

# Some thoughts on fake news



**Nick Anstead, Assistant Professor in Media and Communication**

[e] [n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk](mailto:n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk)

[t] [@nickanstead](https://twitter.com/nickanstead)

**Don't believe (all)  
the hype!**



# General observations

- Fake news is:
  - Not new;
  - Tied in with overly techno-centric explanations;
  - Hard to define;
  - A symptom of other broader changes, which might be more worrying.
- BUT this might mean the problems we face are **more difficult, not simpler.**



Nick Anstead, Assistant Professor in Media and Communication

[e] n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk

[t] @nickanstead

# Today's talk

- Why does it matter?
- A brief history of fake news
- Why are we talking about fake news now?
- Responses to fake news
  - The challenge of definition
  - Responses to fake news
- But are we asking the wrong question?
  - Fake news as part of a structural challenge to liberal democracy and the rise of populism.
  - The co-option of fake news as a discourse
- So how do we respond?
  - Required research
- Final thought: why are we not hearing anything about fake news in UK 2017?



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[e] [n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk](mailto:n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk)

[t] [@nickanstead](https://twitter.com/nickanstead)

# Why does it matter?

- In political terms, various liberal democratic theories has always relied on an informed electorate that is able to rationally weigh the choices before it.
  - Most obviously, deliberative model of democracy (i.e. Habermas, 1992) relies on rational engagement arriving at a consensus position.
  - Even minimalist forms of democracy (i.e. elite democratic theory), which acknowledges cognitive weaknesses of the public, still relies on them taking knowledge related role (such as removing the corrupt or incompetent).



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[t] @nickanstead

# Why does it matter?

- Traditional patterns of media consumption (newspapers, television etc.) does lead to knowledge increase and participation (Norris, 2002).
- There is also evidence that new media environments can do the same thing generally (Kenski and Stroud, 2006), but more limited work on social media (some evidence from Bode, 2012, although claims are made under certain circumstances).
- Matters because more citizens (young people especially) are getting news from social media environments (see Pew, OfCom data on this).



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[e] [n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk](mailto:n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk)

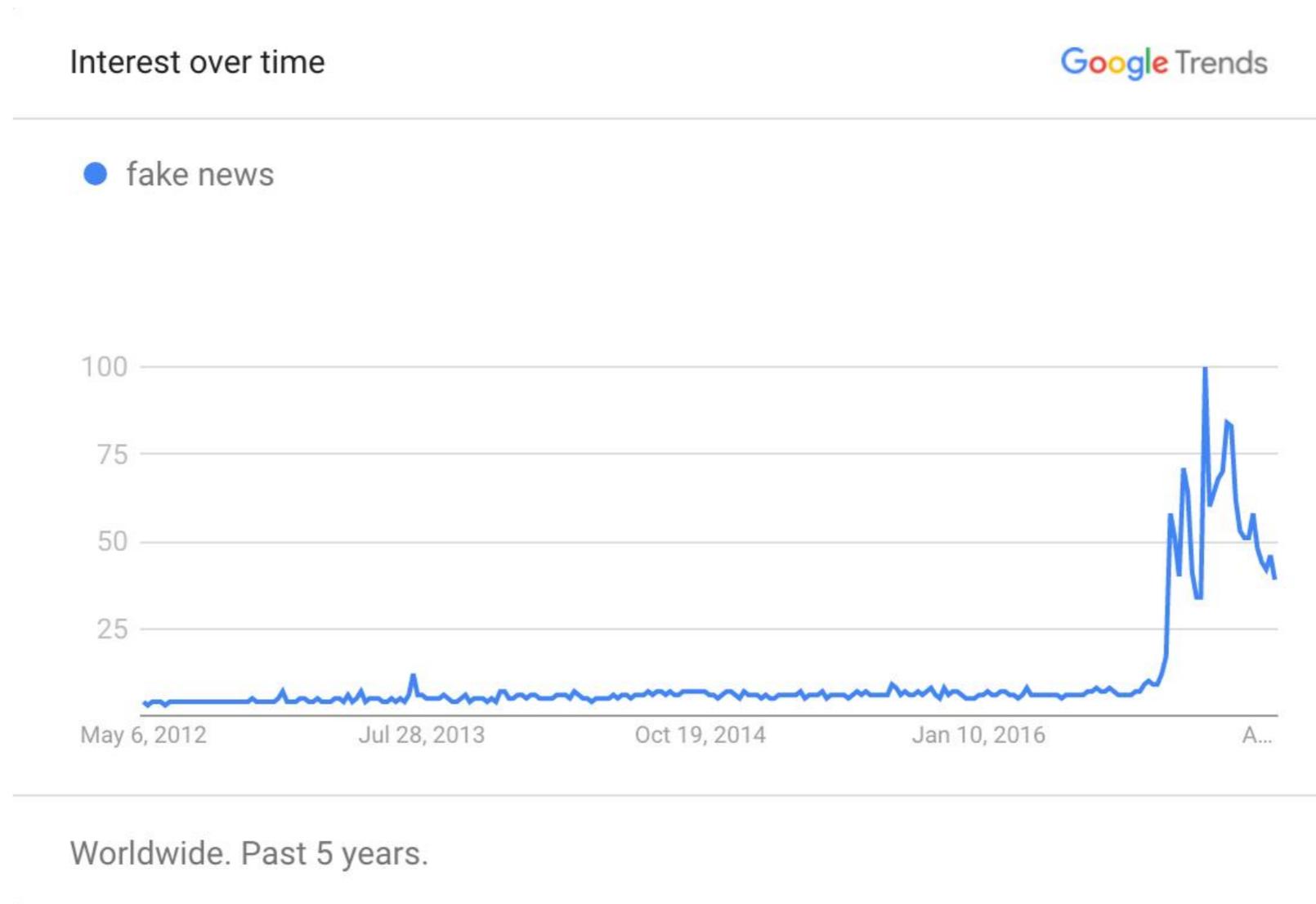
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# A brief history of fake news

- Very important to remember that fake news is not a new idea
  - Scares and panics during various historical events (e.g. Titus Oates and the Popish plot in 1678-1681)
  - Echoes of the Yellow Press (late 19<sup>th</sup> century sensationalist US journalism).
  - 20<sup>th</sup> century propaganda (World War One, World War Two, Cold War etc.).
  - Previous political scandals (Zinoviev letter in 1924, Killian documents in 2004).
  - Conspiracy theories are well-established.



# A brief history of fake news



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# A brief history of fake news

- Recent years have seen greater discussion of fake news (a new term).
- This has been boosted by a number of recent examples
  - Brexit campaign in the UK (£350 million per week claim, ease of negotiating new trade agreements, “Breaking Point” poster, “punishment” budget, no need for “experts” etc.)
  - Donald Trump in the US (“Birther” scandal, claims about Muslims celebrating 9/11, Pope endorsing Trump, various stories about Hillary Clinton).



# A brief history of fake news



Home / UK

## Theresa May might have just had the worst day any politician has had on the campaign trail. Ever.

MAY 2ND, 2017 EMILY APPLE UK

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Today, a handful of individuals control our mainstream media. Mass media coverage is largely conservative. We want to create a counterpoint. An online media outlet that has a global outlook and reach. One that isn't afraid to challenge the status quo, to ask the hard questions, and to have an opinion.

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Our content focuses on news, ideas and key developments that impact democracy, equality and fairness.

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[e] [n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk](mailto:n.m.anstead@lse.ac.uk)

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# Why are we talking about fake news now?

- Events...
- Evolution away from traditional media system. Historically:
  - Mass media act as gate keepers for transfer of information. Enforce editorial standards. Limited opportunities for non-accepted ideas and arguments to be broadcast to mass public.
  - Mass media environment gives news consumers few choices of what information to consume (limited number of channels etc.).



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# Why are we talking about fake news now?

- Arguably, discussion of fake news is driven by the changing information eco-system (Chadwick, 2013).
  - Online environment makes it far easier for individuals and groups to publish content (anonymously if they choose)
  - Citizens can choose which news they want to consume.
- Other elements of this story are economic.
  - Self-definition of many new media firms (hosts of content rather than publishers).
  - “Clickbait” economic model of some online media.
  - Higher pressure and financial uncertainty in traditional news industry.



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# Why are we talking about fake news now?

- Many of the elements of this story are technical:
  - Concern about bots and automated distribution of content (see work of Phil Howard).
  - Role of algorithm in deciding which content users see.
  - Role of networks (one essay, by Kucharski, 2016 even likens it to a virus).
- Political and geo-political elements of the focus on fake news:
  - Partisan citizens in a period of renewed partisanship want news media that confirms their prejudices.
  - Geopolitical tensions and concern about external actors interfering in domestic political activities (especially Russia in western democracies).



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# Why are we talking about fake news now?

- So therefore, we can identify four “big” courses driving discussion of fake news:
  1. Technology (social media environment, bots);
  2. Balkanisation / filter bubble (self-selection, network effects, role of algorithms).
  3. Economics (new business models, collapse of “old” media).
  4. Politics (rise of populism, foreign interference).



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# How do we tackle fake news?

- One of the challenge of dealing with fake news is defining it.
  - **Obvious it is news which is fake...** But we need to define boundaries (recent report by Kennedy School of Government does not bother to do this...).
    - Does it include spin / public relations techniques employed by political parties / government (these go back a long way)? Does institutional setting matter (i.e. referendum vs normal government business)?
    - Ignoring a scientific consensus? (i.e. Global warming? If so, how do we define a consensus?).
    - What is the line between news and comment? Can some fake news be defined a polemical? Do such definitions matter?
    - How ideological is the idea of fake news? (There are examples on the left and the right).



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# How do we respond?

| Strategy                               | Positives  | Negatives  |
|--|--|--|
| Legal defence (“the Germany approach”) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uses full power of the state to prevent fake news.</li> <li>- Tackles irresponsibility of some social media companies.</li> <li>- Some precedent (Holocaust denial, denazification).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Danger of being very illiberal</li> <li>- Is it really enforceable? Slow and hard to use outside of national jurisdiction.</li> <li>- Not suitable in all countries (i.e. US).</li> </ul> |
| Media literacy defence                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Approach empowers the audience with skills.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long-term strategy.</li> <li>- Do audience want facts? (more on this later).</li> </ul>   |
| Fact checking defence                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Approach empowers the audience with information.</li> <li>- Can allow for point-by-point rebuttal.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assumes discourses can be combated with facts.</li> <li>- Does it reach right audience?</li> </ul>  |
| Corporate defence                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cooperative, involves working with companies.</li> <li>- Can lead to very rapid response, integrated with social media environment.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires major shift in cooperate attitude.</li> <li>- Would involve handing massive political power to private companies.</li> </ul>   |



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[t] @nickanstead

# But are we asking the right question?

- Politics has changed dramatically since the 1990s and early 2000s.
  - Lack of economic growth, increased living standards since the 2008 financial crisis.
  - Cultural alienation of some parts of western societies from globalised political settlement (Norris, 2017)
  - General hollowing out of political institutions and declining trust in politicians (Mair, 2013).
  - Weakening of institutions (i.e. European Union) and established political orthodoxy (free trade, liberal consensus).
  - Rise of populism as a counterpoint to liberal democratic consensus (Mudde, 2017).
  - “Re-starting” of history (contra Fukuyama, 1992).
- So therefore maybe discussion of fake news is a symptom not a cause of recent political events?
- Ask a different question: **why do citizens want to believe fake news stories?**



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[t] @nickanstead

# But are we asking the wrong question?



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[t] @nickanstead

# But are we asking the wrong question?



A screenshot of a tweet from Clay Shirky (@cshirky). The tweet text reads: "Seeing my timeline during the convention last night made me despair. We've brought fact-checkers to a culture war. Time to get serious." The tweet has 1,263 retweets and 2,140 likes. Below the text, there are icons for retweets, likes, and replies, along with a row of profile pictures of users who interacted with the tweet. The tweet is dated 12:20 PM - 22 Jul 2016. At the bottom of the tweet, there are icons for replies (63), retweets (1.3K), and likes (2.1K).

**Clay Shirky**   
@cshirky Follow

Seeing my timeline during the convention last night made me despair. We've brought fact-checkers to a culture war. Time to get serious.

RETWEETS **1,263**    LIKES **2,140**

12:20 PM - 22 Jul 2016

63    1.3K    2.1K

# So how should we respond?

- There are technical challenges in the new media environment BUT recent panic about fake news is ahistorical and mistakes symptoms for causes of problems with contemporary democracy.
- Fake news can therefore not be seen in isolation from wider problems with democracy, engagement and trust in political institutions.
  - Indeed to focus exclusively on fake news might be a distraction from these broader challenges.
  - Indeed, attempts to tackle fake news in isolation might actually make the problem worse.



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# So how should we respond?

- There are also academic challenges:
  - How do we define fake news?
    - In other words, do we need to put boundaries on legitimate terms of the debate? How do we do this?
  - Do we understand the effect that fake news has? On what segments of the population?
  - How do we study closed, personalised environments? (i.e. Facebook).
    - Do we need collaboration from firms? Do we have to follow Terms and Conditions produced by firms?



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# Final thought: why is fake news not (yet) important in UK General Election 2017?

- As yet, fake news has not featured in the ongoing UK general election.
- Does not seem, given the opinion polls, that it could play a meaningful role.
- Lack of a genuinely populist party / candidates running with a willingness to deploy fake news.
  - Institutionally, UK politics is relatively locked down, so limited opportunity for non-party actors to get involved.
- Major informational problem is different: lack of access to politicians offering meaningful policy prescriptions that they can be held accountable for.



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# Any questions?



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