Chapter 11
Populism, Fake News, and the Flight From Democracy

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ABSTRACT
Fake news and populist movements that appear to hold the fate of democracy hostage are urgent concerns around the world. The flight from liberal democracy toward oligarchy has spread out from the unexpected results of the 2016 American presidential elections bringing in a wave of reactionary populism and the beginning of a left populist counter movement. The phenomenon of fake news is often explained in terms of opposition public relations strategies and geopolitics that shift audiences toward a regime of post-truth where emotion is said to triumphs over reason, computational propaganda over common sense, or sheer power over knowledge. In this chapter, the authors propose something different in order to theorize the imaginary audience(s) and conditions of reception for fake news treated as both a symptom (often of injury) and a cause (at times a danger to democracy). This leads them to evaluate the role it plays in defining what the fields of journalism, politics, and social science are becoming and what it means for democracy to come.

INTRODUCTION

“Our Ukraine policy has been thrown into disarray, and shady interests the world over have learned how little it takes to remove an American Ambassador who does not give them what they want.” (Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch)

A whisper in the president’s ear and a tweet later, U.S. troops withdraw from Syria, leaving allied Kurdish fighters exposed. A little while later in the U.S. Congress impeachment inquiry, Ukrainian Ambassador Yovanovitch is asking how it could come to the point where a key official, brokering a conflict in another war zone, could be so easily removed by such “shady interests.” Both of these stories are widely reported in the press, and yet, what is true and what is false about them is in dispute. In this chapter, we ask how populism and fake news are bypassing mainstream journalism, democratic politics, and critical social

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science, so that seemingly every truth claim can be parcelled, distorted or denied. How has it come to this, and where might we hope to go from here?

Politicians, journalists and social scientists play different though often overlapping roles in the production of the relation between truth and democracy. Agents in each of these fields are first-level observers of events and each has a different approach to their sources, constituents, and/or actors, as well as to the relations among fact, opinion, and truth. Agents in each field are being assaulted by right populist media and Republican politicians, and each are responding to the attacks in kind. Right populism and fake news, as we argue below, are putting democracy (rule by the people) in a flight toward oligarchy (rule by few), away from what de Tocqueville (1988/1850) called an American “love for the condition of equality” (pp. 504) toward a wildly libertarian version of freedom, haunted by the spectre of racism and sexism. We explore how this shift is in part due to the way strengths in these three fields may have given way to their weaknesses.

FAKE NEWS

The phenomenon of fake news is often explained in terms of the opposition’s public relations strategies and geopolitics that shift audiences toward an “epistemic (or truth) crisis.” Emotion is said to triumph over reason, computational propaganda over common sense, or sheer power over knowledge (Peters, et al. 2018). For some, “the crisis is more institutional than technological” (Benkler et al., 2018, pp. 20). For others, fake news is more importantly understood as a state-sponsored conspiracy (for example, from Russia or Ukraine, depending on one’s political affiliation; Howard et al, 2019) or technologically determined via patented algorithms and feedback loops rather than as a development in the political economy of the media ecosystem (Benkler et al., 2018). Social media has proven that there are multiple ways of taking advantage of long simmering and often highly volatile controversies over race, sexuality, class and other topics (ripe for dog whistles) that seem to always lie on the fringes of what can be said or even thought and what cannot be in polite society. Crossing the line between the two is culturally discouraged and to some extent illegal (libel laws), but it is also allowed under the umbrella of rights related to freedom of association and speech/communication. Destabilizing the category of truth in a democracy for geopolitical gain (Mueller, 2019), in our view, becomes possible because democracy as a regime of truth allows for a great variety of controversial discourse.

Spreading outrageous and distorted information to discredit opposition or create divisiveness between opposing groups is not a new method in the history of propaganda. The Nazi used the term “Lügenpresse”, the “lying press” (New York Times, 2019). However, the growth in types of fake news and the volume that has been disseminated since 2016 is unprecedented. This has been documented in a variety of official reports (House of Commons (U.K.), 2019; U.S. Congress, 2019; DiResta, 2018) that also shed light on the dangers posed by social media monopolies. We have witnessed officials in televised hearings struggling to comprehend the stakes at play in questioning social media executives. There are also reports from several large-scale research projects that focus on the opportunist and predatory usage of technology and social media techniques (“computational propaganda” via bots or automated messages and other means) in local and global communications systems (Wooley & Howard, 2018). Finally, the history of disinformation and propaganda, as well as suggestions for policies that would prevent fake news and curb its damaging effects, are cited as key research areas for protecting democratic practices in the future (Canada, House of Commons, 2019; Sauvageau et als.2018).