Introduction

Donald Trump did not invent the concept of "fake news." But he certainly popularized it during his time as president, while fueling the rise of the "post-truth" era. Nowhere was this clearer than in the early 2017 exchange between *NBC* "Meet the Press" reporter Chuck Todd and Trump's senior adviser Kellyanne Conway over the president's inauguration crowd size. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer falsely claimed that the crowd "was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration," prompting a tense exchange between Todd and Conway. Todd asked Conway, "why the president asked the White House Press Secretary to come out in front of the podium for the first time and utter a falsehood? Why did he do that? It undermines credibility of the entire White House press office on day one." Conway responded, somewhat flippantly, that Todd should not "be so over dramatic about it," offering, "You're saying it's a falsehood . . . our Press Secretary – gave alternative facts to that." Todd rejected the notion that alternative factual realities can exist simultaneously: "Alternative facts? Look alternative facts aren't facts, they are falsehoods" (Todd, 2017).

The Trump administration was clearly operating according to the notion that it was not journalists' role to challenge administration talking points. Conway lectured Todd, "Your job is not to call things ridiculous that are said by our press secretary and our president. That's not your job." For Todd and other reporters, the administration's reliance on obvious falsehoods put them in a difficult position. Aerial photos clearly showed Trump's 2017 inauguration crowd was smaller than Obama's 2009 crowd (Robertson and Farley, 2017). Todd felt compelled to point out the administration's clumsy and obvious falsehood, short of having his own credibility undermined. Todd retorted in response to Conway's efforts to dodge his question about the administration's inauguration disinformation: "Can you please answer the question? Why did he [the president] do this? You have not answered it – it's only one question" (Todd, 2017).

This heated exchange is important in relation to both fake news and post-truth. It is just one of several examples of the administration's efforts to paint the media as fundamentally dishonest and as disseminators of disinformation

1

and fake news. The administration saw itself as exposing reporters' alleged efforts to manipulate the mass public. The exchange was also ironic, as it was fueled by an administration that itself was a serial purveyor of disinformation, routinely amplified by social media, right-wing media outlets, and in mainstream news media – even as professional reporters challenged the truthfulness of administration statements. The irony of complaining about fake news while being a prime disseminator of false information was apparently not lost on members of the administration, including Trump's White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, who claimed in 2018, "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit" (Illing, 2020). The Trump administration appeared to take this strategy to heart. As the *Washington Post*'s fact-checkers estimated, the president put forward 30,573 untruths, lies, false, or misleading claims during his four years in office, "averaging about 21 erroneous claims a day" (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly, 2021). As a strategy of manipulation, it is not entirely clear how well it worked with administration critics, who were already likely to dismiss presidential propaganda and disinformation, although Trump's lies played well with his supporters.

The exchange between Todd and Conway suggests that concepts such as truth and fake news were heavily contested during the Trump years. That contestation makes a sober assessment of "fake news" all the more important in the post-truth era – with "post-truth" defined as political efforts to get past the notion that empirically verifiable facts matter, or that they should be the basis for informing political discourse and public policy. Contemporary US politics is consumed by the discourse of fake news. And the ways in which Americans talk (and write) about fake news is the subject of growing attention in popular and scholarly discussions, particularly following the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Fake news is not a new concept, however, as the notion that the public is subject to various forms of false or misleading information is long-standing.

Readers might wonder why one would utilize the term "fake news," and make the topic a subject of scholarly inquiry. My answer is simple. Like it or not, fake news as a concept has entered the public lexicon and has become a regular part of national discourse in relation to politics and the media. Since the term has become a part of the language and inextricably linked to US political and media culture, there is a real need to understand what it is, and to try and avoid abuse of the term. Without a coherent understanding of what fake news is, it will not be possible to have intelligent, informed discussions about it. Since a primary responsibility of scholars is furthering public knowledge about important sociopolitical issues, it should be clear that a thorough investigation into the meaning of fake news is essential.

This book seeks to answer numerous questions regarding the rise of a national political discourse that is consumed by the phenomenon of fake news. By "the phenomenon of fake news," I am referring to the ways in which government officials, the media, and the public discuss fake news in American social, cultural, and political discourse. I examine various words and phrases that are adopted by officials, by the media, and by the public, which both clarify and obscure understandings of what Americans mean when they talk about "fake news."

I seek to answer five main questions. First, what does it mean to talk of "fake news" in terms of how it is understood in American politics and culture? Second, what factors contribute to continued concerns with fake news? Third, what are the roles of government officials, journalists, and the public in understanding, disseminating, and challenging fake news? Fourth, how is fake news utilized in various institutions of American communication, and what is the role of traditional news media and social media in either challenging or disseminating it? Fifth, how is fake news utilized in the real world of American politics, pertaining to specific case studies over the last two decades? Finally, I conclude the book by discussing how we can better equip ourselves to recognize and combat various forms of fake news. Based on these points, this book begins by examining competing understandings of fake news, how they have emerged, and why they are important. The book then transitions into a deeper exploration of specific forms of fake news – including those that are the most relevant to American political discourse.

In exploring the fake news phenomenon, I draw on the notion that individuals' understandings of the world are socially constructed based on the discourses with which they engage, the information to which they are exposed, and the overall political climate in which they operate. This book draws upon social construction theory as an overarching framework through which to better understand fake news. Essentially, the public's understandings of fake news are the product of the language and discourses they adopt, and particular ways that they discuss the concept, in specific periods in time, and in specific sociopolitical contexts. This book is devoted to exploring those sociopolitical contexts, including analyses of how fake news is understood by political leaders, journalists, the public, and how the concept relates to real-world case studies. Exploring the sources of information Americans consume is important at a time when fake news has become a regular focus of political discourse. The extent to which a population is able (or unable) to form rational, coherent, and informed understandings of politics is impacted by how Americans deliberate. Which is to say that the quality of American democracy is significantly impacted by the quality of political discourse.

There are several factors that impact how people think and talk about politics, including individuals' preexisting beliefs and values, media consumption patterns, demographic factors, partisanship, and ideology. By ideology, I am referring to the standard left-center-right spectrum that defines contemporary politics, including conservative and reactionary politics on the right, so-called moderates in the center, and liberal and radical politics on the left. As for partisanship, I use the term to refer to: (1) Individuals who self-identify as Republicans, independents (or nonpartisan), or Democrats; and (2) The political parties that operate as institutions to reinforce the ideology and goals of partisans in government and among Americans more generally. Parties matter in relation to how people are socialized in familial and other settings, regarding the type of media people consume (for outlets like MSNBC and Fox that are favorable to the Democratic and Republican parties), and for how Americans look at the news and politics.

Research indicates that individuals are driven by "motivated reasoning," preexisting biases (Taber and Lodge, 2006), and prior attitudes (Page and Shapiro, 1992; DiMaggio, 2017) that impact how people interpret events of the day. With the persistence of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers," individuals' reinforce their preexisting ideological and partisan attitudes, insulating them from challenge, intensifying polarization, and enabling the dissemination of extremist content (Sunstein, 2007; Pariser, 2012; Settle, 2019; Baysha, 2020). Prior attitudes are often so powerful that individuals display signs of a "backfire effect," refusing to consider competing views when confronted with them (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). Some scholars even find there may be a role that neural systems play in the brain in reinforcing motivated reasoning, helping to block individuals from considering viewpoints that are seen as competing with their prior attitudes (Kaplan, Gimbel, and Harris, 2016). As I show, however, the quality of political information is also central to understanding how Americans deliberate and form political opinions. There is an independent place for traditional news media and social media to impact political attitudes, even after accounting for factors such as personal partisanship, ideology, and various demographic factors.

Main Contributions

The first major theme of this book is that there is no single definition of fake news, due to the many ways the concept is discussed and understood in political discourse. Since our understandings of fake news are socially constructed, they are open to contestation by competing political actors and groups. I document how there are many contested definitions of fake news that have emerged, related to the ways in which political officials (particularly Donald Trump), journalists, and the American public discuss and understand

it. I identify at least seven different (alleged) types of fake news that are discussed in US political discourse. These types are identifiable by studying fake news, as discussed by government officials, journalists, and the public. They include:

1. Fabricated stories that originate from otherwise reputable news sources.
2. Fabricated stories that originate from fake news mediums posing as legitimate information sources.
3. Sensational or false content from tabloid "news" sources.
4. Spin and propaganda – via false rhetoric and deceptive statements – with the potential to manipulate an audience, and which originate directly from powerful government officials or business actors and are repeated in the media.
5. Allegations of "bias" against the media, commonly lamented by conservative pundits and Republican political officials, suggesting that journalists traffic in distortions or one-sided arguments and information.
6. "Soft news" comedy programs, which long billed themselves – particularly before Trump's rise to political office – as fake news.
7. The position, pioneered by President Donald Trump and echoed by his supporters, that any message the president views negatively is "fake news."

A second theme is that public understandings of fake news are context-specific and shift over time. This point is in line with social construction theory and the understanding that political discourse determines how fake news is discussed in American political culture. The understanding of fake news in US media reporting was largely confined in the 2000s and early-to-mid-2010s to discussions of it as government propaganda and spin, false stories reported by reputable news outlets, and "soft news" comedy programming in the pre-Trump era. But the United States had moved by the late 2010s and early 2020s to a more unwieldy, expansive understanding of fake news, including most of the definitions provided in theme one earlier. Despite the proliferation of competing definitions of fake news, some understandings are more prominent than others when examining President Donald Trump's rhetoric, media reporting, and public opinion.

Third, in seeking to better understand the factors that fuel various definitions of fake news, I explore case studies documenting the competing ways the concept is discussed within and across historical periods. I identify the following developments as major factors driving public discourse on fake news:

1. The long-standing and intensifying cultural trait of anti-intellectualism that is prominent in US politics, and which drives various false claims that emerge to prominence in political discourse over time.

2. The rising phenomenon of ideological extremism in US party politics, primarily on the American right and within the Republican Party (Hacker and Pierson, 2005; Hetherington and Weiler, 2009; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2016), via the growing prominence of mass paranoia, conspiratorial thinking, and misinformation that was fueled by President Trump (Swire et al., 2017), and its negative consequences for political discourse and public opinion. Of specific interest here are numerous conspiracy theories, including Sarah Palin's "death panel" claim in the debate over health care reform, "birtherism" and the belief that President Barack Obama is not a citizen of the United States, the Pizzagate-QAnon conspiracies, which were fueled via social media communications; and various Covid-19-related conspiracies and myths, which proliferated in social media venues.

3. The rise of plutocracy in the United States, which has empowered business interests to assert their political power and impact on political discourse and public thought. The plutocracy question is explored in relation to the effectiveness of the fossil fuel industry in undermining public beliefs in anthropogenic climate change during the 2000s and early 2010s. I also discuss the limits of plutocratic politics, via the public's eventual pushback against climate change denialism from the 2010s onward.

With the long-standing official source bias in the news media, "objective" reporting was historically characterized by deference to governmental sources of information, and the reluctance of journalists to add their own first-person narration into reporting. "Objectivity" through an official source bias is associated with the (largely) uncritical dissemination of government spin and propaganda (DiMaggio, 2010). Reaffirming the official source bias, I analyze US political discourse in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I document the ways that most media outlets failed to challenge the Bush administration's claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and ties to terrorism.

As a fourth point, I argue that the various ways fake news is discussed in the United States, and the ways in which disinformation and misinformation have become commonplace in American politics, speak to a deterioration of social and political discourse over the last decade. The problem of fake news has been confounded by the rise of social media as prime venues for disseminating conspiracies, falsehoods, and propaganda in the 2010s and beyond. With the declining influence of traditional media "gatekeepers" (reporters and fact-checkers) in filtering out blatantly fraudulent assertions and conspiracies, US political discourse has devolved as disinformation and misinformation become increasingly common in relation to important societal issues. Despite the potential for using social media as a means of political organizing and

activism, these venues thus far appear highly suspect in terms of their struggles in facilitating substantive and informed discussions of political, economic, and social matters.

This Book's Audience

This book will appeal to multiple audiences. First, it is targeted to general readers who are interested in the topics of fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and post-truth in US society. This audience includes those who are interested in politics, government, political communication, the media, public opinion, and current events. At a time when fake news has become a household term, clear-headed intellectual and scholarly work, written in an easily digestible way with mass appeal, is badly needed.

A second audience is advanced undergraduate and graduate students. But the book is also written in an accessible manner as to appeal to college freshman and sophomores. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of this work, it is also meant to appeal to multiple groups of students, including those in political science, sociology, communication studies, linguistics, and political psychology.

Finally, it is written for social science scholars and is intended to further scholarly knowledge in the areas of propaganda, misinformation, and fake news studies. I utilized a variety of empirical research methods, including content analysis of media coverage and presidential rhetoric (Twitter posts on fake news), historically based case studies covering major sociopolitical events, and statistical regression analyses of public opinion polling data to measure how news and social media consumption are associated with various political attitudes. I also rely on regression analysis of survey data to uncover statistical relationships between various demographic groups (based on gender, age, education, income, race, political party, and ideology) and behavior on the one hand (specifically media consumption habits), and opinions about the media, politics, and fake news on the other. Since the specifics of my statistical findings will likely be viewed as esoteric and uninteresting to general readers, they appear in detailed appendices at the end of each chapter. These appendices allow scholars to engage in the details of how I conducted my research.

Chapter 1: The Age of Post-Truth Politics

This chapter provides a review of basic definitions for my readers, including discussions of fake news, post-truth, propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation. I closely engage with social construction theory, related to how common understandings of politics and society are created and maintained

through political rhetoric, the media, discourse, socialization, and commonly held political values. Social construction theory is important because of what it can tell us about fake news, particularly the competing ways that different groups of Americans construct understandings of the concept based on partisanship, ideology, and how they are socialized.

Next, I review other works of scholarship that relate directly and indirectly to fake news. This book is situated within a larger sociohistorical framework recognizing the history of American war propaganda pertaining to US official rhetoric, the news media, and public opinion. I discuss how propaganda has been used to manipulate the public into supporting US foreign conflicts, with an eye toward understanding what conditions fuel rising public rejection of these wars. Outside of the historical propaganda literature, I review recent works covering post-truth, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation. I also look at the rise of "new media" – particularly social media – and the impact they have on rising public misinformation in American politics. I review competing works that discuss the potential of social media to empower and disempower the public. I do not deny that social media are used to connect people to politics and each other and to help organize social movements. But they have also fueled a political culture of paranoia, conspiracies, and anti-intellectualism, which are perpetuated by rising disinformation embraced by both political parties – but primarily on the American right.

Chapter 2: The Phenomenon of Fake News, Part 1 – Donald Trump's Twitter Politics

The contemporary right – and right-wing pundits in particular – have led the charge in promoting anti-intellectualism in US political discourse. In this chapter, I review the role of Donald Trump and the right-wing media punditry in cultivating public distrust for journalists, scholars, and other experts. That anti-intellectualism, I show, widely resonated with Trump's base. Chapter 2 reviews Trump's use of Twitter as a venue for constructing a particular meaning of fake news. Trump utilized Twitter – prior to being banned in early 2021 – to promote right-wing values, communicate with and cultivate support from his base, attack the media, and promote falsehoods. I explore how he worked to stigmatize, manage, and suppress the "fake news" media, while examining years of his Twitter content as president, to better understand how he socially constructed meanings of the "fake news" media for his supporters. I identify main themes in his tweets targeting journalists, including lamentations about Russiagate, name-calling, charges of treason, claims about incivility, complaining about poor quality reporting, charges of liberal bias, and allegations that journalists were not reporting on the allegedly miraculous

Trump economy and polls that supposedly demonstrated Trump's popularity with the mass public. A review of national polling data documents how Trump's Twitter attacks on the media resonated strongly with his supporters, who hold negative views of journalists, support government censorship of the media, and balkanize themselves in a right-wing media echo chamber.

Chapter 3: The Phenomenon of Fake News, Part 2 – The News Media Respond to Trump

In Chapter 3, I document how the meaning of fake news has significantly changed over time – particularly concerning how it is reported on in the news media, reinforcing the power of social construction. First, I look at how fake news was understood during the 2000s and 2010s – prior to the Trump era – in the "newspaper of record" – the *New York Times* – a term referring to a major national newspaper with a mass circulation and that is viewed as an authoritative source by the public. I discuss how fake news was primarily understood in three ways – as related to fabricated stories passed off as real news events, as entertainment content pertaining to current events, and as government propaganda masquerading as journalism. Further, the US media's understanding of fake news shifted over the years, and by the time Trump took office. My comprehensive analysis of the *New York Times*' coverage of fake news in the mid-to-late 2010s finds that the paper defined the concept in many ways, compared to Trump's various definitions, with little overlap between the paper and the former president. Editorially, the paper emphasizes conventional definitions of fake news that avoid understanding it as a form of propaganda that operates in service of the state and official interests. I also examine various competing definitions of fake news in other media venues, providing further evidence that the social construction of fake news is a contested phenomenon. I look at US partisan cable media, alternative left and right-wing media, and social media venues – each of which puts forward its own unique interpretation of what fake news means.

Chapter 4: The Phenomenon of Fake News, Part 3 – Public Opinion and Contested Meanings

Understanding how the meaning of fake news is socially constructed and contested requires looking at how the public understands the concept. Chapter 4 analyzes public opinion surveys, to provide a better understanding of how Americans define fake news. I show that concern with fake news is pervasive among Americans despite a majority who struggle to define precisely what it means. I identify the many ways that the phenomenon of fake news is contested by Americans, with at least nine different definitions for the

concept being embraced by large segments of the public. I examine where concerns with fake news are likely to originate, identifying statistical predictors of public concern with the phenomenon. Such concerns are more likely to be expressed by privileged sociodemographic groups, heavier media consumers, and those with high levels of media distrust – the last factor itself appearing to be a function of right-wing partisan and ideological socialization. I tie together the chapter, first by examining Americans' thoughts about how to best combat fake news. Second, I focus on a few definitions of fake news that I argue are the most practically significant out of the nine identified in the chapter – those related to reporters' overreliance on official (corporate and governmental) sources in producing the news, partisan biases in the news, and the rise of conspiracy content in various media sources. These forms of bias are central to the last three chapters of the book, which examine applied case studies that relate to fake news in numerous ways.

Chapter 5: Fake News as Propaganda – The Bush and Obama Years

The social construction of reality through fake news comes in many forms, including the propaganda of the powerful, as exercised against the public. Chapter 5 looks at two cases of such disinformation – the 2003 Iraq war and climate change in the 2000s and onward. I look at how political and economic actors manipulate the news media to promote disinformation favorable to their foreign policy and business interests, in the process "manufacturing consent" of the mass public (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). With Iraq, I examine the initial success of the Bush administration in selling the US invasion through the media, producing growing support for the war among the news consuming public, and based on notions that Iraq possessed WMDs and ties to terrorism. Efforts to maintain support for war were less successful over time, however, as the public was increasingly sensitized to rising casualties and the financial cost of the war, as the United States failed to find WMDs and as the war was increasingly seen as unwinnable and immoral. I also examine how the fossil fuel industry utilized "false balancing" as a news management technique for encouraging mass confusion in relation to climate change, pitting climate change skeptics against individuals recognizing the realities of a warming planet. Through an examination of the "climategate" case study and cap-and-trade legislation in the late 2000s, I document how reactionary political narratives dominated the news, driving increased public opposition to efforts to address climate change. Increased public attention to the news on cap-and-trade was associated with growing resistance to congressional action on combating the rising climate threat. But public skepticism, which reached a high point in the late 2000s and early 2010s, receded by the mid-to-late 2010s