Fake News, False Beliefs, and the Need for Truth in Journalism

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ABSTRACT: Many of U.S. President Donald Trump's business interests—and those of his family and close associates—either conflict or could conflict with his position as the country's top elected official. Despite concerns about the vitality of the journalism industry, these actual or potential conflicts have been reported in great detail across a number of journalism platforms. More concerning, however, are the partisan news organizations on both the right and left that deliberately sow social discord by exciting deeply polarized political tensions among the U.S. populous. Often described as "fake" news, these organizations produce reports that seem designed to create outrage among audiences instead of enlightenment. This paper draws upon social epistemology and information ethics to offer a truth-based ethos for journalism to help overcome this pernicious form of exploitation.

The press—and journalism in general—has been much maligned in its era of contraction and concentration for its inability to objectively and thoroughly report matters of civic importance. The Trump Administration would thus seem a dynamic challenge for the Fourth Estate. News coverage in the Trump era has made it somewhat clearer that there are partisan news organizations that make no effort to report truth in a holistic way, and that in some cases "fake" news organizations deliberately fabricate stories to create outrage at the peripheries of the political spectrum. However, this paper will put forth the argument that contrary to much general criticism, traditional journalists and news organizations are providing more than adequate information regarding these conflicts. What is still unclear is whether news audiences are as receptive to traditional news organizations as they are to partisan or even "fake" news that inundates social news feeds and lie as click bait across the web. I'll use a model of information ethics to make the case that truth and truthfulness must remain or regain their footholds as the standard for news dissemination, or we'll risk further exploitation at the hands of elected officials and their media partners who place political propaganda above meritorious information to sway public opinion in their favor.

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CONFLICTS

President Trump's vast wealth and broad business holdings are not a first among American presidents; John F. Kennedy, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush, and many others were exorbitantly wealthy presidents. What is unique about Trump is that his wealth sits in a globalized world where he has refused to relinquish ownership of his businesses that could bring great personal benefit to him, his close family, and allies because of his position as a public servant. In fact, it may be in direct conflict with the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution, which cites that anyone who holds a position of trust in the United States government must be free of certain types of foreign influence, most commonly financial influence.[1] A widely accepted account of conflicts of interest by Michael Davis is included in this Symposium:[2]

> A conflict of interest is a situation in which some person, whether an individual or corporate body, is in a relationship with another requiring him, her, or it to exercise judgment in the other's behalf when he, she, or it, has an interest tending to interfere with the proper exercise of judgment in that relationship

Trump, of course, is not the only "person" who can benefit from this position because he is not the only member of the administration who can draw upon its influence. His daughter Ivanka, his son-in-law Jared Kushner, and several others besides President Trump are poised to benefit from the trappings of Trump's office. Numerous news organizations have reported about the actual or potential conflicts of interest hovering around the White House. Some examples:

- Son-in-Law Jared Kushner's use of a federal visa program to raise as much as $150 million among Chinese investors for a real estate project wherein anyone who invests at least $500,000 in two luxury towers in New Jersey gets fast-tracked for an American visa.[3]

- Trump's planned expansion of his domestic hotel brand from being in five large U.S. markets to as many as 26.[4]

- The Trump Organization is in substantial debt to Deutsche Bank, which is itself in negotiations with the Justice Department about a multi-billion-dollar settlement for predatory lending practices.[5]

- Ivanka Trump received three Trademarks in China after having a state dinner with China's president.[6]

- Trump is accused of revealing sensitive national security information to Russian diplomats, relationships that he might have massaged for personal business interests and/or for avoiding political blackmail because of links between the Trump campaign and Russia's alleged hacking of the Democratic Party.[7]

The first four of these examples—and many other actual or potential conflicts of interest—would be far less suspect if Trump had placed his organization in a blind trust, but instead we have the first president in American history to fail even to disclose his tax documents. Worse yet, the fifth example above could result

in an instance in which the President conspired with Russians to meddle in the 2016 presidential election. The ordinary reaction, one would think, would be a massive loss of public trust and moral outrage with the President. Though that may be yet to come, Trump's May 7, 2017 Gallup approval ratings are roughly 10 percent below the historical presidential average (43 percent in the first week of May, 2017), but he maintains strong support from Republicans (84 percent), and very strong support from his November 2016 voters.[8] A phenomenon that may well point to at least a partial explanation: post-truth politics and journalism.

POST-TRUTH ERA, COGNITIVE BIAS AND PARTISAN MEDIA

According to the Oxford Dictionaries online, post-truth is: "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[9] The often-polarizing nature of political opinion has made political dialogue similar to the fanatical support of an athletic team: one roots for the team regardless of its competence or skill, heartily cheers its success and deflects its failures, and acts strongly in opposition to competitors or rivals. This form of tribalism seems to have subsumed rational skepticism among original Trump voters who may have greater reason to doubt Trump's presidential capacities after his first quarter in office. Despite Trump's deep flaws, his continued support seems to reflect commonly held cognitive biases that have been bolstered by different forms of mass media—partisan news organizations, "fake" news, and social media echo chambers.

PARTISAN NEWS EFFECTS

Some research suggests that partisan news—particularly with cable television— has a profound effect on political participation in the populous by activating extreme ends of each political spectrum.[10] Fox and MSNBC are frequently cited as two of the most partisan cable news networks, Fox with a conservative tone and MSNBC liberal. Despite the intuitive notion that the masses are entrenched in political identity, political scientist Matthew Levendusky argues in his 2013 journal article and 2014 op-ed that news organizations such as Fox and MSNBC appeal to only a small number of viewers. While many viewers will simply change channels when they disagree with a political angle, those who stay tuned-in tend to be voracious and politically active, which leads to political polarization.

> A generation ago, if ordinary Americans turned on the television at 6 p.m., they had basically one choice: to watch the evening news. They could have chosen to watch ABC, CBS, or NBC, but it wouldn't really have mattered, because they all basically gave the same news in a similar format. Today, if they did that, they would have hundreds of options, including not just the news, but also sports, movies, re-runs, and so forth. Even within news, they have a variety of choices. Not only would they have the major network news programs, but they would have many choices on cable, most notably the partisan outlets of Fox News and MSNBC (not to mention even more choices online). This choice of explicitly partisan outlets means that individuals can choose to hear messages that reinforce their beliefs, while avoiding those from alternative points of view, which some claim leads to polarization.[11]

Ultimately, Levendusky concludes that partisan news allows viewers to confidently confirm their existing beliefs. Those who are more extreme, he claims, tend to be more politically active than those who are more centrist. This increase in political activity—even if among a minority of the populace—therefore has a proportionally greater effect on national politics. It also harnesses at least one, if not several, cognitive biases: confirmation bias being the most prominent. Confirmation bias "connotes the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand."[12] This can be done actively, such as one who searches for agreement with his or her beliefs, or it can be passive, as when one gravitates towards agreement out of its relative familiarity and comfort.

However, as is the case with some instances of social media, the propaganda channels may seek out their audience rather than the reverse. Much has been made of the Facebook "echo chambers" created by algorithms that appeal to users by adjusting news feeds that are consistent with audience viewership habits. "In this work, using a massive quantitative analysis of Facebook, we show that information related to distinct narratives—conspiracy theories and scientific news—generates homogeneous and polarized communities (i.e., echo chambers) having similar information consumption patterns."[13]

Perhaps what is less well-known, though, are the "news" organizations that create and alter content dressed as news. *Buzzfeed News* completed an investigation that showed that several hyperpartisan "news" organizations with Facebook pages—among them, *Liberal Society* and *Conservative 101*—drew their content from the same source with only minor modifications of the content; modifications that served to reverse their political perspective for their respective audiences.[14] Both publications' content came from American News LLC of Miami, which also provides content for *American News* and *Democratic Review*, also highly partisan sites known for producing "fake" news, such as actor Denzel Washington's fabricated endorsement of Donald Trump on *American News*.[15] Their purpose, of course, is to use sensationalism to increase traffic for advertising revenue, and audiences have predictably devoured it. But is it the role of journalism to give the public what it wants or what it needs?

INFORMATION ETHICS AND TRUTH

So far, we have several layers of communication disseminators and receivers regarding journalism's role in reporting Trump's conflicts of interest. We have traditional news organizations that subscribe to some degree of objectivity or fairness; we have partisan news organizations that deliberately support a subjective viewpoint; we have fake news organizations that deceive audiences to generate advertising revenue; and we have varying audiences that have different expectations of what type of "news" they desire. It seems the great equalizer in sorting the ethical practices of both disseminator and civically active audience is with truth or truthfulness. One way of parsing this divide is to frame the communication in terms of whether they qualify as information, which I will shortly describe.

It is my contention that information—meaning content used to inform—commits its disseminators to both epistemological and ethical standards.[16] Epistemologically, informing someone requires at the very least the disseminator is communicating a justified belief, if not bona fide knowledge. Therefore, it ought to sit within the epistemological conditions of knowledge, specifically, that of truth or at least truthfulness, the distinction being that the former is an inarguable fact about the world, and the latter at least offers a justification for believing it is truth in the absence of incontrovertible proof.

Those epistemic criteria frame an ideal of journalistic objectivity as well as the independence, reliability, accuracy and trustworthiness of the sources that generate the information. This epistemology of information logically implies certain ethical values, most prominently accuracy and sincerity. Thus, in terms of its dissemination, information has an intrinsic normative structure that commits everyone involved in its creation, dissemination and consumption to epistemological and ethical norms.

Truthfulness is a complex and contentious concept, and a foundational moral value for journalists. Therefore, it is crucial that we carefully argue its strength as an objective good. In Truth and Truthfulness, Bernard Williams[17] argued against various thinkers who doubt the existence of objective truth; that is, the position that truth does invariably exist in a way cognitively accessible to humans. Williams states that the values truth and truthfulness, and their corresponding virtues—sincerity and accuracy—are indispensable to the human social world. Williams's understanding of truth is similar to the way journalists often conceive of truth: a concept related to the virtues of sincerity and accuracy. Information is an objective commodity capable of yielding knowledge or, as I will soon argue, at least justified belief.

First, journalists ideally must be accurate and truthful in their reports of facts and relevant nonfactual claims, but they must pursue and usually procure verification of those claims. Second, they must be sincere in their intentions. To better understand these concepts, it is useful to appeal to epistemology for the strong interrelationships between knowledge and truth as the concept of information illustrates. A widely acknowledged, though still contentious, definition of knowledge is justified true belief.[18] Though journalists do not always deal directly with knowledge because of the often-unverifiable data with which they work, there must be epistemic standards to help journalists determine what information is newsworthy.

Journalists call this approach to justification by the term "objectivity," which relies on certain forms of verifiability or accuracy. However, if newsworthy information is not required to be knowledge per se, what epistemic standards must it meet to be newsworthy? One possibility is to separate the "truth" condition from the definition of knowledge. Thus, there is an alternative epistemic standard—justified belief—which maintains its dedication to truthfulness. Although a "justified belief" does lose epistemic value by eliminating truth per se, it can nonetheless retain substantial informational value.

Beliefs can be held for a variety of reasons, both good and bad reasons, but justified beliefs must at least meet a set of justificatory criteria. In the domain

of news, because there are instances in which something potentially less than knowledge is still publicly important, there must be justificatory criteria for publishing information based on whether it is worth believing. This objective can be achieved when the information is supported by reasonable, though incomplete, evidence. This evidence must be sufficient to form a justified opinion that the information is probably true; that is, it must be sincere and accurate within the means of verification available to the journalist at the time.

Given the definition of information just offered, such "information" can only be conceived as merely potential or provisional information. Thus, what are some possible justificatory criteria for evaluating "information" that are not necessarily sufficient for knowledge because its truth is uncertain? Several scholars have explored this type of question in social epistemology, particularly focusing on the justification for beliefs regarding social phenomena. In this literature, there is a distinction relevant to the aforementioned justification issue in journalism. As Goldman[19] claims, there are basic sources of justification for holding beliefs such as perception, memory, or inductive inference. These sources are allegedly more reliable, for instance, a first-hand witness of an event. There also are derivative sources of justification, such as when a journalist hears President Trump's denial of his connections with Russia during his campaign. In such cases, we cannot be certain that Trump's statement is truthful, but we can be certain that Trump said it and we can know when and where it was said. Because journalism often must rely on derivative sources of testimony for news, how do journalists evaluate derivative sources of information as newsworthy?

The first instance is somewhat arbitrary. In many cases, journalists cannot ignore some testifiers merely because of their political or social influence (e.g., elected officials, thought leaders). The justification for publishing rests more in the legitimacy of a representative democracy—voters have endowed them with news legitimacy.

The second instance is also potentially weak from an epistemic standpoint. In this case, a person's testimony may become relevant as a matter of luck. For instance, a lone bystander to a publicly important event would make that person's testimony relevant regardless of her/his other traits, barring some obvious disqualification such as pathological liar. The person simply had access to information that no one else had and must be (carefully) relied upon to provide his or her testimony.

The third instance is much stronger epistemically. It requires asking whether certain traits (e.g., trustworthiness) of a testifier and/or the quality of the testimony provide a justification for holding the belief espoused by the testifier. Thus, one proposition about the justificatory value of testimony, called reductionism, asserts that "a hearer H is justified or warranted in accepting a speaker's report or factual statement only if H is justified in believing that the speaker is reliable and sincere, where the latter justification rests on sources other than the testimony itself."[20]

TRUMP'S RUSSIA DOSSIER

Buzzfeed News published an unverified dossier alleging Trump had been courted by Russia for years prior to his campaign which included allegations of Russian hacking of the Democratic Party and sexual scandals. Buzzfeed took the unusual step of publishing the dossier before it could verify the veracity and source of the report. "The dossier, which is a collection of memos written over a period of months, includes specific, unverified, and potentially unverifiable allegations of contact between Trump aides and Russian operatives, and graphic claims of sexual acts documented by the Russians."[21] Numerous national publications were aware of the dossier but they initially refused to publish details because they couldn't be verified.

Buzzfeed disagreed with the sentiment that it should be withheld, despite its admission that there are errors in the report. "Now BuzzFeed News is publishing the full document so that Americans can make up their own minds about allegations about the president-elect that have circulated at the highest levels of the US government."[22] The dossier was apparently collected by a former British intelligence agent who worked on behalf a Republican organization that opposed Trump's candidacy for president. Once Buzzfeed published its article and the full document, CNN also reported it in less detail.

Ultimately, the story became about Buzzfeed's editorial policies as much as the allegations against Trump. Few if any of the salacious details were either corroborated or falsified. On one hand, Buzzfeed took heat for being a clickbait generator rather than a legitimate news source. On the other hand, it reported on documents being investigated by U.S. national security leaders. In a sense, this puts the dossier's publication in the heart of this paper's discussion about journalism's commitment to information.

Citing a lack of verifiable evidence, news organizations such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* stood by their "gatekeeper" roles rather than leaving the public to deduce its merit. Herein shines an old argument about journalism and its place as a profession—or at least, its commitment to professionalism. News organizations that commit to accuracy, verification and truthfulness hold a gatekeeping role in part because it's what is expected of them: the public may regularly condemn journalists for their negative reports and opinionated criticism, but when journalists are right, the public benefits from this even if a portion is angered by the truth. When they make no effort towards quality control, they are less likely to report the truth, then the public struggles with indeterminacy and falsehoods, which stokes the fire about journalism's alleged flagging value and ultimate demise.

In this instance, traditional journalists withheld reporting about the dossier because they could not trust that the dossier was accurate nor that its source was sincere. The former British spy and author of the dossier, Richard Steele, later commented that the dossier was not for public eyes.[23] Others in the intelligence industry confirmed that intelligence documents are often riddled with rumor and innuendo and are known to be as such. Apparently, so too did journalists

who were appropriately trained in conveying information instead of spreading propaganda.

CONCLUSION

In reporting on Trump's conflicts of interest, traditional news media such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and others, have used standards of reporting that allowed them to provide bona fide information to the public, at least in the weaker sense that reporters had strong reason to believe that the conflicts were verifiable or at least have a strong potential to manifest. When the evidence is there, it is attributed, and when the potential is there for a conflict, but incomplete evidence, it is labeled as such or not reported. To the contrary, partisan news organizations deflect concerns that should matter to the public and will affect the public wellbeing. Fake news organizations that aim to build outrage are at least as damaging as partisan news organizations because audiences often don't realize the deliberate inaccuracies embedded in them. Though audience skepticism of traditional journalism organizations may be high, and confirmation bias may reduce their positive effect on audience opinion, if the United States is to maintain democratic values, news organizations committed to reporting information rather than propaganda remain invaluable.

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