

WHY DO PEOPLE SHARE FAKE NEWS? A SOCIOTECHNICAL MODEL OF MEDIA EFFECTS

Alice E. Marwick*

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Peter Daou launched “Verrit,” a partisan news site targeted to Democratic voters disappointed with the results of the 2016 election. The site consists of single quotations, facts, and statistics, each formatted as a graphic and labeled with a unique “identification code” to indicate authenticity and accuracy. For instance, a Verrit article titled “Where Is the Outcry Over Republicans Sabotaging Health Care for Children?” leads with a Pearl S. Buck quote, “The test of a civilization is in the way that it cares for its helpless members,” helpfully verified with the number 0443076, and followed by a stack of infographics, tweets, and news articles supporting the title’s proposition. The site explains:

Each “verrit” is marked with an identification code and contextualized with supporting material. The purpose of the code is to confirm that the content originated at Verrit.com. To authenticate a verrit, enter the code in the search bar. No result = fake.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, University of North Carolina Faculty Advisor, Media Manipulation Initiative, Data & Society Research Institute. I am indebted to the members of the Media Manipulation Initiative at the Data & Society Research Institute, whose research and insight has been fundamental to my own thinking on these issues: danah boyd, Becca Lewis, Francesca Tripodi, Caroline Jack, Robyn Kaplan, Matt Goerzen, and Joan Donovan. I would also like to thank Joshua Tucker, Alex Leavitt, Adam Berinsky, Stacy Blasiola, and many others for conversations about this paper at Social Science Foo Camp (2018), Reece Peck for sharing his manuscript-in-progress about Fox News, the students of Julie Cohen’s Technology Law and Policy Colloquium at Georgetown Law for their memos on an earlier draft of this paper, and Francesca Tripodi for sending me an early draft of her paper “Alternative News, Alternative Facts: Deconstructing the Realities of ‘Fake News’” (2018) which uses ethnographic methods to take the type of active audience approach to “fake news” for which I am advocating in this paper.

The site met with immediate mockery upon launch, with Abby Ohlheiser of the *Washington Post* describing it as “something that’s useful for Clinton supporters who like to argue online about politics.”¹ Verrits are rarely, if ever, shared in the wild, which makes it unlikely that people would go to the trouble of creating fakes. But Verrit is built upon a series of premises: first, that when confronted with “correct” information, people will change their political opinions; second, that what is “correct” and what is “incorrect” are objective truths; and third, that people share political viewpoints online in an attempt to inform others, or at least convince others with different opinions. All of these presumptions are debatable.

Verrit, like Snopes, Politifact, and a host of other fact-checking sites, reflect fundamental misunderstandings about how information circulates online, what function political information plays in social contexts, and how and why people change their political opinions. Fact-checking is in many ways a response to the rapidly changing norms and practices of journalism, news gathering, and public debate.² In other words, fact-checking best resembles a movement for reform *within* journalism, particularly in a moment when many journalists and members of the public believe that news coverage of the 2016 election contributed to the loss of Hillary Clinton.³ However, fact-checking (and another frequently-proposed solution, media literacy) is ineffectual in many cases and, in other cases, may cause people to “double-down” on their incorrect beliefs, producing a backlash effect.⁴

This paper uses active audience approaches to media consumption to investigate and critique the phenomenon known as “fake news.” The term “fake news” has been used in scholarly circles for some time to

¹ Abby Ohlheiser, *What Even is Verrit, The News Source Endorsed by Hillary Clinton?*, WASH. POST (Sept. 5, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/09/05/what-even-is-verrit-the-news-source-endorsed-by-hillary-clinton/> [<https://perma.cc/CS2G-JFUZ>].

² LUCAS GRAVES, *DECIDING WHAT’S TRUE: THE RISE OF POLITICAL FACT-CHECKING IN AMERICAN JOURNALISM* (2016).

³ See, e.g., Philip Bump, *Assessing a Clinton Argument That the Media Helped to Elect Trump*, WASH. POST (Sept. 12, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/09/12/assessing-a-clinton-argument-that-the-media-helped-to-elect-trump/> [<https://perma.cc/NF65-CN4Q>].

⁴ Michelle A. Amazeen, *Journalistic Interventions: The Structural Factors Affecting the Global Emergence of Fact-Checking*, JOURNALISM (Sept. 8, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917730217> [<https://perma.cc/K22A-UNQK>]; James H. Kuklinski et al., “*Just the Facts, Ma’am*”: *Political Facts and Public Opinion*, 560 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 143, 143–154 (1998); Brendan Nyhan & Jason Reifler, *When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions*, 32 POL. BEHAV. 303, 303–330 (2010).

describe a variety of content: satirical news sites like *The Onion*, manipulated photography, fabricated news items, propaganda, and press releases, to name a few.⁵ During the 2016 election season, “fake news” emerged first as a way to characterize cheaply-produced sites full of sensational information that emulated the visual conventions of online news, but existed solely to capitalize on Americans’ interest in the election and generate online advertising dollars.⁶ The term expanded to include hyper-partisan news sites like *Breitbart*, *Daily Caller*, and *Occupy Democrats*, which provide ideologically-slanted but not necessarily incorrect coverage.⁷ It was then seized upon by then-candidate Donald Trump to describe unflattering mainstream news coverage. Not only is the term “fake news” both vague and value-laden (making it analytically useless), it does not include other types of problematic information, such as political memes, YouTube videos, and podcasts produced by far-right extremist groups that have contributed to mainstreaming white supremacist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic ideas.⁸

Regardless of what “fake news” actually means, it is typically tied up with anxieties about the democratic ramifications of the shift from consuming news from broadcast television and newspapers to consuming news on social platforms. Thus, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been heavily criticized for their role in spreading, facilitating, and even encouraging “fake news.”⁹ However, today news spreads through digital networks as only one element of a constant feed of information. Whether people are likely to trust a story has less to do with who published it than who shared it.¹⁰ Moreover, many “fake news” or hyper-partisan stories

⁵ Edson C. Tandoc, Jr. et al., *Defining “Fake News” A Typology of Scholarly Definitions*, 6 DIG. JOURNALISM 137, 5, 5–11 (2017).

⁶ Craig Silverman & Lawrence Alexander, *How Teens in the Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters with Fake News*, BUZZFEED (Nov. 3, 2016, 7:02 PM), <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo> [https://perma.cc/7TKF-8PWA].

⁷ Yochai Benkler et al., *Study: Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda*, COLUM. JOURNALISM REV. (Mar. 3, 2017), <http://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php> [https://perma.cc/8RWA-MR4J].

⁸ Alice E. Marwick & Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, DATA & SOC’Y RES. INST. 107 (May 15, 2017), https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf [https://perma.cc/AHD8-SPXQ].

⁹ Robyn Caplan et al., *Dead Reckoning: Navigating Content Moderation After “Fake News”*, DATA & SOC’Y RES. INST. (Feb. 21, 2018), https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_Dead_Reckoning_2018.pdf [https://perma.cc/G5AE-Y998].

¹⁰ Mary Madden et al., *How Youth Navigate the News Landscape*, DATA & SOC’Y RES. INST. (Mar. 1, 2017), <https://kf-site->

reinforce narratives about race, class, and gender that help build and reinforce collective identity, especially on the right.¹¹ Sharing fake news must be understood within this context of self-presentation and reinforcement of group identity. This paper examines the *social* roles of various types of problematic information, including “fake news,” hyper-partisan news coverage, misinformation, and disinformation,¹² proposing a sociotechnical model of media effects to understand how and why such content spreads through social media.

Fact-checking sites and media literacy campaigns presume that people will not share news if they know it is inaccurate, painting users as cultural dupes at the mercy of media elites. But this is simply a newer form of the “magic bullet” media effects model popular in the first half of the 20th Century.¹³ This theory conceptualized media “messages as magic bullets capable of mesmerizing listeners who passively received and responded to communicative stimuli in an essentially uniform manner.”¹⁴ In contrast, active audience approaches require understanding how and why people make meaning from media, viewing media use within a particular sociocultural context.¹⁵ Using a sociotechnical approach to understand how and why people share fake news instead reveals complex social motivations that will not be easily changed.

production.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/pdfs/000/000/230/original/Youth_News.pdf [https://perma.cc/P3AC-PBDN]; MEDIA INSIGHT PROJECT, ‘WHO SHARED IT?’ HOW AMERICANS DECIDE WHAT NEWS TO TRUST ON SOCIAL MEDIA (Am. Press Inst., Mar. 20, 2017),

http://www.mediainsight.org/PDFs/Trust%20Social%20Media%20Experiments%202017/MediaInsight_Social%20Media%20Final.pdf [https://perma.cc/5XAW-AQ8A].

¹¹ Francesca Polletta & Jessica Callahan, *Deep Stories, Nostalgia Narratives, and Fake News: Storytelling in the Trump Era*, 5 AM. J. CULTURAL SOC. 392 (2017).

¹² Caroline Jack, *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*, DATA & SOC’Y RES. INST. (Aug. 9, 2017), <https://datasociety.net/output/lexicon-of-lies/> [https://perma.cc/9QVJ-6A8Y].

¹³ SHEARON LOWERY & MELVIN L. DEFLEUR, MILESTONES IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: MEDIA EFFECTS (3d ed., 1995).

¹⁴ J. Michael Sproule, *Progressive Propaganda Critics and the Magic Bullet Myth*, 6 CRITICAL STUDS. MEDIA COMM. 225, 225 (1989).

¹⁵ HENRY JENKINS, TEXTUAL POACHERS: TELEVISION FANS AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE (1992); David Morley, *Active Audience Theory: Pendulums and Pitfalls*, 43 J. COMM. 13 (1993); JANICE A. RADWAY, READING THE ROMANCE: WOMEN, PATRIARCHY, AND POPULAR LITERATURE (1984).

I. DETERMINING THE EFFECT OF FAKE NEWS

A. Problematic Information Beyond Fake News

This paper uses the term “fake news” as a kind of shorthand. I do this even knowing that the term has significant problems. Media historian Caroline Jack, in her piece *The Lexicon of Lies*, argues that the term *problematic information* works best for the current information ecosystem. This is because other frequently-used terms rely on understanding the intent of the information creator. *Misinformation* is unintentionally incorrect, such as a newspaper printing an erroneous fact and subsequently issuing a correction. *Disinformation*, on the other hand, is intentionally incorrect.¹⁶ Derakhshan and Wardle suggest adding the term *mal-information* to describe “information, that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.”¹⁷ However, internet content is ambivalent, as communication scholars Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner theorize; the networked nature of the internet and the ability to replicate and remix images, text, and video makes it impossible to determine where a particular idea, image, or meme originated, let alone pinpoint the intent of the author.¹⁸ This is particularly true considering the dominance of irony as an expressive and affective force in native internet content. Thus, using intent to distinguish between types of information is not only extremely difficult (if not impossible), but potentially misleading.

Equally troublesome is the term *propaganda*, which has such a negative valence that it is often used simply to characterize persuasive information that the speaker does not like. The difference between propaganda, public relations, and advertising is not a matter of scope, scale, or information content, but of whether or not the speaker approves of the originator.¹⁹ And, as previously mentioned, given the networked and constantly shifting nature of internet content, pinpointing an originator may be impossible.

Finally, the term *fake news* is simultaneously too broad and too narrow. It brings to mind websites architected to look like “real,” mainstream news sources, filled with clickbait content in order to make money from online advertising. The Oxford Internet Institute’s

¹⁶ Jack, *supra* note 12.

¹⁷ Hossein Derakhshan & Claire Wardle, *Information Disorder: Definitions, in UNDERSTANDING & ADDRESSING THE DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM* 5, 8 (2017), <https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Disinformation-Ecosystem-20180207-v2.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/WFY4-9Z35>].

¹⁸ WHITNEY PHILLIPS & RYAN M. MILNER, *THE AMBIVALENT INTERNET: MISCHIEF, ODDITY, AND ANTAGONISM ONLINE* (2017).

¹⁹ Jack, *supra* note 12.

computational propaganda project classifies these websites as “counterfeit” news sites and their content as “junk news.”²⁰ Many of these sites were famously investigated by BuzzFeed reporter Craig Silverman in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2016 election.²¹ However, an array of research has found that this is by no means the only way in which problematic information spreads. For instance, First Draft defines seven types of mis- and dis-information: satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, and manipulated content.²²

Using the term “fake news” ignores the fact that hoaxes, memes, YouTube videos, conspiracy theories, and hyper-partisan news sites are equally common ways of spreading problematic information.²³ For example, Figure 1 is an image tweeted by an account called NatSocPagan on January 24th, 2018. It shows the headshots of 33 Fox News employees that the image labels as Jewish or married to Jews, along with a picture of Executive Chairman Rupert Murdoch, who is labeled “Christian Zionist.” Under the collage is the caption, “Out of the 151 News related personnel working at Fox, 32 of them are Jewish. That is roughly 20%. If Jews only make up 2% of American’s total population, that means they have a 1000% rate of over-representation at 21st Century Fox.” The thinly veiled implication is that even Republican stalwart Fox News is part of the globalist media—“evidence” for a long-standing White Supremacist conspiracy theory that the media is controlled by Jews for the purpose of destroying Aryan culture. This image suggests two things. First, that politically or ideologically problematic information often spreads through categories of information that do not fit the *fake news* rubric: this includes memes; images; YouTube videos; and lengthy text files that shore up evidence supporting some fringe theory (such as the one linked in the image used by NatSocPagan, which includes links to biographies of Fox employees). Second, the image suggests that even information which is *factually correct*, such as the religious commitments of various Fox News

²⁰ Vidya Narayanan et al., *Polarization, Partisanship and Junk News Consumption Over Social Media in the US: COMPROP Data Memo 2018.1*, COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA PROJECT (Feb. 6, 2018), <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/02/Polarization-Partisanship-JunkNews.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/TPJ5-WWF7>].

²¹ Craig Silverman, *This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook*, BUZZFEED (Nov. 16, 2016, 5:15 PM), <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook> [<https://perma.cc/SVJ4-QNLQ>]; Silverman & Alexander, *supra* note 7.

²² Claire Wardle, *Fake News. It's Complicated.*, FIRST DRAFT NEWS (Feb. 16, 2017), <https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-news-complicated/> [<https://perma.cc/NT9V-SL7J>].

²³ Marwick & Lewis, *supra* note 8.

having twin boys, or a man being sexually assaulted by a sasquatch, but the civic and democratic ramifications of such false information is probably negligible (I could be convinced otherwise).²⁴ For example, BuzzFeed identified the two most-shared false news stories on Facebook in 2017 as “Babysitter transported to hospital after inserting a baby in her vagina” and “FBI seizes over 3,000 penises during raid at morgue employee’s home,” both from *World News Daily Report*.²⁵ However, while BuzzFeed identified only eleven of the top fifty stories as political, I would argue that many other stories that appear in their top fifty are political, such as “17-year-old teenager sues his parents for being born white” and “Texas church shooter was Antifa member who vowed to start civil war” (see Table 2). Such stories and those like them involve power relationships, structural inequality, or sensational anecdotes that illustrate such; they shore up or argue against particular partisan identities and positions. In other words, “fake news” stories may include the types of problematic political positions that I find most concerning, or they may simply be sensationalist tabloid content. In Part 2B, I analyze a sample of “fake news” stories and a sample of problematic information to see the similarities and inconsistencies between the two.

However, before delving into the research on fake news, I want to examine in more depth how we can understand the effects that fake news may have on individual users and citizens. This requires a bit of Communication disciplinary history.

B. Models of Media Effects

The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the Northeastern United States at the end of the 19th century caused a great deal of anxiety about modern life. The theory of *mass society* held that urban life—tenement apartments, movie theaters, and factory work—would engender a faceless throng of atomized, alienated people particularly susceptible to demagogues or manipulation by mass media.²⁶ This theory, influenced by

²⁴ These are both from the BuzzFeed analysis mentioned in the next sentence. If I were to argue that these stories have civic and political ramifications, I would say that widespread hoaxes and falsehoods may undermine overall trust in the media. On the other hand, these are the types of stories that tabloids like the *Weekly World News* trafficked in for decades.

²⁵ Craig Silverman et al., *These Are 50 of the Biggest Fake News Hits on Facebook in 2017*, BUZZFEED (Dec. 28, 2017, 2:31 PM), <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/these-are-50-of-the-biggest-fake-news-hits-on-facebook-in> [https://perma.cc/TK69-3SE2].

²⁶ Raymond A. Bauer & Alice H. Bauer, *America, ‘Mass Society,’ and Mass Media*, 16 J. SOC. ISSUES 3 (1960); Irene Taviss Thomson, *The Theory That Won’t Die: From Mass Society to the Decline of Social Capital*, 20 SOC. F. 421 (2005).

European sociologists such as Tönnies and Durkheim, held that old ties of nation, ethnicity, or family would be broken down, replaced by whatever was propagated by media messaging. This was especially salient in post-World War I America.²⁷ As a result, a number of American public intellectuals, such as Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell, began to seriously investigate the effects of mass media messaging.

In Communication studies, discussions of media effects theory typically portray propaganda scholars of the 1930s–1950s as adhering to a so-called “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theory. The magic bullet theory presumes that people—the audience—make up an undifferentiated mass; that media affects all people the same way; and that it has the impact that the creators intended, whether that is to buy dish soap or support a political party. The audience is comprised of “cultural dupes” who are easily led by distracting entertainment.²⁸ Despite its straw-man nature, and the fact that the theory is clearly incorrect, the magic bullet theory still pops up both in scholarship and in popular understanding of media.

Regardless, the magic bullet theory quickly fell out of favor among researchers, as empirical and experiment-based frameworks failed to find evidence for lasting or consistent media effects.²⁹ For instance, Lazarsfeld and Merton found that in order for mass media to have a persuasive effect, it had to be coupled with in-person, positive contact with someone holding the same opinion.³⁰ Katz and Lazarsfeld’s *Personal Influence* argued that any media message was strongly mediated by opinion leaders and peers.³¹ A host of behavioral studies that followed indicated that media stimuli had

²⁷ LOWERY & DEFLEUR, *supra* note 13.

²⁸ MAX HORKHEIMER & THEODOR W. ADORNO, DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT: PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS (Gunzelin Schmid Noerr ed., Edmund Jephcott trans., Stan. Press 2002) (1944). Subsequent research has shown that this is an unfair characterization of scholars like Lasswell, who were more critical and nuanced than the magic bullet theory might suggest. See W. Russell Neuman & Lauren Guggenheim, *The Evolution of Media Effects Theory: A Six-Stage Model of Cumulative Research*, 21 COMM. THEORY 169, 169–196 (Apr. 8, 2011). It does, however, describe the moral panic around juvenile violence in the 1950s, which was causally linked to comic books and television, see JANET STAIGER, MEDIA RECEPTION STUDIES (2005), and subsequent panics around violent movies and video games.

²⁹ Kevin Arceneaux & Martin Johnson, *More a Symptom Than a Cause: Polarization and Partisan News Media in America*, in AMERICAN GRIDLOCK: THE SOURCES, CHARACTER, AND IMPACT OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION 309 (James A. Thurber & Antoine Yoshinaka eds., Cambridge U. Press 2015); Lowery & DeFleur, *supra* note 14.

³⁰ Paul F. Lazarsfeld & Robert K. Merton, *Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action*, MEDIA STUDS. 18 (1948).

³¹ ELIHU KATZ & PAUL F. LAZARSELD, PERSONAL INFLUENCE: THE PART PLAYED BY PEOPLE IN THE FLOW OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS (Transaction Publishers 2006) (1966).

negligible or temporary effects.³² These perspectives suggested that, in contrast with the magic bullet theory, that the effects of media were minimal—a *limited effects* model of media.³³ “Limited effects” media theories were heavily criticized by critical scholars like Todd Gitlin, who argued that their inability to find direct causal relationships between media viewing and outcomes ignored the “power of the media to define normal and abnormal social and political activity, to say what is politically real and legitimate and what is not; to justify the two-party political structure; to establish certain political agendas for social attention and to contain, channel and exclude others; and to shape the images of opposition movements.”³⁴

More recently, researchers have sought to understand people’s engagement with media. Active audience theory emerged from several paradigms: British cultural studies;³⁵ the “uses and gratifications” tradition of Communication studies;³⁶ and audience researchers, who increasingly rejected the idea of the audience as an undifferentiated mass.³⁷ The new “active audience” paradigm examined how people make meaning from media, often incorporating sophisticated analyses of the relationship between individual positionality, social context, and hegemonic ideologies expressed through mass media.³⁸ For instance, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* used ethnography to understand women who read romance novels, a genre often dismissed as silly or escapist.³⁹ Her participants valued the escape that reading provided from their busy lives as homemakers and mothers, but they also enjoyed seeing the strong, independent-minded heroines get emotional gratification from the male characters in the novels. Radway deftly showed how her subjects, lower-middle class women who had not found emotional fulfillment in

³² STAIGER, *supra* note 28.

³³ For a very thorough examination of media effects theories, see *id.*

³⁴ Todd Gitlin, *Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm*, 6 THEORY & SOC’Y 205 (1978).

³⁵ JOHN FISKE, TELEVISION CULTURE (Routledge, 2d ed. 2011) (1987); Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973), reprinted in CULTURE, MEDIA, LANGUAGE: WORKING PAPERS IN CULTURAL STUDIES 1972–79 128 (Stuart Hall et al. eds., 1st ed. 1980); DAVID MORLEY, THE NATIONWIDE AUDIENCE: STRUCTURE AND DECODING (1980).

³⁶ Tamar Liebes & Elihu Katz, *Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction: A Comparative Analysis*, 1 EUR. J. COMM. 151 (1986); Denis McQuail et al., *The Television Audience: A Revised Perspective*, in SOCIOLOGY OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS (Denis McQuail ed., 1972), reprinted in MEDIA STUDIES: A READER 271, 284 (Paul Marris & Sue Thornham eds., 2d ed. 1996).

³⁷ IEN ANG, DESPERATELY SEEKING THE AUDIENCE 2 (2006); Virginia Nightingale, *What’s Happening to Audience Research?*, 39 MEDIA INFO. AUSTRAL. 18, 18–20 (1986).

³⁸ Morley, *supra* note 15.

³⁹ RADWAY, *supra* note 15.

heterosexual partnerships, were able to maintain their belief in traditional roles by reading about heroines who had. At their best, such qualitative studies explored the complex interplay between individual agency and hegemonic power expressed in mass media; at their weakest, media texts were portrayed as intrinsically polysemic and open to any interpretive resistance.

In the 1990s, cultural studies scholars began to move beyond a general “audience” model to deconstruct the popular notion of the “fan” as brainless or pathologized, instead arguing that fans have affective investments in particular types of media.⁴⁰ Many of these studies emphasized the *participatory* nature of fandom. Fans did not simply consume content: they produced their own in the forms of fan art, fan films, and fan fiction. Henry Jenkins used *participation* in contrast with the notion of mere *spectatorship*, in conversation with scholars like Janice Radway, Ien Ang, and Camille Bacon-Smith. He described fans “not only as consumers of mass-produced content, but also as a creative community that took its raw materials from entertainment texts and remixed them as the basis for their own creative culture.”⁴¹ With the rise of the internet, these processes extended beyond fan cultures, who were deeply networked and productive long before computer-mediated communication. Jenkins extrapolated his theory in the book *Convergence Culture* and a number of essays on the topic, writing:

Patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies, which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture refers to the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment.⁴²

To Jenkins and other media theorists like Larry Lessig and Clay Shirky, participatory culture represented a shift from top-down cultural production to “user-generated content.” The internet made it easier for everyone, fans or not, to create their own types of media, comment on

⁴⁰ CAMILLE BACON-SMITH, *ENTERPRISING WOMEN: TELEVISION FANDOM AND THE CREATION OF POPULAR MYTH* (1992); Lawrence Grossberg, *Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom*, in *THE ADORING AUDIENCE: FAN CULTURE AND POPULAR MEDIA* (Lisa A. Lewis ed., 1992); JENKINS, *supra* note 15.

⁴¹ HENRY JENKINS, MIZUKOH ITO & DANAH BOYD, *PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN A NETWORKED ERA I* (2016).

⁴² Henry Jenkins, *Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?: Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture*, in *RETHINKING MEDIA CHANGE: THE AESTHETICS OF TRANSITION* 286 (David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins eds., 2003).

mass media, and collaborate with each other on projects like Wikipedia or citizen journalism. Thus, the productivity of online fans was extended to all. The only roadblocks to these egalitarian forms of participation were copyright laws, broadcast media companies, and other legacy industries grasping to maintain control in a rapidly-changing world.

In many cases, these early studies of online participation reflect a utopian characterization of the early internet as “fandom writ large.”⁴³ These studies have generally not aged well. It is no longer the broadcast media industries that concern most internet scholars, but data-mining operations, government surveillance, and huge platforms like Google and Facebook. And while in 2010, Clay Shirky was unable to come up with a harmful form of user-generated content—instead picking the “LOLCat” as the lowest form of online creation⁴⁴—the current moment has brought into stark relief just how harmful user-generated content can be. Regardless, what the active audience and participatory paradigms suggest is that it is not enough to see how many people were exposed to a fake news story or YouTube video; we must understand what these viewers *do* with it.

C. Theorizing the Effects of Fake News

While the magic bullet theory has been repeatedly debunked, it remains useful to think with, given that one simplistic but popular narrative of fake news is that people voted for Trump in the 2016 election because they believed a passel of conspiracy theories and falsehoods about Hillary Clinton that were mostly spread on Facebook.⁴⁵ This narrative is unsurprising; researchers have found that “magic bullet-like” language is often used to discuss partisan media such as fake news.⁴⁶ Once again, we find ourselves in a period of rapid social change, which produces great anxiety over the effect of new forms of media on the masses. The current conversation over fake news and disinformation struggles with the balance between disinformation as a “magic bullet” (i.e. duping foolish Facebook users into believing that Barack Obama was not born in the United States), and a model that prioritizes causal effects on user activity while disregarding the structural influence of problematic patterns in media messaging and representation.

⁴³ HENRY JENKINS, MIZUKOH ITO & DANAH BOYD, *PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN A NETWORKED ERA 3* (2016).

⁴⁴ CLAY SHIRKY, *COGNITIVE SURPLUS* 18–19 (2010).

⁴⁵ A related theory is radicalization via far-right media, aka the “Red Pill.” This theory is widely believed by far-right members, particularly white supremacists.

⁴⁶ KEVIN ARCENEUX & MARTIN JOHNSON, *CHANGING MINDS OR CHANGING CHANNELS?: PARTISAN NEWS IN AN AGE OF CHOICE* (2013).

For examples of the latter, a report from the Quello Center at Michigan State University argued against the “filter bubble” theory of personalized search results,⁴⁷ instead finding that internet users interested in politics “search for and double check problematic political information, and expose themselves to a variety of viewpoints.”⁴⁸ While the study advocates against a technologically determinist viewpoint, its findings could be used to avoid pursuing interventions. Similarly, Bakshy et al. used a very large Facebook dataset to determine how often users were exposed to political viewpoints and news stories outside their ideological orientation. They conclude “[a]lthough partisans tend to maintain relationships with like-minded contacts, on average more than 20% of an individual’s Facebook friends who report an ideological affiliation are from the opposing party, leaving substantial room for exposure to opposing viewpoints.”⁴⁹ Finally, Allcott and Gentzkow determined that the overall effect of fake news was limited, estimating that “the average US adult might have seen perhaps one or several news stories in the months before the election.”⁵⁰ This would suggest that fake news had less impact than television advertising. Boxell et al. created an index of political polarization in the United States, finding that the group *most likely* to be polarized were adults over sixty-five, which is the demographic group least likely to use the internet. They conclude that “these facts can be shown to imply a limited role for the Internet and social media in explaining the recent rise in measured political polarization.”⁵¹ Such studies suggest that fake news or problematic information has limited effects. However, each of them operationalizes fake news narrowly, ignores the relationship between problematic information and mainstream media, and attempts to draw causal relationships between viewing fake news and a particular outcome.

⁴⁷ Pariser’s theory of the filter bubble holds that personalization algorithms will result in a lack of exposure to ideologically diverse content. Instead, users will only be shown content that they already agree with, or that matches their previous online activity and interests. ELI PARISER, *THE FILTER BUBBLE: HOW THE NEW PERSONALIZED WEB IS CHANGING WHAT WE READ AND HOW WE THINK* (2011).

⁴⁸ William Dutton et al., *Social Shaping of the Politics of Internet Search and Networking: Moving Beyond Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Fake News* (Quello Ctr., Working Paper No. 2944191, 2017).

⁴⁹ Eytan Bakshy et al., *Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook*, 348 *SCIENCE* 1130 (2015).

⁵⁰ Hunt Allcott & Matthew Gentzkow, *Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*, 31 *J. ECON. PERSP.* 211, 213 (2017).

⁵¹ Levi Boxell et al., *Greater Internet Use Is Not Associated with Faster Growth in Political Polarization Among US Demographic Groups*, 114 *PROCS. NAT’L ACAD. SCIS.* 10612, 10616 (2017).

Finally, Figure 1—and thousands like it—call into question many of the studies of fake news dissemination, which must operationalize “fake news” in order to measure it. They do this in a variety of ways, but often researchers rely on a corpus of URLs that represent media outlets that spread “fake news” such as *Daily Caller* or *Breitbart*. For example, one study from the Oxford Internet Institute uses a list of ninety-one websites that they categorize as “junk news.”⁵² These include sites like *Breitbart* and *Daily Caller*, but also *Mediaite* and the *New York Daily News*, which are arguably legitimate media sources.⁵³ Allcott & Gentzkow’s study of the spread of fake news on social media used a list of 156 stories identified by BuzzFeed, Snopes, and Politifact as demonstrably false.⁵⁴ The Public Data Lab’s *Field Guide to Fake News* used a list of twenty-two “fake news” stories based on a BuzzFeed list similar to the one discussed above.⁵⁵ None of these studies would attend to images such as Figure 1; nor would they attend to, say, a YouTube “documentary” on white genocide. Thus, many of the studies previously discussed may underestimate the engagement that people have with problematic or ideologically-driven information online.

While these studies are important and valuable, they are limited. Research on online disinformation is in its infancy, and there is a need for more sophisticated models to truly understand the effects of “fake news” that take into account the complex interplay of people, media, and technology.

II. A SOCIOTECHNICAL MODEL OF MEDIA EFFECTS

In order to fully understand *why people share fake news*, we need to adopt a *sociotechnical* model of media effects with three parts (Table 1): first, that people make meaning from information based on their social positioning, identity, discursive resources, and skill set; second, that media messaging is often structured in particular ways to further a variety of agendas—whether it be increasing consumption of goods, increasing time on a website, or furthering a political viewpoint; and third, that the material settings of media consumption (for instance, newspapers, cable television, or social media) have particular technical affordances that

⁵² Narayanan et al., *supra* note 20.

⁵³ Erik Wemple, Opinion, *Study Bashes Trumpites for Promoting ‘Junk’ News. But What’s That?*, WASH. POST (Feb. 7, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2018/02/07/study-bashes-trumpites-for-promoting-junk-news-but-whats-that/> [https://perma.cc/239R-32X8].

⁵⁴ Allcott & Gentzkow, *supra* note 50.

⁵⁵ LILIANA BOUNEGRU ET AL., PUBLIC DATA LAB, A FIELD GUIDE TO FAKE NEWS AND OTHER INFORMATION DISORDERS 20–22 (2017).

affect both meaning-making and messaging. In other words, people can and do make meaning from media, but they cannot simply make *any* meaning. In networked settings, this is complicated both by the presence of connected others, and by the algorithms and advertising models that drive social media.

The term *sociotechnical* comes from organizational development; it describes a way of understanding work practice as both a set of social systems (human behavior) and a set of technical systems (complex infrastructures). Organizations are successful when their social and technical systems work together smoothly.⁵⁶ In Science and Technology Studies (STS), the term is used loosely to describe the social construction of technology, or the way that human agency and technical affordances mutually shape artifacts. As Wiebe Bijker writes, any conceptual framework of the sociotechnical “must combine the strategies of actors with the structures by which they are bound.”⁵⁷ In other words, a *sociotechnical theory of media effects* must examine actors, preferably taking an ethnographic approach to understanding cultural practice and group identity, and media, as both patterns of messages and sets of technological affordances which constrain or enable certain meanings and actions. This will require multiple methodologies and interdisciplinary thinking.

This model works with more modern effects theories such as: agenda-setting, which holds that media coverage largely determines what people think of as significant issues, legitimizing or de-legitimizing certain political viewpoints;⁵⁸ priming, which says that the amount of coverage media devotes to an issue makes audiences receptive to particular themes;⁵⁹ and framing, which analyzes how news organizations construct a story to further a particular point of view.⁶⁰ In these theories, the messages of media are influenced by larger hegemonic ideologies and political economies, but may be interpreted in a variety of ways by the recipients. However, these theories were formulated in the age of broadcast media and presume traditional journalistic practices. They also

⁵⁶ THE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, VOLUME 2: THE SOCIO-TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE (Eric Trist, Hugh Murray & Beulah Trist eds., 1993).

⁵⁷ WIEBE E. BIJKER, OF BICYCLES, BAKELITES, AND BULBS: TOWARD A THEORY OF SOCIOTECHNICAL CHANGE 15 (1995).

⁵⁸ Maxwell E. McCombs & Donald L. Shaw, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, 36 PUB. OPINION Q. 176 (1972).

⁵⁹ Shanto Iyengar et al., *Experimental Demonstrations of the “Not-So-Minimal” Consequences of Television News Programs*, 76 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 848 (1982).

⁶⁰ ERVING GOFFMAN, FRAME ANALYSIS: AN ESSAY ON THE ORGANIZATION OF EXPERIENCE (1974).

do not consider the role of the individual in creating and spreading media messaging.

Actors. First, the researcher must determine how people make meaning from media. Drawing from and inspired by media anthropology,⁶¹ active audience theories,⁶² ethnography of social technologies,⁶³ and human-computer interaction,⁶⁴ such approaches typically use ethnographic or qualitative methods to understand media use *in situ*⁶⁵—as part of daily life.⁶⁶ This approach requires defining specific groups of actors (i.e. users, audiences), such as “American mainstream conservatives” or “open-source software hackers,” observing their on- and offline activities, understanding their social contexts, and listening to how they describe their use of media. From active audience theory, it presumes that actors do not simply receive media messages but decode or interpret them based on their social position and discursive resources available to them.⁶⁷ Celeste Condit argues that audiences do not often interpret texts in radically different ways; for example, they often agree on the basic plotline of a television show. Rather, “[i]t is not that texts routinely feature unstable denotation but that instability of connotation requires viewers to judge texts from their own value systems.”⁶⁸ In other words, the more we know about the actors involved, the more we can understand the roles and meanings that media takes in their lives.

Messages. Second, the model requires an understanding of the media messages under analysis. Using methods such as content analysis,⁶⁹

⁶¹ FAYE D. GINSBURG ET AL., *MEDIA WORLDS: ANTHROPOLOGY ON NEW TERRAIN* (2002).

⁶² Morley, *supra* note 15; RADWAY, *supra* note 15.

⁶³ NANCY K. BAYM, *TUNE IN, LOG ON: SOAPS, FANDOM, AND ONLINE COMMUNITY* (2000); DANAH BOYD, *IT’S COMPLICATED: THE SOCIAL LIVES OF NETWORKED TEENS* (2014); WHITNEY PHILLIPS, *THIS IS WHY WE CAN’T HAVE NICE THINGS: MAPPING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE TROLLING AND MAINSTREAM CULTURE* (2015).

⁶⁴ LOUIS L. BUCCIARELLI, *DESIGNING ENGINEERS* (1994); LUCY A. SUCHMAN, *PLANS AND SITUATED ACTIONS: THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN-MACHINE COMMUNICATION* (1987).

⁶⁵ MARY L. GRAY, *OUT IN THE COUNTRY: YOUTH, MEDIA, AND QUEER VISIBILITY IN RURAL AMERICA* 126–127 (1st ed. 2009).

⁶⁶ DANIEL MILLER & DON SLATER, *THE INTERNET: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH* 65 (2000).

⁶⁷ Hall, *supra* note 35.

⁶⁸ Celeste Michelle Condit, *The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy*, 6 *CRITICAL STUDS. MASS COMM.* 103, 107 (1989).

⁶⁹ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Sarah E. Shannon, *Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis*, 15 *QUALITATIVE HEALTH RES.* 1277 (2005); Marilyn Domas White & Emily E. Marsh, *Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology*, 55 *LIBR. TRENDS* 22 (2006).

discourse analysis,⁷⁰ or computational analysis of social media data,⁷¹ the researcher can determine reoccurring patterns, themes, and underlying presumptions of a particular set of media messages; for instance, “alt-right memes,” “Donald Trump’s tweets,” or “superhero blockbuster films.” This approach presumes that media texts are polysemous, in that they can be interpreted multiple ways. However, this does not presume an infinite array of meanings. As rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli advises, “[p]olysemy indicates a bounded multiplicity, a circumscribed opening of the text in which we acknowledge diverse but finite meanings.”⁷² These limits or boundaries are often determined by the nature of the platform through which the messages are expressed. Network television, for instance, adheres more tightly to dominant ideologies than does YouTube. Using a qualitative or critical approach to content analysis enables an understanding of the relationship between media messages, power, and social control.

Affordances. Finally, the researcher must determine the features, functionality, and—if possible—affordances of the communication medium through which messages are expressed. An affordance is a popular concept in technology studies; it refers to what a user perceives a particular object can do.⁷³ Evans et al. argue that an affordance is a *possibility for action*; it is determined by the user, the features of the technology itself, and the outcome for which the technology is used.⁷⁴ For example, for an American teenager, Instagram may afford posting a small amount of highly edited and curated photos, while Snapchat may afford sending silly photos to friends to create intimacy and a sense of “backstage” interaction. There is nothing technical that stops the teenager from posting the same silly photo to Instagram, but her *perception* of what the technology lets her do is quite different. This is, of course, influenced by social norms and what Ilana Gershon calls “media ideologies”—

⁷⁰ DEBORAH CAMERON, *WORKING WITH SPOKEN DISCOURSE* (2001); Norman Fairclough, Jane Mulderrig & Ruth Wodak, *Critical Discourse Analysis, in DISCOURSE STUDIES: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY INTRODUCTION* 357 (Teun A. Van Dijk ed., 2d ed. 2011).

⁷¹ Seth C. Lewis et al., *Content Analysis in an Era of Big Data: A Hybrid Approach to Computational and Manual Methods*, 57 J. BROAD. & ELEC. MEDIA 34 (2013); Rob Procter et al., *Reading the Riots on Twitter: Methodological Innovation for the Analysis of Big Data*, 16 INT’L J. SOC. RES. METHODOLOGY 197 (2013).

⁷² Leah Ceccarelli, *Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism*, 84 Q. J. SPEECH 395, 398 (1998).

⁷³ Sandra K. Evans et al., *Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research*, 22 J. COMPUT.-MEDIATED COMM. 35 (2017); James J. Gibson, *The Theory of Affordances, in THE ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PHYSICAL PERCEPTION* 119 (Classic ed. 2015) (1986).

⁷⁴ Evans et al., *supra* note 73.

people's beliefs about the right way to use a specific type of media.⁷⁵ However, using affordances helps to avoid a technologically determinist approach to communication technology, acknowledging how material conditions affect user agency. A variety of methods can be used to analyze affordances; for example, researchers might walk users through a particular application⁷⁶ or interview users about how they understand technology.⁷⁷ Such methods aim to understand use in context. Clearly, the affordances of a newspaper or letter will be less complex than an application like Snapchat, but in both cases, materiality matters.

The rest of this paper tests the sociotechnical model of media effects in order to answer the question: why do people share fake news? This study is merely preliminary; future research should investigate the model using multi-disciplinary and multi-methodological studies.

A. Active, Conservative Audiences

To determine the actors—those who share fake news—this paper focuses on conservative and far-right Americans. This is due to the scholarly studies that point to a partisan asymmetry of information consumption. The interdisciplinary research group Public Data Lab tracked “fake news” spreading through Facebook and found that pro-Trump and anti-Clinton pages were most likely to spread fake news, and that the fake news stories with the most traction were anti-Clinton.⁷⁸ A recent *Guardian* investigation found that anti-Clinton YouTube videos, which often trafficked in conspiratorial thinking or outright lies, were far more likely to be recommended than anti-Trump videos.⁷⁹ Faris et al. determined that in the months up to the election, centrists and left-leaning citizens were likely to get information from mainstream news sources like CNN and the *New York Times*, while right-leaning citizens were far more likely to consume a dense network of “hyper-partisan” sources like *Breitbart* and *The Daily Caller*.⁸⁰ While these sources may not be fake

⁷⁵ ILANA GERSHON, *THE BREAKUP 2.0: DISCONNECTING OVER NEW MEDIA* 16–50 (2010).

⁷⁶ Ben Light, Jean Burgess & Stefanie Duguay, *The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps*, 20 *NEW MEDIA & SOC'Y* 881 (2018).

⁷⁷ Joshua McVeigh-Schultz & Nancy K. Baym, *Thinking of You: Vernacular Affordance in the Context of the Microsocial Relationship App, Couple*, 1 *SOC. MEDIA & SOC'Y* 1 (2015).

⁷⁸ Bounegru et al., *supra* note 55.

⁷⁹ Paul Lewis, “Fiction Is Outperforming Reality”: How YouTube’s Algorithm Distorts Truth, *GUARDIAN* (Feb. 2, 2018, 7:00 AM), <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth> [<https://perma.cc/DWR5-ZKER>].

⁸⁰ ROB FARIS ET AL., *BERKMAN KLEIN CENTER, PARTISANSHIP, PROPAGANDA, AND DISINFORMATION: ONLINE MEDIA AND THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION* (2017),

news per se, the same study describes them as “combining decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create fundamentally misleading view[s] of the world.”⁸¹ Because these sites do not adhere to the same norms of objectivity and nonpartisanship as traditional journalism, they are able to amplify messaging that supports partisan goals even if it is untrue. However, Faris and Benkler clearly point out that it is not that Republicans are more credulous than Democrats; it is that they are inhabiting an information system that is full of inaccurate information.

A similar study from the Computational Propaganda project at the Oxford Internet Institute found that Trump supporters and “Hard Conservatives” (people espousing anti-liberal, anti-immigration, and/or pro-militia views) were far more likely to share what the project calls “junk news” on Facebook or Twitter than their left-wing and centrist equivalents.⁸² In fact, the Trump group on Twitter shared more junk news than all the others combined.⁸³ However, this may be partially explained by a variety of studies which find that people who are more ideologically extreme share more on social media.⁸⁴ Since the conservative media sphere is infested with disinformation, very partisan conservatives would then be more likely than very partisan liberals to share disinformation. Finally, my previous research on online disinformation finds that much of it is ideologically motivated by far-right extremist groups.⁸⁵

https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/33759251/2017-08_electionReport_0.pdf?sequence=9 [<https://perma.cc/M5G7-NNMD>].

⁸¹ Benkler et al., *supra* note 7.

⁸² “Junk news” is defined as sources which “deliberately publish misleading, deceptive or incorrect information purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture. This content includes various forms of extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, masked commentary, fake news and other forms of junk news. Narayanan et al., *supra* note 20, at 2. Sources were evaluated in terms of professionalism, style, credibility, bias, and counterfeited nature.

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ Daniel Preoțiu-Pietro et al., *Beyond Binary Labels: Political Ideology Prediction of Twitter Users*, PROCEEDINGS OF THE 55TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR COMPUTATIONAL LINGUISTICS, VOL. 1: LONG PAPERS 729 (2017); Jesse Shore et al., *Network Structure and Patterns of Information Diversity on Twitter* (2017); Magdalena Wojcieszak, ‘Don’t Talk to Me’: *Effects of Ideologically Homogeneous Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism*, 12 NEW MEDIA & SOC’Y 637 (2010).

⁸⁵ Rebecca Lewis & Alice E. Marwick, *Taking the Red Pill: Ideological Motivations for Spreading Online Disinformation*, in UNDERSTANDING & ADDRESSING THE DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM (2017), <https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Disinformation-Ecosystem-20180207-v4.pdf?x37029> [<https://perma.cc/S674-8HKT>]; Marwick & Lewis, *supra* note 8.

However, this is not to say that liberal or left-leaning individuals do not share problematic information online. For example, a variety of studies have suggested that very liberal individuals are more likely to adhere to anti-vaccination beliefs.⁸⁶ Some conspiracy theories appeal primarily to left-leaning individuals.⁸⁷ While it is clear that false information is more prevalent on the right, more research is needed to determine what sharing behaviors look like amongst left-wing Americans.

While ethnographic studies of communities where fake-news sharing is prevalent are limited,⁸⁸ we can gain some insights into this community *as an audience* by examining qualitative work on conservative communities and media consumption. Though this paper does not hew to a particular political ideology, I will also note that discussions of fake news that, in an attempt to seem nonpartisan, do not identify patterns in problematic information—or treat all fake news as interchangeable false “content”—will be very unlikely to be able to answer “why people share fake news.”

Francesca Tripodi’s ethnographic research on mainstream American conservatives engages directly with questions of partisanship and ideology. She argues that because conservatives consider the mainstream media to be “fake,” they turn to alternative media sources such as *Breitbart* and the video channel *Prager U* for information.⁸⁹ Her participants used the term “fake news” solely to refer to mainstream media sources like CNN, MSNBC, the *New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. When asked for examples of false narratives, they mentioned the sexual assault allegations against Trump, the Trump campaign’s purported collusion with Russia, and coverage of the Charlottesville rally which ignored leftist agitation. In these instances, their beliefs are counterfactual. The mainstream media is not reporting “fake news,” and the hyper-partisan sources her participants favor are far more likely to spread false information. Ultimately, conservatives and liberals are not only

⁸⁶ Charles McCoy, *Anti-Vaccination Beliefs Don’t Follow the Usual Political Polarization*, CONVERSATION (Aug. 23, 2017, 8:34 PM), <http://theconversation.com/anti-vaccination-beliefs-dont-follow-the-usual-political-polarization-81001> [<https://perma.cc/892X-PZAT>].

⁸⁷ McKay Coppins, *How the Left Lost Its Mind*, ATLANTIC (July 2, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/liberal-fever-swamps/530736/> [<https://perma.cc/BLH2-XQJY>].

⁸⁸ For an excellent recent take on mainstream conservatives and their relationship to the media, see FRANCESCA TRIPODI, DATA & SOC’Y RES. INST., SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVE FACTS: ANALYZING SCRIPTURAL INFERENCE IN CONSERVATIVE NEWS PRACTICES (2018), <https://datasociety.net/output/searching-for-alternative-facts/> [<https://perma.cc/D4H6-S6ZZ>].

⁸⁹ Francesca Tripodi, *Alternative News, Alternative Facts: Deconstructing the Realities of “Fake News”*, presented at the Am. Soc. Ass’n, Phila. Pa. (Aug. 13, 2018).

consuming different media, but existing in different epistemological realities.

Another perspective on partisan news consumption is found in Reece Peck's outstanding book *Fox News Decoded: Partisanship, Populism and the Performance of Class*, which is based on content analysis of hundreds of hours of Fox programming and interviews with Tea Party activists and media practitioners. In the book, Peck painstakingly analyzes how Fox paints itself as the champion of the underdog—white, working class, political conservatives, or the “little guy”—by fusing conservative talking points with tabloid culture. In contrast, while outlets like the *New York Times* or National Public Radio pride themselves on being objective, they are widely viewed by conservatives as having a left-wing bias (giving rise to the liberal bumper sticker slogan “reality has a liberal bias”).

To explain this disparity, Peck explains how such outlets signify a *social identity* through the stories they cover, the entertainment media they highlight, and the marketing appeals they make to intellectuals, cosmopolitan business people, and hip urbanites.⁹⁰ Thus, by believing stories in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, cultural conservatives risk taking on the mantle of left-wing identity regardless of what those stories discuss. Peck points out that partisanship is primarily driven not by any particular party position or platform, but by affinity for and similarity to one's fellow party members. A great deal of research finds that partisanship is identity-based: people identify with the party that they feel that most members of their social group belong to, and will adjust their party preferences to match their family, friends, or neighborhoods.⁹¹ Just as the *New York Times* references eating Korean food, listening to Kendrick Lamar, and flying business class, Peck argues that Fox News uses a set of cultural referents like country music stars in their political rhetoric, which interpolates a particular class and race identity: namely, white, blue-collar, and masculine—a strategy that he calls *cultural populism*.⁹²

Understanding Fox News is *extremely* important to understanding problematic information. Fox, along with its pundits and local affiliates, often amplifies far-right stories that begin in fringe online communities.⁹³

⁹⁰ Reece Peck, *Fox News Decoded: Partisanship, Populism and the Performance of Class*, at 2 (n.d.) (unpublished manuscript).

⁹¹ POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTISANSHIP: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES 57 (John Bartle & Paolo Bellucci eds., 2015).

⁹² See Peck, *supra* note 90, at 93–98.

⁹³ Marwick & Lewis, *supra* note 8.

It contributes to partisanship, which fuels problematic information.⁹⁴ It has been the most popular cable news network for fifteen straight years, and cable news is where most Americans get their political information.⁹⁵ Many of the narratives and talking points that appear frequently in problematic information work seamlessly with the metanarratives and themes pioneered and honed by Fox.

It would be a mistake to assume that Fox News watchers are “radicalized” or “brainwashed” by what they watch—a new form of the magic bullet theory. Arceneaux and Johnson argue that partisan media is a symptom of polarization, not the cause⁹⁶ and express frustration that studies of media like Fox News often take a “magic bullet” approach, assuming uniform exposure, causal effects, and passive news consumers.⁹⁷ Returning to Francesca Tripodi’s research, she finds that conservatives use close-reading techniques similar to biblical interpretation to read Trump’s speeches, proposed legislation, and transcriptions of debates.⁹⁸ When they compare their own interpretations to mainstream media coverage, they inevitably find inaccuracies, reinforcing their idea of mainstream media as “fake.” As Tripodi writes, this approach to evaluating news articles and sources resonates with contemporary conservative critiques of the left, which hold that “liberal ideology is formed by disputable claims and emotional appeals instead of fact-based evidence.”⁹⁹ By carefully parsing the “facts” themselves, conservatives believe they have arrived at a truthful interpretation of current events.

However, these interpretations are, obviously, not necessarily correct, as the interplay between individual attitudes and partisan media are often more complicated. In Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers In Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, she tells a “deep story” which underlies the anger and frustration felt by her informants in southern Louisiana. Her participants felt that they were “in line” for the benefits promised to them by the American Dream—stable jobs and financial security, both of which were in short supply in Louisiana. But the line did not seem fair. She writes:

⁹⁴ Shanto Iyengar et al., *Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization*, 76 PUB. OPINION Q. 405 (2012).

⁹⁵ See generally Peck, *supra* note 90.

⁹⁶ Arceneaux & Johnson, *supra* note 29.

⁹⁷ ARCENEUX & JOHNSON, *supra* note 46.

⁹⁸ Francesca Tripodi, *Alternative Facts, Alternative Truths*, DATA & SOC’Y: POINTS (Feb. 23, 2018), <https://points.datasociety.net/alternative-facts-alternative-truths-ab9d446b06c> [<https://perma.cc/RBL7-KQ5W>].

⁹⁹ *Id.*

Black women, immigrants, refugees . . . all have cut ahead of you in line. But it's people like *you* who have made this country great. You feel uneasy. It has to be said: the line cutters irritate you. They are violating rules of fairness. You resent them, and you feel it's right that you do. So do your friends. Fox commentators reflect your feelings, for your deep story is also the Fox News story.¹⁰⁰

The “deep story” of waiting in line for long-awaited benefits is a metaphor that resonates with Hochschild's informants; it is embedded in their everyday conversations, and shapes how the Louisianan conservatives feel. In Polletta and Callahan's analysis of storytelling by conservative commentators and in Trump's campaign material, they find plenty of evidence for Hochschild's deep story. Like Hochschild, they are interested in stories, or narratives, that are told both in media and conversation. These narratives are coded and moral, reinforcing ingroup/outgroup feelings. They are so prevalent that even if people have no personal evidence for something, they hear stories told in conservative outlets that enforce their own beliefs, which are also repeated in conversation with others.¹⁰¹ For instance, one frequent theme of Fox coverage (which appears throughout Hochschild's interviews as well) is that urban liberals look down upon rural and “flyover” state residents and see them as stupid, ignorant, or rednecks. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton's famous “basket of deplorables” speech specifically targeted the alt-right and white supremacists, but it was taken by mainstream conservatives as attacking them. Many Trump supporters thus wore the badge *deplorable* with pride. The speech supported their deep beliefs, and it did no favors for Clinton. While the media gave the speech a great deal of coverage, this was almost unnecessary for conservatives to view it as insulting and condescending.

In her study of political viewpoints in Wisconsin, Katherine Cramer argues that rural residents express a *rural consciousness*, which she characterizes as a “politics of resentment.” In other words, rural residents believe that urban governments and institutions ignore rural concerns, deprive rural areas of needed resources, and that non-rural people are getting more than their “fair share.”¹⁰² Cramer's participants saw urbanites as lazy, lacking common sense, and undeserving of the

¹⁰⁰ ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD, STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND: ANGER AND MOURNING ON THE AMERICAN RIGHT 139 (2016).

¹⁰¹ Polletta & Callahan, *supra* note 11.

¹⁰² KATHERINE J. CRAMER, THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT (2016).

many economic advantages they enjoyed as residents of Madison or Milwaukee. Not all of the people Cramer interviewed were Democrats, and she makes it clear that this rural consciousness is not simply racism tied up in another name—the rural Wisconsinites were very dismissive of elected officials and wealthy tourists, both predominantly white. But the idea of *resentment*, feeling like underdogs, is what is important here and in Hochschild's work. Mainstream media represents the out-of-touch, lazy urbanites trying to cut ahead of the line; conservative media attempts to affect an "authenticity" which is tied to non-elite, non-urban identity.¹⁰³

Thus, according to previous research, successful conservative news stories often tap into "deep stories" that are common in other forms of conservative storytelling, such as:

- Conservative values are under attack from liberals (who may manifest themselves as immigrants, trans people, feminists, Black Lives Matter activists, Antifa, or any number of other boogeymen);
- Liberal urbanites look down upon rural conservatives; and
- The mainstream media are left-wing elites who wish to destroy traditional values, are corrupt and greedy, and, in the most extreme narratives, are controlled by Jews. This implies that mainstream media stories cannot be trusted; since they are usually furthering a narrative completely at odds with whatever ideology or position the problematic information is taking up, this makes the problematic information itself seem more truthful.

Partisan news also produces *affect*:

- It reflects a cultural identity of blue-collar whiteness, or rejects liberal urban identity markers;
- It gives a sense of urgency;
- It not only creates in-group solidarity, but reinforces out-group animus; and
- It expresses resentment towards the undeserving.

In the next section, I analyze the *messages* of fake news stories to see if they conform to these patterns identified in mainstream conservative media.

¹⁰³ See generally Peck, *supra* note 90.

B. Messages: Deep Stories

To examine the *messages* of fake news, I conducted two brief exercises in content analysis. In the first, I used a sample of the top 100 fake news stories on Facebook as determined by BuzzFeed (fifty for 2017 and fifty for 2016). These are strictly false stories posted by websites pre-determined by BuzzFeed to include fake news, such as yournewswire.com and tmzhiphop.com. In other words, they adhere to the model of “fake news” discussed in “Problematic Information Beyond Fake News.” For a second corpus, I used the “Hot 50” on Snopes.com for March 15, 2018.¹⁰⁴ Snopes.com is a popular fact-checking site that determines the accuracy of popular email forwards, viral videos, trending social media topics, and memes in addition to “fake news” stories, so it included a broader range of problematic information. Rather than providing headlines, Snopes provides “claims,” since the assertions they analyze are often found in multiple pieces of media.

I categorized each story, read the original source when available (many “fake news” stories from 2016 had disappeared, and many of the Snopes stories referred to memes, tweets, or videos), and coded it as political or not, using a very broad definition of “political” as pertaining to systemic power relationships. For stories I determined to be political, I then coded the political leaning of each story. Political leaning was determined by examining the underlying themes and messages of each story, whether they mentioned a politician in favorable or unfavorable terms, and whether they included “hot-button” issues such as immigration, Islam, or Black Lives Matter. After coding all the items, I went back and re-coded them, then resolved any inconsistencies between the two samples (e.g. I had coded an anti-Hillary conspiracy as “conspiracy” in the first sample and as “political” in the second—I decided to code both of them as “political”).

¹⁰⁴ I am not certain how Snopes defines the “hot” in their “Hot 50” (it is not the “most searched” or “most shared,” as those have their own pages. However, those categories indicate the most searched or most shared stories at snopes.com, meaning they were searched or shared by people who had already visited a fact-checking site, presumably to determine the veracity of a claim. This is not the same as popular false stories). On their “Transparency: Topic Selection” page, they write: “The inputs we use for the process of determining reader interest include the tabulation of terms entered into our search engine, reader e-mail submissions, comments and items posted to our Twitter and Facebook accounts, external social media posts, Google Trends, Twitter’s Trending Now, Facebook’s Trending Topics, and items flagged for review by Facebook users as part of our partnership with Facebook.” *Transparency: Topic Selection*, SNOPEs (Feb. 28, 2017), <https://www.snopes.com/topic-selection/> [<https://perma.cc/4SMZ-S6ER>]. Therefore, the “Hot 50” seems like a good starting point to classify problematic information with a wider scope than the BuzzFeed lists.

I began with a very simple coding scheme: None, Left, or Right.

- *None*: Stories which had no political leaning. They might be outrageous, sensational, or grotesque, but did not mention partisan issues.
- *Right*: Stories that were anti-Obama, anti-Clinton, pro-Trump, or adhered to right-wing positions on partisan issues such as gun control, police brutality, and immigration.
- *Left*: Stories that were anti-Trump, pro-Obama, pro-Clinton, or adhered to left-wing positions on partisan issues such as gun control, police brutality, and immigration.¹⁰⁵

I had two hypotheses:

- H1: “Fake news” stories would primarily be right-leaning.
- H2: Right-leaning “fake news” stories would adhere to the deep stories and affective messaging discussed in the previous section.

1. BuzzFeed Stories

The BuzzFeed stories were surprisingly difficult to code. I was forced to abandon my simple coding in favor of six categories: none, undetermined, left, right, conspiracy, or racist.

Undetermined: I used this code if the story had a political valance, but it was difficult to determine. A story like “Pence: Michelle Obama Is the Most Vulgar First Lady We’ve Ever Had,” could be interpreted as anti-Pence (and therefore left-leaning) or anti-Michelle Obama (and therefore right-leaning).

Racist: Stories that used racist African American stereotypes, but otherwise did not include any partisan issues.¹⁰⁶ Racism is clearly

¹⁰⁵ Several stories in both samples dealt with animal welfare and hunting. I spent quite a bit of time deliberating over this but ultimately coded the animal welfare stories as non-partisan and the hunting stories as left-wing.

¹⁰⁶ There were no racist stories about any other ethnic group, although there were three Islamophobic and one anti-immigrant story, which I coded as right-leaning since they played on other partisan issues like voter fraud and Hillary Clinton’s supposed affiliation with ISIS.

political, but not something that neatly maps on to partisanship in terms of who might share such a story.

Conspiracy theories: Stories that supported nonpartisan conspiracy theories (such as Princess Diana’s death). Partisan conspiracy theories, such as Pizzagate,¹⁰⁷ were coded as such.

The results of my coding can be seen in Table 2. Most of the stories had no political leaning (forty-one). Twenty-one leaned right, twelve I considered undetermined, eleven leaned left, seven focused on conspiracy theories, and four were racist. Seven dealt with non-US issues (Mexico, Argentina, and the Philippines) so were not analyzed for content.

2. Snopes Claims

Unlike the BuzzFeed corpus, not all the Snopes stories were false—ten were “mixed,” three were categorized by Snopes as “out of date” (accurate information that circulates sometimes years after it happened), six were true, and thirty-one were false. The political leanings were also fairly easy to determine—stories were either non-political (“300,000 pounds of rat meat disguised as chicken wings were sold in the U.S.”) or highly partisan (“Donald Trump’s IQ, at 156, is comparable to that of the smartest U.S. presidents.”). There were no racist stories¹⁰⁸ and many fewer ambiguous claims. Only one story was coded as “undetermined”—a sexual harassment claim against the recently deceased Stephen Hawking. While this might convey a sentiment of feminist support for the #metoo movement, it is not clear from the original story.

The political leanings of the Hot 50 can be seen in Table 3. Twenty-five had no political leaning, eighteen leaned right-wing, seven stories were left-wing, and one was undetermined. Notably, all but one of the right-leaning stories were false (thirteen false, three mixed, and one out of date), whereas three of the left-wing stories were true (two false and two mixed).

¹⁰⁷ A far-right conspiracy theory holding that prominent Democratic politicians, including Hillary Clinton, were running a child trafficking ring for pedophiles out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong pizza in Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁸ This may be due to Snopes editorial policy, which does not cover content they think is inappropriate for the site.

3. Findings

My first hypothesis—that problematic information would primarily reflect right-wing sensibilities—is false. Most problematic information does not involve political issues. Significantly more false stories lean right than left, although there is still a plethora of false content that appeals to people with left-wing sensibilities.

My second hypothesis—that right-wing problematic information would reflect the deep stories and affective messaging discussed in the previous section—was supported. Both the right-wing “fake news” stories and problematic content listed on Snopes mapped fairly neatly to the “deep stories” outlined in the previous section. Thus, my first significant finding is that *problematic partisan information exists on a continuum with mainstream partisan media*. Some stories engaged with long-term conservative talking points involving Obama’s birth certificate and ties to ISIS, the dangers of Muslim refugees, celebrities and liberals getting their comeuppance, and the like, which reinforce themes that are already omnipresent on Fox News. Others made sensational claims about Hillary Clinton’s criminality and the violence of Black Lives Matter members. This suggests that the difference between problematic partisan information and mainstream partisan information is simply a matter of scale, rather than a clear line between “true” and “false.” Moreover, some of the stories played on themes emphasized by extremist groups. For instance, the headline “Police Find 19 White Female Bodies in Freezers With ‘Black Lives Matter’ Carved into Skin” is similar to false stories spread by white supremacist groups to brand Black Lives Matter a terrorist organization.

Indeed, my research with Becca Lewis is concerned with how far-right extremist groups use social media for two purposes: first, to recruit more adherents to their points of view, and second, to get media coverage of their news frames, ideas, slogans, and so forth, thus “opening the Overton window” (the range of political viewpoints that are socially acceptable in American society) and furthering their ideological aims.¹⁰⁹ Thus, problematic information is often more extreme than the political views voiced on Fox News and may include outright racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, which is signaled through dog-whistle phrases and coded language in mainstream media. Ideologues may adopt some of these affective and framing strategies to appeal to conservatives

¹⁰⁹ Lewis & Marwick, *supra* note 85; Marwick & Lewis, *supra* note 8.

and further their own aims, even if these do not map at all to mainstream conservatism.¹¹⁰

The second significant finding is that *fake news and problematic content appeals to different people for different reasons*. “Fake news” content is clickbait. The goal of the fake news producer is to have as many people spread their content as possible. The easiest way to do that is to find a news item that will be shared by people of different political proclivities. This can be a sensational claim about vaccinations or conspiracies or animals—topics that appeal across party lines—or it can be a story that includes both conservative and liberal points of view. A story like “White Baseball Players Kneel in the 50’s to Protest Black Lynchings,” could be interpreted in support of NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s position on Black Lives Matter, or it could be a refutation of the history of White racism. It was impossible for me to determine the intent of these stories without seeing the context in which they were shared. The latter stories are polysemous, which is key to their appeal. This polysemy potentially increased the audience for the stories, in that people with many different political leanings might be motivated to share them.¹¹¹ Precisely because of the ambiguity, I had a difficult time coding the “fake news” stories.

On the other hand, only two of the stories in the Snopes sample also appeared in the BuzzFeed sample. Most of the Snopes stories would not be classified as “fake news” by any algorithm, but they are still widely shared, so this analysis shows the utility of examining problematic information beyond fake news. Moreover, some of the Snopes stories were true, while all the “fake news” stories were false. Again, this points to a continuum of “truthiness” rather than a clear bright line between “fake” and “real” news.

Obviously, this quick exercise is not definitive; it is merely a starting point for future research, which might use larger samples from a more diverse set of sources, use multiple coders to increase reliability, or interview people who shared news items to determine intent. Nonetheless, in the context of this paper, it is a good demonstration of how *messaging* research might be combined with other methodologies in a sociotechnical approach to determining media effects.

While we may understand the content of problematic information a bit better and understand both why it resonates with conservatives and

¹¹⁰ This is a bit complicated, since Trump does draw frequently from fairly extreme online content and holds more extreme policy positions than many mainstream Republicans.

¹¹¹ John Fiske, *Television: Polysemy and Popularity*, 3 CRITICAL STUD. IN MASS COMM. 391 (1986), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038609366672> [<https://perma.cc/7U3Y-95FE>].

how it is coherent with more mainstream conservative media, we must look not only at problematic information itself, but the technical context in which it is spread in order to fully understand this problem.

C. Affordances: The Impact of Social Sharing

Today, most people get at least some of their news from social media, whether that be Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit, newsletters, blogs, or podcasts. Social media has several significant differences from traditional media:

1. Anyone can produce and distribute content
2. Content is shared through social networks and in social contexts
3. Social media platforms promote content algorithmically, based on complex judgments of what they think will keep you on the platform

First, *anyone can produce and distribute content*, rather than just professional journalists or filmmakers. This means that people holding viewpoints outside the Overton Window—who would never appear on mainstream media—can and do produce their own news stories, tweetstorms, and blogs. This has produced a huge boom in news targeted to a wide range of political commitments: there are feminist news sites, anarchist Facebook pages, socialist newsletters, libertarian podcasts, white supremacist memes, even fan sites for Stalin and blogs written by people who advocate returning to monarchic feudalism.¹¹² It has also allowed for a variety of activist groups to organize around issues that are often absent from mainstream media. The Black Lives Matter movement, for example, used hashtag activism to increase coverage of police brutality and bring attention to biased coverage of black victims. It has also enabled the creation of information that is false, biased, or both, which is often indistinguishable from that which is professionally produced. The cost of and skill involved in creating a YouTube video or Medium post continues to decline. While most internet users do not post YouTube videos or political blog posts (although many do), a huge number take part in lower-overhead online activities, such as liking a Facebook post, reblogging, retweeting, or commenting on a news story, or wading into a discussion war on someone else's Facebook or Instagram account. Others simply listen, scrolling through a feed or reading a story.

¹¹² “Tankies” and “neo-reactionaries,” respectively.

Secondly, most people do not go to individual newspapers or blogs to consume news. Instead, they consume news as part of their *social feed*. This means that political material is served up as simply one ingredient in a bouillabaisse of photographs, personal stories, advertisements, movie trailers, celebrity gossip, sports news, or whatever else appears in someone's Facebook feed, Snapchat stories, or subscribed subreddits. Alfred Hermida refers to this constant flow of information as *ambient journalism*.¹¹³ Zizi Papacharissi notes that this stream is affective; among social media participants, news is "collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments."¹¹⁴ In social spaces, the traditional journalistic value of objectivity no longer makes sense: virtually every story is augmented with someone's opinion. Hermida writes, "Professional publications go to great lengths to distinguish the spaces for commentary and opinion from those for the news. Social media platforms break down such boundaries, with facts and fiction, and observations and opinions, in the mix."¹¹⁵

Scholars and journalists are just beginning to understand the myriad impacts of social sharing. The Media Insight Project found that when people see a post from a person they trust, they are more likely to recommend the news source to friends, follow the source on social media, and sign up for news alerts from the source.¹¹⁶ Similarly, a Knight Foundation study found that "[n]ews-seekers depend on friends, contacts and individuals followed as trusted news sources as much as or more than they depend on the media outlets themselves."¹¹⁷ This may have something to do with the greatly diminished trust in traditional journalism; when mistrust of news is widespread, people look for other markers of trustworthiness. Notably, Republicans are far less likely to trust news than Democrats, suggesting that the "deep story" of media bias discussed in the

¹¹³ Alfred Hermida, *Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism*, 4 JOURNALISM PRAC. 1751 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512781003640703> [<https://perma.cc/4NCQ-5BPN>].

¹¹⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, *Toward New Journalism(s): Affective News, Hybridity, and Liminal Spaces*, 16 JOURNALISM STUD. 27 (2015).

¹¹⁵ Alfred Hermida, *Social Media and Journalism*, in THE SAGE HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL MEDIA (Jean Burgess, Alice E. Marwick, & Thomas Poell, eds., SAGE Publications Ltd. 2017).

¹¹⁶ MEDIA INSIGHT PROJECT, *supra* note 10.

¹¹⁷ *Mobile-First News: How People Use Smartphones to Access Information*, KNIGHT FOUND. (May 11, 2016), <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/mobile-first-news-how-people-use-smartphones-acces> [<https://perma.cc/YW9Y-8VN5>].

previous section is widespread.¹¹⁸ But most importantly, within social environments, people are not necessarily looking to inform others: they share stories (and pictures, and videos) to express themselves and broadcast their identity, affiliations, values, and norms.

At a recent workshop on partisan media, my friend “Carly” related her frustration. Her mother, a strong conservative, repeatedly shared “fake news” on Facebook. Each time, Carly would send her mother news stories and Snopes links refuting the story, but her mother persisted. Eventually, fed up with her daughter’s efforts, her mother yelled, “I don’t care if it’s false, I care that I hate Hillary Clinton, and I want everyone to know that!”

This anecdote encapsulates how problematic political information functions online as an identity-signaling mechanism. When someone chooses to share a fake news story on Facebook, Twitter, via text message, or on Whatsapp; when they post a conservative meme to their wall; or when they “like” a YouTube video about a pro-Trump conspiracy theory, they may well be doing it to signal their identity and affiliate themselves with like-minded others. Right-leaning citizens are more likely than left-leaning citizens to do this because the right-wing mediasphere has more problematic information than that of the left; left-leaning citizens are more likely to share mainstream media articles, although they are by no means immune to problematic information. Regardless, what is important is not the accuracy of the information shared, but the *identity that it signals*. Sharing a *New York Times* story signals something different than a *Mother Jones* story than an *US Weekly* story than a *Wall Street Journal* story than a *Breitbart* story. Media institutions are affiliated with partisan identities, which map to particular configurations of race and class. People want to share stories that express their feelings and identities.

Finally, platforms sort or recommend content based on complex algorithms which serve different videos, images, or stories based on what they think will keep you on the platform. Just as television programs only had to be good enough to keep you from changing a channel, social media content does not have to be *good*; in many cases, a sensational or even grotesque result will be more likely to engage viewers than one that is more thoughtful, but perhaps less lurid. The artist James Bridle wrote a passionate *Medium* post critiquing YouTube videos made for children that contained disturbing imagery of pregnancy, vaccinations, toothache, children in distress, or beloved characters fighting or hurting each other.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *10 Reasons Why Americans Don’t Trust the Media*, KNIGHT FOUND. (Jan. 16, 2018), <https://medium.com/trust-media-and-democracy/10-reasons-why-americans-dont-trust-the-media-d0630c125b9e> [<https://perma.cc/EQ8E-629B>].

¹¹⁹ James Bridle, *Something Is Wrong on the Internet*, MEDIUM (Nov. 6, 2017), <https://medium.com/@jamesbridle/something-is-wrong-on-the-internet-c39c471271d2> [<https://perma.cc/VS33-LQ4Y>].

His article set off a wave of controversy and forced YouTube to make sweeping changes to how children's videos were monetized. Many of these videos were probably churned out by small video studios using pre-existing character models and automated software simply for advertising revenue, but in other cases they were made by independent video creators who refined their productions based on what they believed the algorithm prioritized, such as the "Toy Freaks" channel on YouTube, made by a single dad who featured his two daughters in various upsetting situations.¹²⁰ Since disturbing videos got more traction on YouTube and thus made more money, more were produced, and more were recommended to viewers. Similarly, the *Guardian* study of YouTube discussed previously found that in many cases, searching for a term like "dinosaurs," "aliens" or even "Hillary Clinton" brought up a series of Recommended Videos based on conspiracy theories or outright nonsense like Flat Earth theory.¹²¹ Thus, it is quite possible that problematic information is prioritized on social media sites because it garners more engagement, even if that is to dispute it or make fun of it. Additionally, algorithms often serve content based on a user's social networks and perceived interests. In an episode of the Gimlet podcast *Reply All*, a caller ("Charles") told a story about noticing an uptick in white supremacist content in his Facebook feed—something that was antithetical to his own political positions. He found out later that his brother-in-law had briefly attended White Pride meetups in his hometown and connected to some likeminded people via Facebook. Facebook used this information to serve similar content to Charles.¹²² In all these cases, YouTube and Facebook take no interest in *what* the content is about, whether it's holocaust denial videos or makeup tutorials; they are simply interested in keeping their viewers on the platform.

In other words, platforms do play a role: the material affordances of technology amplify or stifle certain types of human behavior. Before the internet, for instance, white supremacists used Xeroxed newsletters to spread their propaganda, which severely limited the amount of outreach they could do.¹²³ Today, extremist groups rely on the internet to intensify

¹²⁰ Todd Spangler, *YouTube Terminates Toy Freaks Channel Amid Broader Crackdown on Disturbing Kids' Content*, VARIETY (Nov. 17, 2017), <http://variety.com/2017/digital/news/youtube-toy-freaks-channel-terminated-1202617834/> [<https://perma.cc/6N5V-M9WW>].

¹²¹ Lewis, *supra* note 79.

¹²² PJ Vogt & Alex Goldman, #109 *Is Facebook Spying on You?*, GIMLET MEDIA PODCAST: REPLY ALL (Nov. 2, 2017), <https://www.gimletmedia.com/reply-all/109-facebook-spying#episode-player> [<https://perma.cc/5XFL-ZRMK>].

¹²³ JESSIE DANIELS, *WHITE LIES: RACE, CLASS, GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN WHITE SUPREMACIST DISCOURSE* (1997).

the reach of their ideology and target online information to potentially like-minded individuals. But platforms—and social technology in general—by no means play the *only* role. Information flows on and off platforms, between face-to-face interactions and broadcast media. Stories are discussed in person and on Facebook. In other words, online sharing does not exist in a vacuum. Isolating any single social technology ignores myriad others through which problematic information flows freely.

This does not mean that there is nothing that platforms can do to cut down on problematic information. Promotional algorithms must be examined carefully (perhaps through audit studies) in order to track patterns in the types of content being recommended to users. There is a need for increased content moderation, although it is expensive, and moderators often undergo emotional harm. The ways in which advertising revenue encourages certain types of problematic content must be scrutinized. Users must have the opportunity to turn off algorithmically sorted content on platforms like Facebook and Instagram in favor of chronology. Platforms that rely on granular demographic categories to target users should ensure that labels like “Jew-Haters” are removed, making it more difficult to target hateful content directly.¹²⁴

III. WHY DO PEOPLE SHARE “FAKE NEWS”?

To answer the titular question, we must examine the findings from our three-part sociotechnical model of media effects.

1. Actors: Partisan Americans share fake news stories that support their pre-existing beliefs and signal their identity to like-minded others.
2. Messages: Successful problematic information builds on “deep stories” found in mainstream conservative media or makes polysemic appeals that cross party lines.
3. Affordances: Algorithmic visibility and social sharing massively increase the scale and spread of problematic information.

This model complicates the two primary solutions proposed to combat “fake news”: fact-checking and media literacy.

¹²⁴ Julia Angwin et al., *Facebook Enabled Advertisers to Reach ‘Jew Haters’*, PROPUBLICA (Sept. 14, 2017), <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-enabled-advertisers-to-reach-jew-haters> [<https://perma.cc/9WQY-LLKS>].

A. Fact-Checking

Fact-checking is predicated on the assumption that people will change their mind when confronted with correct information, which implies a very passive model of the audience: If an audience member reads a fake news story, she believes it; if she is presented with contradictory facts, she will change her mind. Her own agency and predispositions are entirely absent.¹²⁵ As we have seen, this ignores a wide variety of social and cultural factors, and is not supported by empirical evidence. In fact, fact-checking may have the opposite effect of making stories “more sticky.” Pennycook et al. find that messaging is reinforced through repetition; the more people see fake news headlines, the more likely they are to think they are accurate. This is true even if the story is repeated in order to debunk it.¹²⁶ Moreover, Nyhan and Reifler find not only that people are likely to reject corrections if they contradict their pre-existing worldview, but there may be a “backlash effect” where they believe their misperceptions more strongly.¹²⁷ In other words, if “Mario” firmly believes that Hillary Clinton is a murderous criminal, a fact-checking statement that disputes the veracity of a story about Seth Rich may make Mario “double down” on his pre-existing beliefs. In other cases, people may believe that fact-checking is yet more evidence of “liberal bias.” For instance, when Google began including information about source veracity in their search results, hyper-partisan site *The Daily Caller* accused it of unfairly targeting conservative sites.¹²⁸ This may cause even more resentment and anger towards perceived liberal outlets, contributing to decreased trust.

B. Media Literacy

Media literacy, or “active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create”¹²⁹ has been widely proposed as a solution

¹²⁵ ARCENEUX & JOHNSON, *supra* note 46.

¹²⁶ Gordon Pennycook et al., *Implausibility and Illusory Truth: Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News But Has No Effect on Entirely Implausible Statements* (Soc. Sci. Res. Network, Working Paper No. 2958246, 2017), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2958246> [<https://perma.cc/AH3F-Y552>].

¹²⁷ Nyhan & Reifler, *supra* note 4.

¹²⁸ Eric Lieberman, *Google’s New Fact-Check Feature Almost Exclusively Targets Conservative Sites*, DAILY CALLER (Jan. 9, 2018), <http://dailycaller.com/2018/01/09/googles-new-fact-check-feature-almost-exclusively-targets-conservative-sites/> [<https://perma.cc/43QB-2C73>].

¹²⁹ Renee Hobbs & Amy Jensen, *The Past, Present, and Future of Media Literacy Education*, 1 J. MEDIA LITERACY EDUC. 1 (2009).

to “fake news.”¹³⁰ As our model shows, simply giving people the skills to improve their ability to read media will not necessarily solve the problem of fake news sharing. Francesca Tripodi’s participants engaged in a very sophisticated model of textual criticism, but their pre-existing beliefs that the mainstream media were biased or “fake” caused them to turn to hyper-partisan or counterfactual online sources.¹³¹ As danah boyd asks, “What does it mean to encourage people to be critical of the media’s narratives when they are already predisposed against the news media?”¹³² Moreover, in many cases, what matters is the affective or emotional appeal of a particular story or claim, rather than its factual accuracy. In many cases, the sharer may be aware that the story is false, but still choose to share it for its identity-signaling properties.

In their assessment of media literacy, Bulger & Davison identify several problems. In addition to a somewhat fragmented set of curricula, media literacy puts the responsibility for determining information credibility on to the individual, rather than viewing problematic information as a structural problem (and one boosted by the economic models of online content).¹³³ Even extensive media literacy training often had little impact on students’ ability to accurately assess online information; this is compounded by the ability of problematic websites to mimic the legitimacy signals of reputable online sources.¹³⁴ Given both the scope and scale of problematic information, and its identity-signaling properties, encouraging media literacy may have no effects, or potentially deleterious ones.

CONCLUSION

The sociotechnical model of media effects shows that people do not share fake news stories solely to spread factual information, nor because they are “duped” by powerful partisan media. Their worldviews are shaped by their social positions and their deep beliefs, which are often both partisan and polarized. Problematic information is often simply one

¹³⁰ Monica Bulger & Patrick Davison, *The Promises, Challenges, and Futures of Media Literacy*, DATA & SOC’Y RES. INST. (Feb. 21, 2018), <https://datasociety.net/output/the-promises-challenges-and-futures-of-media-literacy/> [https://perma.cc/6E2T-BNPM].

¹³¹ Tripodi, *supra* note 98.

¹³² danah boyd, *You Think You Want Media Literacy . . . Do You?*, DATA & SOC’Y: POINTS (Mar. 9, 2018), <https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2> [https://perma.cc/7QDT-CVGT].

¹³³ Bulger & Davison, *supra* note 130.

¹³⁴ Sam Wineburg & Sarah McGrew, *Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information* (Stanford Hist. Educ. Group, Working Paper No. 2017-A1, 2017), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3048994 [https://perma.cc/V2AW-PZW5].

step further on a continuum with mainstream partisan news or even well-known politicians. We must understand “fake news” as part of a larger media ecosystem. That does not mean that we should ignore platforms; we must scrutinize the ways in which algorithms and ad systems promote or incentivize problematic content, and the frequency with which extremist content is surfaced. Finally, while media literacy and fact-checking efforts are very well-intentioned, they may not be the best solutions, given the highly-polarized, mistrustful political climate of the United States.

In order to solve the problem of fake news, we need to conceptualize its effects as sociotechnical. Fake news is not simply a problem of pre-existing polarization; it is not simply a problem of online advertising or algorithmic targeting. It is not simply about increased far-right extremism or the popularity of Fox News. It is not entirely caused by the decline in trust of traditional journalism, nor the move to a social sharing model of news consumption. It is all of these things. And understanding not only *why* people share fake news, but how we can mitigate the impacts, requires taking a more holistic approach.

Figures:

A Three Part Theory of Sociotechnical Media Effects		
Part	Presumptions	Method
Actors	People make meaning from information based on their social positioning, identity, discursive resources, and skill set	Ethnography, qualitative interviews, focus groups
Patterns	Media messages are polysemic, but structured in particular ways for various outcomes	Content analysis, discourse analysis, quantitative data analysis
Affordances	The material settings of media consumption enable and constrain types of meaning-making and messaging	Human-computer interaction, walkthroughs, user interviews

Table 1: A Three Part Theory of Media Effects

Category	Sample Headline	Frequency
None	Sharks spotted in Mississippi River near Davenport has been confirmed as Great white shark	41
Right	Obama Signs Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide	21
Undetermined	African Billionaire Will Give \$1 Million To Anyone Who Wants to Leave America if Donald Trump is Elected President	12
Left	Trump Claims America Should Never Have Given Canada Its Independence	1
Non-US	Robredo: If Elected Vice President of Duterte, I Will Immediately Resign My Post	7
Conspiracy	CIA Agent Confesses on Deathbed: 'We Blew Up WTC 7 On 9/11'	4
Racist	Chicago Man Arrested for Slapping 25 B*tches Because He Was Tired of B*tches	4

Table 2: Political Leanings of Fake News Stories from BuzzFeed

Category	Sample Claim	Frequency (Total)	True	False	Mixed	Out of Date
None	Dangerous cosmic rays will pass near Earth tonight, causing bodily harm if you keep personal electronics near you.	25	2	15	5	2
Right	A 1981 Columbia University student ID card identifies Barack Obama as a foreign student named Barry Soetoro.	18	1	13	3	1
Left	Harley-Davidson announced in March 2018 that it was closing its Wisconsin plant and moving all manufacturing to Thailand in response to President Donald Trump's just-announced steel tariffs.	7	3	2	2	0
Un-determined	Famed theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking was accused of sexual misconduct by a former student.	1	0	1	0	0

Table 3: Political Leanings and Veracity of Snopes "Hot 50" Urban Legends for March 15, 2018