serve, and provide a broad range of perspectives in that coverage. The elimination of the Fairness Doctrine opened the floodgates for the rise of political talk radio, dominated for 35 years by right wing voices who in many ways set the stage for the mainstreaming of the unpresidential political discourse of Donald Trump (Rosenwald).<sup>6</sup>

The deregulatory approach continued in the next several administrations, culminating with the 1996 Telecommunications Act, signed by law by President Clinton, which permitted corporations to amass large numbers of local newspapers and news stations, giving unfettered access to almost every household in America to massive, transnational corporations with no strings attached vis a vis public service principles or outcomes. Ironically, much of this was justified by regulators who argued new technological advances like the internet made earlier ownership restrictions moot. Under George W. Bush, regarding the topic of media ownership, the FCC said it was not "particularly troubling that media properties do not always, or even frequently, avail themselves to others who may hold

contrary opinions," arguing without irony that "nothing requires them to do so, nor is it necessarily healthy for public debate to pretend as though all ideas are of equal value entitled to equal airing."<sup>7</sup>

In examining the history of the U.S. media over the past 100 years, it is apparent that any regulatory initiative designed to put public service principles into action vis a vis broadcasters, newspapers, and other media platforms was received by commercial interests with considerable suspicion if not outright scorn. This universal opposition gave the upper hand to those who argued for market-based principles to be the guiding light of the major media (Packard; McChesney; Croteau Hoynes). In the process, the opportunity to build a media infrastructure conducive to a culture of true public deliberation and reflection on a wide scale about important matters of the day was jettisoned in favor of market principles built on laws of supply and demand.

Today, there is a growing chorus of scholars from both the left and the right arguing something that has always made U.S. policymakers and industry leaders feel uncomfortable. As Emily Bazelon described in an expose in the *New York Times Magazine* in October 2020, "perhaps our way of thinking about free speech is not the very best way." Bazelon points to other democracies that have taken distinct approaches from the U.S. to the issue of government regulation of the media, arguing that "despite more regulations on speech, these countries remain more democratic," and "have created better conditions for their citizenry to sort out what's true from what's not," allowing those publics to make informed decisions about important issues of public concern (Bazelon).

As our politics drift into these uncharted waters, we are suddenly openly contemplating an overhaul of the social media giants, confronting them about how they monitor and/or police content on their platforms, as well as how they monetize this content. Is it not time we begin asking the same questions of political talk radio and prime-time cable channels, who up to now have avoided any public scrutiny for the damage they've caused to our politics? Should we not demand more from our news publishers and nightly news producers who, despite facing growing economic challenges due to competition from new, digital platforms, still have tremendous abilities to reach the public on a massive scale?

Clearly there are many questions to consider in trying to justify this kind of scrutiny. For one, would a media system based on a public interest model result in a different public response to "fake news" as we understand it today in the U.S.? In such a system, would audiences, ie, the public, have built-in defenses, as Bazelon argues, to sort out what's true from what's not after decades of exposure to this kind of media content? In countries where public interest broadcasting models do exist, is fake news having less of a detrimental impact on the political culture as it is having in the U.S. today? I think the jury is still out on this, but the question warrants further attention

to see how audience response to fake news is impacted by the political culture that emerged within a public service system. We would also need to examine approaches to motivated reasoning and political beliefs, and research on cognitive consistency, selective exposure and how people deal with information at odds with their own belief systems.

But in the end, to understand where we are today in the U.S., we cannot continue to point the finger at one set of factors while ignoring a long trajectory of undemocratic practices that have been promoted and embraced wholeheartedly by the corporate media establishment and their good friends in government. We were warned about the dangers of such a system decades ago. After seeing the events unfold in Washington on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, I believe now is as good a time as ever to start paying attention to it once again.

### **The Medium and Fake News, Susan Drucker**

What is different about this historical moment? The coronavirus pandemic has changed our relationship with technology, accelerating the drive towards digitization. During lockdown, communication apps became necessary for any and all social interaction beyond our homes. People have had to use online tools to work, get an education, receive medical attention, and enjoy much-needed entertainment. The media environment became the breeding ground and space for easily accessible and cheap channels of dissemination of false information with little gatekeeping. The relationship between the global pandemic and global media environment of social media shouldn't be minimized.

The issue of fake news is best understood through the examination of the medium employed. The medium of the day is key to understanding how the channels through which false information is spread. Jacob Soll in *Politico* notes: Fake news took off at the same time that news began to circulate widely, after Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439. "Real" news was hard to verify in that era. There were plenty of news sources—from official publications by political and religious authorities, to eyewitness accounts from sailors and merchants—but no concept of journalistic ethics or objectivity. Soll concludes, "But as printing expanded, so flowed fake news" (Soll, 2016).

The historical relatives of fake news could be studied as through the lens of the history of print and the media environment of 1622 when Pope Gregory XV created in Rome the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, a commission of cardinals charged with spreading the faith. It could be explored through "a golden age of 'yellow journalism,' back in the 1890s, when fake news helped start a war" (Woolf, 2016). It could be understood by exploring the media environment of World War II and the use of technologies of the time famously used by Adolf Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels.

The early days of broadcasting famously provided a classic example of the power of trust in the medium and media format. On October 30, 1938, 12 million people sat in their living rooms tuned to CBS radio to listen to "The Mercury Theatre on the Air" when the broadcast was interrupted by a series of news bulletins describing an alien invasion taking place in the United States. The illusion of realism along with the fact that many in the audience missed the clear introduction that the broadcast was Orson Welles' dramatization of "The War of the Worlds" based on H.G. Wells' 1897 novel led to some degree of panic throughout the U.S. The reaction was attributed to the faith that listeners placed in the veracity of CBS radio (one of three national networks at that time). For those who panicked, a Columbia Broadcasting System newscast was always real, never fake. Today the fundamental issue is how digitization of a medium transforms the concept of journalism in general and news in particular.

The current global, digital, and social media environment has escalated the speed and reach of such information. Fake news predated digital media but is fake news in a digital age a matter of difference, of degree, or kind? In the chapter "The Technology of Distrust" written back in 2007, Gary Gumpert and I attempted to deal with the amount of trust we place in each unique medium. In that piece we argued:

'[T]he media' are not synonymous with the press. The singular terms refers to a means of transmission. A medium of communication is required by any form of the press, be it newspaper, magazine, radio or TV station, but a medium of communication does not have to serve a news and information function. A medium does not have to be a mass medium, nor is it limited to one sense modality. The distinction is important because while the concept and execution of the press have a moral and responsible dimension to it, a medium (a technology) has no intrinsic moral character. It is not judged or evaluated from an editorial or critical standard, but generally by the standard of accuracy and precision. For our purposes, a medium (often in combination with a group of other media) always has characteristics that shape and alter one's understanding and perception of that which is transmitted. It is not neutral. The dilemma alluded to involves the power of a medium generally, seen by most people, as neutral and non-invasive, as having defining characteristics that allow for manipulation, alteration, and changes by artistic and/or editorial forces (Gumpert & Drucker, 2007, p. 191).

There is an illusion of transparency, a sense of permeability of function and medium, obliterating traces of production which construct mediated connection or message. The differences between mediated and direct experiences have become less distinct. Analogue media made it difficult to *mask* alterations but with the shift to digital media it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to *detect* alterations. With analogue media there

are continuity errors, evidence of edits or jump cuts, inherent noise and distortion that reveal the creation/manipulation process at work (Trucker, 2004). Analogue media capture the actual sound or image while digital media are representations of sound. This is important because studies suggest that the less apparent or obtrusive the medium is to the audience, the less evident is the influence of the medium. The degree to which an image or message is perceived to be trustworthy is associated with the perception of the neutrality in transmission" (Gumpert and Drucker, 2007).

We also argued, every medium rests upon a conditional degree of authenticity, the audience enters into a relationship with the medium to create meaning (Gumpert & Drucker, 2007). When one asks, "What is new about the fake news phenomenon?" (Barclay, p. 48), one is left with the issue of whether it is a difference in degree or kind. The essential underlying characteristics of digitalization and the internet is speed/velocity and the multiplicity of sources (Cohen, 2017). The ability to reach more people, faster, carries with it changes in the way we think and interact with the world. The platform of original transmission is less significant than the fact that if content is on the internet it potentially reaches millions in unpredictable or unforeseen patterns and places (Cohen, 2017).

With digital media, the limitations of access and distribution are easily obliterated. Digitalization brings a proliferation of channels and applications along with the multiplication of sources. Velocity and multiplicity have changed the way one thinks and interacts with the world. Rapid dissemination of repeated or reposted content builds its own sense of credibility and fosters the impression that one is cross-checking sources since so many may carry the same content. Digital media enable manipulation devoid of expensive or technically complex tools.

While digital technology facilitates creation and dissemination of fake information, it simultaneously makes discovery more difficult. The less apparent or obtrusive the medium, the more transparent the influence of the medium. Further, intent to defraud, harm, or disguise intentions are also made more difficult but remain important factors.

Another layer of nearly invisible media influence is the omnipresent and mighty algorithm. An algorithm, a sequence of mathematical operations using equations, arithmetic, probability, and logic translated into computer code is powerful and by nature, hidden. They are used by governments, corporations, campaigns and especially advertisers to make largely hidden decisions about targeted audiences. They rely on past patterns to predict and shape future decisions. Algorithms have quietly come to play a big part in our day-to-day lives, offering convenient sources of information provided by mathematical formulas which subtly guide our interactions with information and others. Ultimately, the digital era implies the *need*, if not the duty of the audience to investigate and verify facts. "Digitalization has

shifted the obligation to cross-check sources of news information from publishers to receivers” (Drucker et al., [2018](#)).

## Conclusions

We find ourselves in a time consumed by concern for “fake news” but in reality, this era has been approaching for some years. “In 2005 the American Dialect Society’s word of the year was “truthiness,” popularized by Stephen Colbert on his news show satire *The Colbert Report*, meaning “the truth we want to exist.” In 2016 the *Oxford Dictionaries* nominated as its word of the year “post-truth,” characterizing it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Shermer, [2018](#)). This is also a time when understanding how an age-old phenomenon like the dissemination of false information has been transformed by the digital media environment. We are in a time that demands an understanding of how channels differ, how the commercial and regulatory environment shapes the spread of misinformation and disinformation and how the characteristics of a medium itself, apart from content, influences how content is perceived and processed.

Faced with overwhelming speed, dissemination, and ways to disguise misinformation and propaganda, concepts of a simpler media era beckon. These include fact-checking, cross-checking and perhaps most potently the concept of the “marketplace of ideas.” Journalists now have started highlighting fact-checking in their reporting stories, so readers can click through to fact-check (Shermer, [2018](#)). Cross-checking news has never been more readily available. Confirming content by consulting information from several sources and comparing news outlets remains a valid way of seeking accurate information. An awareness of the media cocoons so easily created and maintained needs to be cultivated yet confirmation bias is comforting but dangerous.

“Digitalization has shifted the obligation to cross-check sources of news information from publishers to receivers” (Drucker et al., [2018](#)).

In the interest of unfettered free expression, the “marketplace of ideas” stands out as a relevant way to process the current fake news phenomenon. Dating back to John Milton’s *Areopagitica*, published in 1644, it rests on the assumption that in an open communication environment individuals have the capacity to divine truth from falsehoods. In a clash of falsity and truth, truth will out. The “marketplace of ideas” metaphor took hold as a concept in American jurisprudence with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’s dissent in *Abrams v. United States*, arguably becoming one of the most powerful governing principles (*Abrams v. United States*, 1919).

The communication marketplace has been radically altered. The marketplace has expanded to word wide options to build personal media cocoons which serve to guard against disagreeable.

## Conclusions

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is not the first in history, but it is the first in which technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people informed and connected but, simultaneously, facilitates and amplifies the infodemic.

The current media landscape provides a breeding ground and space for dissemination with little gatekeeping and easily accessible cheap channels of dissemination. The relationship between the global pandemic and global media environment of social media shouldn't be minimized.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> There were many polls taken immediately after the November elections and in the weeks leading up to January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, where the reported numbers ranged between 74 to 85% of GOP voters nationally did not believe the 2020 elections were fair. The 80% came from this report: <https://www.businessinsider.com/majority-republicans-dont-believe-biden-won-election-gallup-poll-2020-12>.

<sup>2</sup> From reconsidering our approach to “freedom of speech” as a sacred concept that is more important than sanctioning lies and misinformation in the media, to recent litigation calling to task purveyors of misinformation and making them accountable to those lies, we’re seeing growing signs of a public recognition of an information system in crisis, a crisis that fundamentally threatens democracy in the U.S. See Bazelon, Emily. “Freedom of Speech Will Preserve Our Democracy.” *New York Times Magazine*, October 18, 2020; Russonello, Giovanni, “Trump Isn’t the Only One on Trial. The Conservative Media Is, Too.” *New York Times*, Published February 8, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/08/us/politics/trump-conservative-media.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>;

<sup>3</sup> This term is employed with great caution. The term “fake news” today is often erroneously considered as something new in the contemporary media landscape, despite the fact that for well over a century, its active use by a wide variety of actors, both public and private, has permeated just about every popular medium in this country as a means of influencing, and some would say manipulating public opinion.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/opinion/digital-revolution-democracy-fake-news.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/opinion/talk-radio-conservatives-trumpism.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ahrens, Frank, "FCC Releases Its New Media Ownership Rules," *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/2003/07/03/fcc-releases-its-new-media-ownership-rules/6f4eaca6-8a44-47b6-b754-0e6e2fad6073/>