Political Elites' Use of Fake News Discourse
Across Communications Platforms

KATE FARHALL
RMIT University, Australia

ANDREA CARSON
La Trobe University, Australia

SCOTT WRIGHT
The University of Melbourne, Australia

ANDREW GIBBONS
The University of Texas at Austin, USA

WILLIAM LUKAMTO
The University of Melbourne, Australia

"Fake news" has become a global term since Donald Trump's election as President of the United States. President Trump adopted what we describe as a "discourse of fake news" to attack and discredit news media and political rivals, which is suggested to have been reproduced by politicians in other national contexts. This article investigates whether Australian politicians adopt a fake news discourse. To do so, data are gathered over six months after Trump's election from four political communications fora : parliamentary debates, social media (Facebook and Twitter), press, and politicians' websites. We find fake news discourse is predominantly the domain of conservatives. Frequent users employ fake news discourse to delegitimize primarily the media, but also political opponents. Australian politicians' use of fake news discourse is rare, but it is amplified by news media. Concerningly, it is seldom contested. We argue this has negative consequences for public debate and trust in media and political institutions.

Keywords: fake news, political communication, media trust, Australian politics, journalism, weaponization

Kate Farhall: katherine.farhall@rmit.edu.au
Andrea Carson: a.carson@latrobe.edu.au
Scott Wright: scott.wright@unimelb.edu.au
Andrew Gibbons: agibbons@austin.utexas.edu
William Lukamto: wlukamto@student.unimelb.edu.au
Date submitted: 2018–10–09

Fake news circulated online extensively during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, leading to speculation this might have influenced the result (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). U.S. president-elect Donald Trump weaponized this term, "fake news," perhaps to initially undermine concerns about fake news during the election campaign, and then to attack and discredit mainstream news media and political rivals (McNair, 2018, p. 91). This was exemplified in January 2017 at Trump's first press conference as president-elect when he shouted, "You are fake news!" at a CNN reporter, from whom he refused to take questions (Carson, 2017). Trump's first tweet to specifically mention "fake news" appeared in December 2016, as stories about online fake news became more prominent. In the next year, Trump used the phrase more than 160 times.[1]

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that the phrase "fake news" has been "appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable" (p. 5). Although anecdotal evidence supports this, no systematic analyses exist of whether, and if so, how, politicians beyond the U.S. might use the discourse of fake news. In the same way that the Americanization of election campaigning was shaped by national cultures and political systems (Scammell, 1995), fake news discourse may manifest distinctly in different locations. McNair (2018) argues that "fake news" can be used in deliberate ways for strategic political ends, labeling this "weaponization" and asserting that the current information ecosystem facilitates this strategic political usage.

The discourse of fake news can similarly be weaponized for political gain. Research shows that political elites' use of the term "fake news" negatively affects individuals' trust in news media. This has significant implications for liberal democracies, including for the coexistence of diverse perspectives, the discussion of actual mis- or disinformation, media trust, and the democratic process, which relies on a well-informed citizenry (Brummette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Messner, 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2018). This finding underlines the importance of examining fake news terminology usage by political elites beyond the U.S.

This article addresses these issues by analyzing whether fake news is "weaponized" for political ends by Australian politicians. It examines federal politicians' use of the terms "fake news," "post-truth," and "alternative facts," which when combined, we argue form a fake news discourse. We contend that these three terms comprise the discourse of fake news due to connections made among them in previous academic work, and the relative simultaneity of their entry into public discourse (Brennen, 2017). Although nuanced differences exist among the three, when weaponized they all indicate the untrustworthiness of their target and result in the "production of confusion" (Cooke, 2017, p. 212).

To test for these phenomena, we apply content analyses over a six-month period following Trump's electoral victory to four fora of political discourse: parliamentary debates, social media (Facebook and Twitter), daily mainstream press, and politicians' websites. We find that fake news discourse is used infrequently by a vocal minority of Australian politicians—mostly on the political right—primarily to attack the media. Concerningly, we find that this political behavior is largely unchallenged by the subject of the attacks: the media. This article is structured as follows: We build on broader literature around strategic political communication involving politicians criticizing the media. We then examine current debates about

---

[1] See Trump's Twitter archive (http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/).

fake news as concept and lexicon, before outlining our methods, data, and results. We conclude with implications of our findings.

Attack the Dog

Attacking the media is an established political tactic (Crawford, 2006). Generally, politicians' critiques of the media fall into two categories. The first targets media institutions and the culture they foster. An example is Tony Blair's (2007) famous speech where he argued the media were "like a feral beast just tearing people and reputations to bits" (pp. 478–479). Or former Australian prime minister (PM) Malcolm Turnbull calling for a shift from "aggressive" to "forensic" interviewing (Bourke & Whitbourn, 2015). The second type of political criticism is designed to influence audience perceptions of the media. The discourse of fake news fits this second strand. Research has suggested that "complaints about news coverage are at least partly strategic," and one possible reason "is that the criticisms represent an attempt by conservative elites to cast doubt about the credibility of news media in the minds of voters" (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999, p. 55). Experimental findings have shown that "elite attacks [on the media] increase perceptions of bias in the direction of the attack . . . even when no bias exists" (Smith, 2010, p. 332).

In practice, these two types of criticism overlap because they can affect both the public and journalists. The inherent tension that Blumler and Gurevitch (1981) described between politicians and journalists has arguably been exacerbated as politicians increasingly adapt to media logics motivated by conflict, negativity, personalization, and market-driven news (Brants, de Vreese, Moller, & van Praag, 2010). Politicians believe "their activities have to be geared toward the media," necessitating "stable cooperations" with journalists, while simultaneously creating a dependent relationship (Maurer, 2011, p. 44). However, there has been a cultural shift away from this symbiotic relationship to one of

> mistrust and cynicism. In [politicians'] perception, journalists are too event driven and too eager for power struggles or for setting the political agenda themselves, and they are interpreting political reality more than covering the political issues and policy decisions in a substantial way. (Brants et al., 2010, p. 37)

Although the fractious relationship between politicians and journalists is longstanding, how politicians attack the media and journalists in their public communications is understudied. Most existing studies focus on how politicians attack each other (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997); how the media "attack" politicians (Lloyd, 2004); or on journalists' and politicians' attitudes toward each other (Brants et al., 2010). We now turn to examine elite attacks on the media in the Australian context specifically.

Killing the Messenger in Australia

The relationship between Australian politicians and the media is a complex mix of incestuousness and brazen attacks (Griffen-Foley, 2003; Tiffen, 1990). Research has focused on attacks on the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), particularly on accusations of bias from the political right, echoing the "liberal bias" critique found in the U.S. (McNair, Flew, Harrington, & Swift, 2017). Studies conclude that politicians "have deliberately used the accusation of bias to bully the ABC into taking

a more conservative line," and at times ABC management has been "strongly inclined to cooperate with government" (Turner, 2005, pp. 98, 103).

In 2014, the ABC received sustained criticism by then conservative PM Tony Abbott who argued the ABC was taking "everyone's side but Australia's" (Ireland, 2014, para. 1). Abbott reignited criticism after Islamist Zaky Mallah asked a question of a government minister on the panel show *Q&A*, labeling this an act of "betrayal" by the ABC and compelling government ministers to boycott *Q&A* (Ireland, 2014). McNair et al. (2017) conclude these attacks were "close to a state of moral panic, albeit manufactured and politically motivated" (p. 183). Turner (2005) argues that commercial broadcasters escape these political attacks, despite surveys finding more Australians trust the ABC, as governments are "unwilling to offend them unnecessarily" (p. 98). Although there is a long history of Australian politicians attacking the media, few studies have investigated how they do so in the digital age. Although, Fuller, Jolly, and Fisher's (2018) analysis of former PM Malcolm Turnbull's Twitter use captured evidence of this in passing.

This study focuses on the dynamics of fake news discourse, because it represents a recent addition in elites' lexicon. Brummette et al. (2018) described it as a "focal point in the current political debate" (p. 512). Others argue fake news confuses political debate, with discussions of "fake news" further complicating political communications (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Brummette et al., 2018). Furthermore, the simultaneity of declining media trust and the rise of fake news suggests a potential interrelationship between the two (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). As Van Duyn and Collier (2018) explain, "talking about fake news may have wide-ranging consequences for whether individuals trust news media and the standards with which they evaluate it" and by extension "democratic outcomes" (p. 3) It is also timely to study the discourse of fake news because it "may encourage the dissemination of false information, particularly when fake news is discussed by elites without context and caution" (Van Duyn & Collier, 2018, p. 3). These links among the discourse of fake news, the proliferation of mis- and disinformation, and the health of democratic and liberal media systems provide compelling reasons for a focused study on the "discourse of fake news," using Australian political elites as the case study.

Theorizing Fake News

Debates around the accuracy of reporting have ebbed and flowed since the sensationalist "Penny Press" in the 1830s (Conboy, 2002; Mott, 1962). What distinguishes fake news in the digital age is the volume, ease, and speed with which it can spread. The global network society enables disinformation to move from the margins to the mainstream of the digitized public sphere, facilitating horizontal sharing of information in place of top-down elite communication (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Its viral spread is expedited by the structure of online media platforms, their algorithms, search engine optimization techniques, and the snowball effect on social media whereby "trending" topics gain more prominence (McNair, 2018). These technological changes make it "more difficult for deliberate fakes to be proven wrong in a way and within a time frame that persuades the broad public audience of their fraudulent or dishonest nature" (McNair, 2018, p. 19).

However, the term "fake news" is hotly contested. Some consider it woefully inadequate because of the complexity of the online "misinformation ecosystem" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 12). Wardle

and Derakhshan's coining of the term "information disorder" aims to encapsulate the broad range of misinformation (unintentional false information), disinformation (intentional false information), and malinformation (correct information used with intent to damage) that, despite important differences of intent, is often inadequately termed fake news.

Although scholars have sought to theorize fake news' proliferation and unpack homogenized understandings of it, fewer studies seek to understand the way in which the discourse of fake news is harnessed by political elites for strategic ends. However, Van Duyn and Collier's (2018) experimental investigation provides one example that assesses the impact of elites' appropriation of this discourse. They suggest it lowers trust in media, leads to less accurate identification of real news, and potentially leaves people ill informed, eroding news media's normative function (see Smith, 2010). Similarly, Brummette and colleagues' (2018) research into the proliferation of the term "fake news" online shows that it is "infectious in homophilous networks" (p. 512), and that logic falls away, emotions are heightened, and politicization increases with its usage.

To further unpack questions surrounding the use of fake news discourse by political elites in the Australian context, we seek to understand how and when federal politicians deploy this language. Because political discourse can vary by site/platform, party, and target audience (Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018), and can receive different degrees of contestation by different actors, we believe fake news discourse may disseminate differently across these dimensions and thus explore this possibility in our analysis. Specifically, we address three research questions:

RQ1:   *Do Australian federal politicians use fake news discourse, and if so, how does this vary between different sites of political communication and political parties?*

RQ2:   *If federal parliamentarians use fake news discourse, who do they target in their strategic political communications?*

RQ3:   *If fake news discourse is deployed, is it contested? By whom?*

Methodology

Content analyses of different political communication fora were undertaken to detect Australian federal politicians' use of fake news discourse, operationalized here as the use of three terms: "fake news," "alternative facts," and "post-truth." We analyzed newspaper articles, politicians' websites (which include their press releases), transcripts of federal parliamentary debates, and social media (Facebook posts and tweets). We collected data for six months following Trump's election (November 8, 2016, to May 8, 2017) to understand if Australian political elites deployed fake news terminologies following its political use in the U.S. Six months was considered a reasonable time span to detect and examine political elites' adoption of these terms.

The coding method categorizes politicians' usage of fake news discourse by drawing on two typologies of fake news content (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Wardle, 2017). Both typologies delineate categories across a broad range of information disorder, including satire and parody; forms of misleading,

imposter, or fabricated content; false connections or context assigned to content; manipulated content or images; advertising in the guise of news; and political propaganda. We adapted these categories to develop codes that classify the type of information disorder that a politician alleged had taken place.

Several classifications were not relevant to this study. For example, because we are interested in what information disorder politicians allege has occurred, rather than the misinformation itself, we do not analyze visual data. Therefore, we selected four applicable categories to develop our coding framework to detect and measure the type of dis- or misinformation that elites allege occurs when they employ the discourse of fake news. These categories were (a) satire, (b) misleading content, (c) imposter content, and (d) fabricated content.

Four actions were taken. First, we recorded descriptive data of "who" used "what" terminology, "when," and in what context.[2] Second, drawing on the two existing fake news typologies, we analyzed how politicians employed the discourse to denote one of the four forms of information disorder described above. There was a subtle distinction between misleading and fabricated content that goes to personal intent, which content analysis cannot detect, and thus we merged these categories and coded for whether a politician was describing content as either misleading or fabricated. We also interpreted "imposter content" as referring to whether a politician queried the validity or legitimacy of a source cited in a news report or other communications. Third, we determined the target of the fake news language. In other words, was the politician employing it to attack the media, political rivals, both, or neither? Finally, we examined if there was evidence of the journalist or others immediately contesting the use of this pejorative language.

We used a two-step approach to collect the data. First, a preliminary survey of the Factiva news archive was undertaken using the keyword "fake news" along with the names (and nicknames) of the 226 members of the 45th Australian Parliament. Politicians were ranked highest to lowest according to the number of results of the search. This was done to identify those most often publicly associated with "fake news." This did not necessarily mean politicians were using this term, only that their names appeared within articles/transcripts containing the keyword. This search returned 1,519 stories across the six-month period.

Because we sought to track the discourse of fake news across four political communications fora, it was not within the scope of this project to analyze all Australian federal parliamentarians. Nor was this seen as desirable, as "fake news" language was relatively new in the Australian context, and many politicians did not engage with it. We focused on politicians registering 10 or more news articles including both their name and the term "fake news" in the initial search. This search retrieved 1,254 stories involving 29 of 226 politicians. These 29 politicians (the most frequent users) formed our sample. As "fake news" is a nascent term in political communications, it is unsurprising only about 10% of Australia's federal politicians were identified alongside the term in excess of 10 times.[3] Almost half of Australia's federal politicians returned

---

[2] These descriptive data were recorded across 19 variables. Coding frame available here (https://www .researchgate.net/publication/335109157_Political_Elites'_Use_of_Fake_News_Discourse_Across_Commun ications_Platforms).

[3] The 29 politicians were Malcolm Turnbull, Pauline Hanson, Chris Hayes, Tony Abbott, Bill Shorten, Scott Morrison, Matt Canavan, Julie Bishop, Cory Bernardi, Barnaby Joyce, George Christensen, Peter Dutton, Nick Xenophon, Eric Abetz, Mike Kelly, Rick Wilson, Josh Frydenberg, Christopher Pyne, Malcolm Roberts, George

zero hits in the Factiva search for the six-month period, indicating they most likely did not use the term during that time. We investigated further by searching politicians' names and "fake news" in Factiva in the 12-months before Trump's victory to ascertain if use of the term by Australian politicians predated Trump's adoption of it. Significantly, our search returned zero reports of Australian politicians using "fake news" in the Australian press before our study's designated timeframe.[4]

For detailed analysis across different communications platforms, the second stage involved searching the 29 politicians' names alongside the expanded set of fake news discourse keywords, across several communications platforms. The keywords were "alternat* fact*," "fake news," "post-truth*," "post truth*" (no hyphen), and #fakenews (no space) for the social media data. To meet our selection criteria, politicians had to explicitly use these terms (e.g., were directly quoted); be reported as using the term (paraphrased usage); or reported as agreeing with/refuting use of the term by others. Across all four fora, only 22 of 29 politicians searched returned items meeting these criteria. From the first forum under examination—the mainstream news media—this secondary search yielded 65 news stories involving 16 of our 29 politicians. We conducted an intercoder reliability test of this data six months after initial coding, finding reliability on most variables. Our lowest level of agreement was 85% for a variable describing story genre (e.g., political story, policy story, no political or policy content). This variable returned an alpha score of 0.74 using Krippendorff's alpha test. This is considered above the minimum acceptable threshold (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009, pp. 354–355).

This search process was repeated to investigate each of the political communication fora of social media, politicians' websites, and the parliamentary Hansard database to understand if fake news language is used differently in various political communication contexts. The core unit of measure was each individual political communication (i.e., each news story, Hansard transcript, website page/document, Facebook post, or tweet).

After cleaning the data to meet the search criteria, this yielded 152 distinct observations across the four fora. To clarify, if the same incident involving fake news language was recorded in Hansard and then later reported verbatim in a news source, these were recorded and coded separately. This was necessary to understand how the discourse of fake news might travel across communication contexts. Given the notoriety with which Trump's Twitter feed drives traditional media commentary in the U.S., including duplicates thus allowed us to investigate whether this agenda-setting function could be identified in the Australian context.

Data and Findings

Frequency, Agents, and Context of Fake News Discourse

The first observation is that some Australian federal politicians adopted fake news language after the election of President Trump, but its usage was not widespread. Fake news discourse appeared most

---

Brandis, Doug Cameron, Sam Dastyari, Marise Payne, Richard Di Natale, Stephen Jones, Kelly O'Dwyer, Derryn Hinch, David Leyonhjelm, John Williams.

[4] Politicians' names and "fake news" appeared together eight times, but the politician was not engaging with the term.

often in the news media, the only site involving a gatekeeper or intermediary. In other fora, where politicians speak directly to their audience, they are less likely to employ this language. For example, of the 7,333 tweets and 5,509 Facebook posts collected during the six-month study, a meager few contained fake news language from politicians (see Table 1). Australian politicians' lower engagement with fake news language on Facebook and Twitter in our data set is in contrast to the U.S. experience, where there is a strong association between the discourse of fake news and social media (Brummette et al., 2018). Thus, we find that politicians use fake news discourse not only to appeal to certain audiences (the public). The data also suggest that this language is deployed to appeal to information gatekeepers themselves, who, as journalists, may perpetuate and be drawn to terms like "fake news" because they are seen as newsworthy. We investigate these platform-based distinctions further below and in the "Usage and Targets" section.

Table 1. Distinct Fake News Discourse Events by Forum.

Forum	Facebook	Twitter	Websites	Hansard	Press	Total
Number of distinct fake news discourse events	10	40	23	14	65	152

Source: Authors.

The data highlight two notable peaks in politicians' engagement with fake news language during the six-month study: November/December 2016 and February/March 2017 (see Figure 1). These peaks correlate with the parliamentary sitting calendar, showing that—unsurprisingly—the discourse of fake news is more salient when parliament is in session.[5] This tells us about directionality. Politicians set the news agenda using fake news language, which is duly reported by the news media because it fits within media logic considerations and is thus considered newsworthy. Two further spikes outside parliamentary sitting time relate to specific "fake news" stories, furthering this "newsworthiness" hypothesis. A cluster of reporting around the end of December 2016 (during recess) stemmed from an accusation by conservative National Party senator Matt Canavan that ABC reportage of mining company Adani's plans to build Australia's biggest coal mine was "nothing but fake news." This comment attracted 10 days of coverage (December 22–31) by half the nation's 12 daily metropolitan newspapers—a big news story by Australian standards. The senator maintained attention on the issue with an opinion piece published in the Murdoch-owned (center-right) *Australian* and posted on his website, following up with two tweets.

---

[5] Parliamentary sitting dates in 2016–17 were November 7–10, November 21–December 1, February 7–16 and March 20–30 (Parliament of Australia, 2016, 2017a).

Number of fake news discourse events per month, by platform
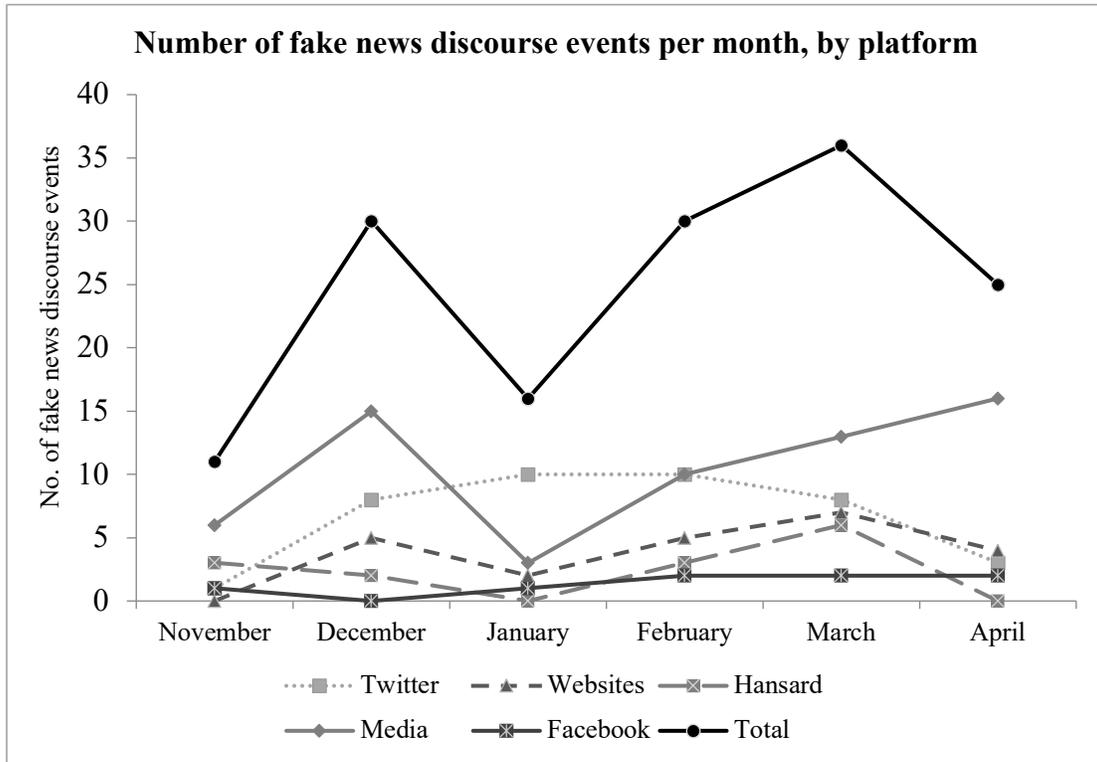
Figure 1. Number of fake news discourse events per month, by platform. **N =148. The first week of May (n = 4) is not recorded here because it is an incomplete month. Source:** *Authors.*

Who are the primary actors using the discourse of fake news? We find it is a noisy minority of mainly White, male, right-wing politicians. Although use of the keywords appeared in 152 instances, only 22 politicians directly engage with these terms, 15 of whom are members of conservative parties (see Figure 2). Users of fake news discourse fell into two distinct categories: high-profile politicians who attract significant media/public attention, or "fringe" politicians who tend toward sensationalistic behavior to attract attention disproportionate to their vote share.
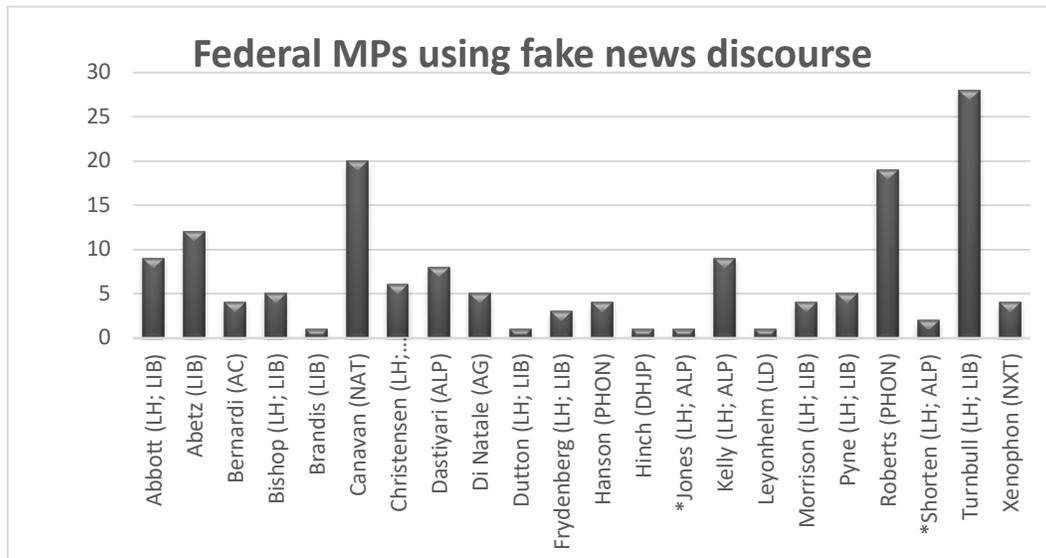
Figure 2. Total number of instances of fake news discourse use, by politician. **N = 22 MPs; N = 152 events. *MPs who use fake news discourse to refute it. LH = Lower House. All other users from the Senate. Party codes: LIB = Liberal; AC = Australian Conservatives; NAT = National; ALP = Labor; AG = Greens; PHON = Pauline Hanson's One Nation; DHJP = Derryn Hinch's Justice Party; LD = Liberal Democrats; NXT = Nick Xenophon Team. For left–right alignment of parties, see Figure 3.** Source: *Authors.*

In the first category are MPs such as cabinet minister and National Party senator Matt Canavan, and 29th Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull (the most prolific user) in the lower house. In the latter category are the outspoken media users, all senators, such as populist, right-wing One Nation member at the time, Malcolm Roberts.

The second spike, in April, stemmed from former conservative PM Tony Abbott. In a tweet, he refuted a claim that he agreed to a charity boxing match with an opposition senator: "[The] story about me re-entering the ring is fake news. Utter rubbish. Media should be ashamed of themselves" (Abbott 2017). Associated reporting on this topic generated six press stories in different outlets, which is significant in light of Australia's media concentration, giving the story the potential for widespread audience reach. Importantly, these clusters indicate fake news is regarded as newsworthy, with mainstream news media amplifying its use.

Overwhelmingly, the main political actors using fake news discourse belong to the political right (see Figure 3). Likewise, the conservative press was more likely to report it, especially Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper. Politicians from minor parties were also disproportionately represented (32%), consistent with the "fringe" observation described earlier. Two Labor representatives (Mike Kelly and Sam Dastyari) were the only nonright politicians to assert (rather than rebuke) the language with any regularity. This finding is consistent with studies showing fake news circulation and discourse is predominantly the domain of conservatives (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; McNair, 2018).
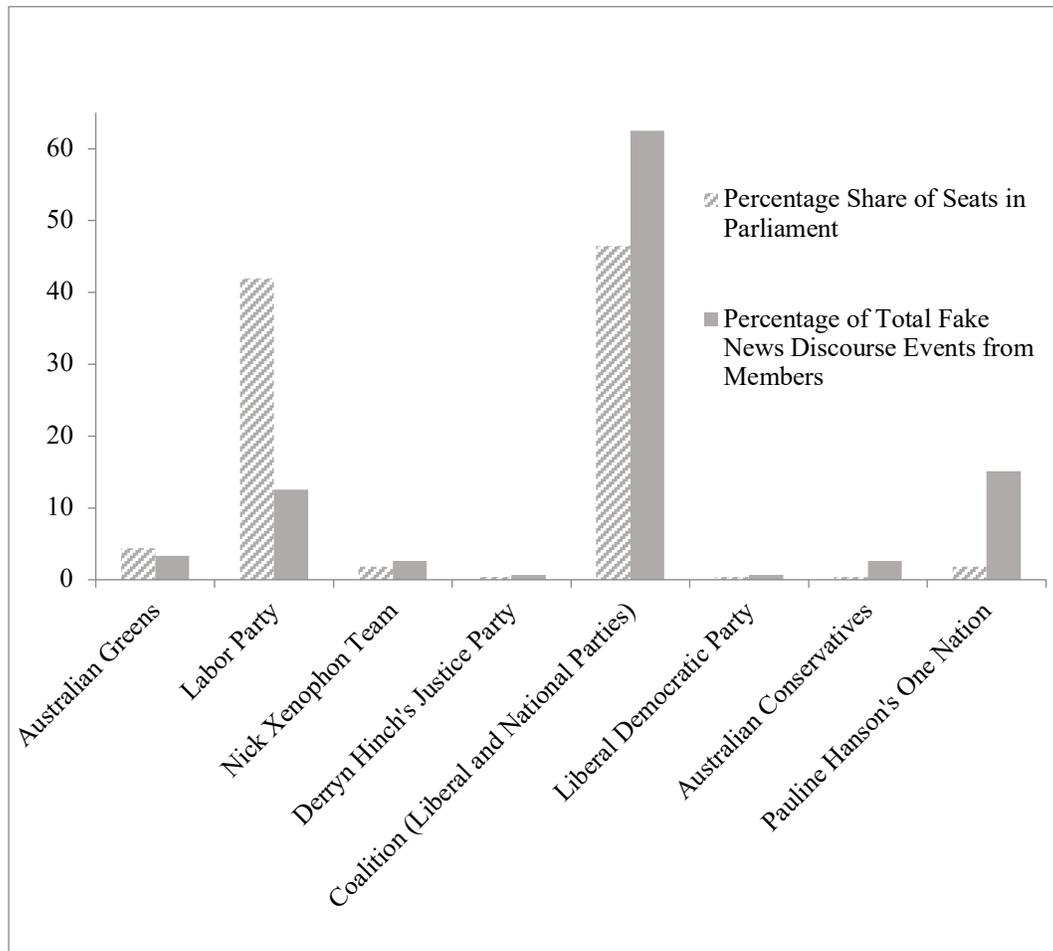
Figure 3. Percentage share of seats in parliament compared with percentage share of total fake news discourse events, by party. **N = 22 politicians using fake news discourse; parties organized left to right politically.** **Source:** *Authors.*

Finally, we find that political elites use the discourse of fake news most often in the context of politics and personality, rather than policy debates. For example, in a press release on his website, conservative Liberal[6] Senator Eric Abetz (2017) resorted to fake news discourse to attack the public broadcaster by claiming the ABC is "plagued by bias, has a fetish for running fake news as fact and is overrun by poor financial management."

---

[6] Note that the Liberal Party is the primary conservative party in Australia, despite the progressive connotations of "liberal."

This finding is consistent with Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) contention that information disorder must be understood in the context of the "ritualistic function of communication" (p. 9) and the emotional and psychological factors at play. Drawing on Carey (1989), they emphasize that communication does not merely represent the transmission of information between people, but "plays a fundamental role in representing shared beliefs" and constitutes "not just information, but drama" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 9). Building on this, Wardle and Derakhshan point to the fact that "successful problematic content . . . plays on people's emotions, encouraging feelings of superiority, anger or fear" and that such content is often delivered performatively (p. 9). Given this association between information disorder and "exaggerated emotional articulations of the world" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 14), it is unsurprising that politicians used fake news in emotive contexts of politicking and personality attacks rather than policy debates. This reflects Brummette and colleagues' (2018) finding that the term "fake news" is associated with "emotionally charged and ideologically similar online networks" (p. 510). Like "fake news" itself, we find political elites' use of fake news discourse is closely linked to emotional constructions of shared beliefs and rarely to discussions of policy detail.

However, the Hansard data deviated from the above findings. In this forum, fake news discourse—although primarily used to attack opposition politicians—appeared mostly in the context of policy debates. Further, the most common term within Hansard was "post-truth," rather than "fake news," the dominant term on other platforms. We hypothesize that the overrepresentation of then PM Malcolm Turnbull (seven of 14 Hansard documents) provides one explanation for the dominance of "post-truth" because it appeared to be his preferred term. Further, the parliament is a forum in which politicians contest one another, seeking to construct their version of reality. Here, their target is not the media, but each other. Post-truth in this circumstance is about constructing their narrative that sees their opponents as untruthful rather than fake—a term reserved for the media. We return to these differences in usage across communicative platforms shortly.

Usage and Targets

We now turn our attention to the use and targets of fake news discourse across the different public communications platforms. Focusing on the categories drawn from existing fake news typologies, we find the discourse was never used to label content as satire/parody. Rather, politicians overwhelmingly deployed fake news language to call out material they alleged contained misleading/fabricated content (72%). Much less often (8%) the discourse was used to question the source of information (see Table 2).

Australian politicians' fake news language was targeted at news media in 57% of all instances, usually to attack critical coverage or unfavorable representations of the politician/their party. This result supports existing assertions that the discourse of fake news is appropriated by politicians to attack and delegitimize negative reporting and media outlets perceived as critical (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This is an important finding because politicians' strategic use of the fake news lexicon to target the mainstream media extends McNair's notion of the "weaponization" of fake news. McNair (2018) argues the digital public sphere allows for false information to be "weaponized" in "new and potentially much more damaging ways than was the case for fakers in the past" (p. 89), such that incorrect information is increasingly used for strategic political gain at the expense of the news media's reputation.

Table 2. Usage of Terms as per Existing Typologies.

Communications forum	Satire/parody	Misleading/fabricated content	Imposter content
Press	0	57	**2**
Twitter	0	24	**0**
Politicians' websites	0	13	**5**
Hansard	0	7	**0**
Facebook	0	9	**5**
Total	0	110	**12**
Percentage of sample	0	72	**8**

Note. Coding categories are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive.
Source: Authors.

The Facebook page of former right-wing populist senator Malcolm Roberts provides the most extreme example of the weaponization of fake news discourse against the mainstream media. Targeting the national broadcaster, Roberts (2017) used Facebook to label a report about his party leader as fake news: "Turns out the ABC, in-between spewing fake news about our party, ruined ANZAC day for diggers. . . . The ABC are a clear and present threat to democracy."[7] In the data, the ABC is frequently targeted by conservatives, with politicians from three conservative parties claiming the ABC produced fake news to satisfy leftist agendas.

This branding may engender public doubt about the trustworthiness of Australia's oldest media institution. The media are already experiencing a drop in public trust in liberal, anglophone media systems (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018). By attacking the media with terms that have been shown to confuse public debate, politicians risk further weakening public respect for traditional elite gatekeepers, while simultaneously shaping the agenda and regaining some control over messaging in a chaotic digital media ecosystem (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Smith, 2010). Although this "weaponization" is not widespread, it is a visible trend. These findings serve to complicate the relationship among political elites, perceived mainstream media bias, and drivers of public mistrust in democracies, indicating the urgency for further research.

Turning to the question of who introduces the discourse of fake news, where transcripts of media interviews were available on politicians' websites, surprisingly the journalist introduced the topic in 75% of cases. Typically, the MP accepts (rather than refutes) the premise of fake news, taking it as an opportunity to criticize the media or political opponents. In this common scenario, the journalist's question becomes an easy scoring point for the politician, often allowing them to sidestep a question or gratuitously query the media's veracity. For example (Turnbull 2017):

---

[7] ANZAC Day is a national holiday in memory of fallen defense force members; "digger" is colloquial for soldier in Australia and New Zealand.

> **JOURNALIST:** Today, we have seen a press conference by President Trump where he has discussed at length this issue as fake news. Prime Minister Turnbull do you believe there is such a thing as fake news?
>
> **PRIME MINISTER:** A very great politician, Winston Churchill, once said that politicians complaining about the newspapers, is like a sailor complaining about the sea—there's not much point. That is the media we live with.

This kind of sequence suggests journalists play a role in driving and reinforcing fake news discourse, likely to the detriment of trust in journalism (Van Duyn & Collier, 2018). We offer two hypotheses that may account for journalists' initiation of fake news discussions. First, political-economic evaluations of media suggest that the discourse of "fake news" is accommodated in reporting because of commercial news values. The impact of changing technological, sociopolitical, and economic conditions on newsrooms are well documented (Schudson, 2008). These structural changes have led journalists to "continuously reproduce news around familiar themes and formats" (Flew, 2009, p. 89), such that it can be quickly produced and easily digested. "Fake news" fits such a criterion. It is a salient concept that has featured strongly in public discourse since the 2016 U.S. presidential election and is sensational, but simple. These elements give it news value. Journalists' introduction of the discourse therefore provides an easy representation of a popular, contemporary political issue. In this way, the pressure to produce constant, marketable news may account for why journalists initiate the discourse.

To understand why journalists do not refute the terminologies, we examine the concept of "indexing." Media coverage is often constrained by the contours of elite debate on a given topic. As Bennett (1990) notes, "mass media news professionals . . . tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (p. 106). If a perspective is not apparent in elite circles, it is unlikely to be voiced in the media (Bennett, 1990). Consequently, mainstream media may be "unwilling to . . . challenge official narratives about public issues" (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006, p. 482). Rather than challenging fake news discourse, journalists become complicit in propagating its usage because it fits within existing debates.

Sometimes, albeit rarely, political interviewees contest journalists' usage of fake news discourse. Three members of the opposition center-left Labor party outright reject journalists' use of fake news terminologies. For example (Labor 2016):

> **JOURNALIST:** There's been a lot of talk since the election of Donald Trump in the United States that we are in a new phase now that we're operating in a post-truth world. What do you think—how loose do you think politicians can be with the facts if they're tapping into the public mood?
>
> **SHORTEN:** No, I don't think that we are in a post-truth phase. What happened in America I think was due to a great deal of disenchantment with business as usual, with vested interests.

The difference in approach between senior Labor and Liberal politicians is consistent with the broader finding that fake news discourse is primarily a conservative tool.

The exchanges where opposition members refute the premise of fake news represent three of four instances where fake news was problematized. On the fourth occasion, Labor MP Mike Kelly used the term in a tweet to indicate "fake news" was a social phenomenon requiring scrutiny. The absence of discussion by politicians in our sample of fake news as a policy challenge is at odds with broader Australian and global conversations. In May 2017, the Australian Senate issued terms of reference for an inquiry into the "Future of Public Interest Journalism," including two terms (1.c and e) explicitly naming "fake news" (Parliament of Australia, 2017b). Similarly, in December 2017, the federal "Digital Platforms Inquiry" referred to the "quality of news" in its terms of reference (Morrison, 2017). In the U.S., the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence similarly held hearings about social media influence in the 2016 U.S. elections (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2017). This disparity between the state of global and national conversation, and the level of debate evidenced in our data, suggests that Australian political discourse lags behind debates about information disorder as a social and policy problem.

Differences Across Platforms

Subtle differences were identified in the use of fake news language across platforms. We argue these disparities across communicative spaces can be partly understood through the lens of Kreiss and colleagues' (2018) theory of strategic social media use. They argue that political communication on different platforms is shaped by political campaigners' perceptions of their candidate, audiences, affordances, genres, and election timing. To this framework, we add "gatekeeping."

The media were the most common target accused of peddling fake news. However, in politicians' press releases and Hansard documents, politicians tended to attack fellow politicians using this language. We suggest these divergent trends are, in part, attributable to the kind of communicative space each medium represents. On social media and politicians' websites, political elites bypass journalistic gatekeepers to speak to the public directly, often their "base," which may embolden them to attack the framing of stories (see Engesser et al., 2017). By comparison, press releases are designed to be reported in the mainstream media, so politicians may be hesitant to criticize the media in a context where they are dependent on it to share their message. These elements reflect the communications genre, or the style of communication expected in each context, as well as who the politician is talking to via the medium (audiences) and whether their discourse will be filtered through or potentially silenced by gatekeepers.

Yet this study found the role of the traditional gatekeeper of political communication—the news media—is manipulated for political outcomes at the gatekeeper's own expense. Political elites use fake news discourse to appeal to different audiences, including gatekeepers, who, as outlined above, are unlikely to refute, and instead often amplify messages about fake news, even to their own detriment. This is evident in the U.S. when journalists report and thus spread the president's tweets about "fake news," which often delegitimize the media. Carlson (2017) reminds us that in doing so, journalistic authority—the "right to be listened to" (p. 8)—is challenged. Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) also argue that in these instances "fake news" is aimed at news media to undermine the traditional gatekeeper's

legitimacy, rather than being employed to evaluate the veracity of media coverage. Although there is not space here to investigate the full epistemic consequences for public knowledge of this attack on gatekeepers' credibility (for discussion, see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), we note that perceptions of gatekeepers shape strategic political communication across platforms. We thus propose the addition of gatekeepers to Kreiss and colleagues' (2018) framework. Echoing Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), we posit that research on how journalists respond to attacks on their legitimacy using the political weaponry of fake news discourse is urgently required.

Parliamentary debates recorded in Hansard are, in a Westminster system, a communicative genre where it is the norm for politicians to robustly criticize each other. Our data reflect this. In eight of 14 documents where the fake news discourse was detected, it was used to discredit political parties or politicians, or denote something said by a politician as untrue/misleading. For example, then PM Malcolm Turnbull asserted (House of Representatives, 2017), "The hypocrisy of this Leader of the Opposition strains the boundaries of traditional political practice. He has moved into the post-truth environment with a vengeance." The affordances of different platforms also affect the manifestation of fake news discourse. Hansard, given the parliament's scope for wordy debate, tends to entail more expansive statements employing fake news discourse; by contrast, Twitter's tight architecture curtails statements (Papacharissi, 2009).

The target audience of the message and the type of politician (candidate) also shaped the use of fake news discourse. As Kreiss and colleagues (2018) note, campaign media practitioners in the U.S. perceive Twitter to be the purview of the political class, and to fulfill an agenda-setting function shaping legacy media. Twitter can therefore be used for formulating pithy public statements. This is reflected in high-profile government ministers' use of the platform primarily to establish their position on an issue. For example, senior Coalition minister Josh Frydenberg used Twitter to clarify a previous statement, tweeting that "FakeNews @Mark_Butler_MP Last Sept I said: 'But for that weather event, the blackout would have never occurred'" (@JoshFrydenberg, 2017).

Although we rarely found verbatim feed-through of fake news discourse from Twitter to legacy media, this did occur once in our data set: Abbott's statement about the boxing bout (described above) appears first on Twitter and later in two press articles. Interestingly, we found verbatim statements rarely traveled across platforms, with four instances of fake news discourse repeated once, and two statements found three times each (six statements reproduced a total of 14 times).

Although high-profile government MPs most often used Twitter to state a public position, "fringe" politicians from minor parties used Twitter to attack others or rail against a perceived injustice. Again, the type of politician (candidate) and target audience matters. For example, Malcolm Roberts (@MRobertsQLD 2017) used the platform to attack BuzzFeed, tweeting, "@MarkDiStef you never fail to disgrace yourself or insult a large swathe of the population. Last time u attacked Jews. You are #fakenews." Fringe candidates, such as Roberts, are overwhelmingly dominant in the Twitter/Facebook data compared with other political fora. Social media may be a way for these politicians to cut through the noise of other political actors. Consistent with Papacharissi (2009) and Kreiss at al. (2018), we observe that social media are fora for presenting an image that reflects a candidate's "authentic" personality, with posts designed to appear

intimate and spontaneous. The fiery exchanges on both Twitter and Facebook from minor party fringe candidates, as well as occasional members of major parties who are perceived as less restrained in their public discourse,[8] can be seen to reflect these politicians' public personas.

Contestation

A recurring approach in contemporary fake news research is to investigate whether false or problematic messages are contested (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In the case of deliberately distributed disinformation, critical analysis and contestation are imperative to counteract the potential for negative societal impacts. However, challenging such messages is difficult because of the sophisticated representation of disinformation, the speed of communication through digital networks, the effects of peer-to-peer dissemination, and associated issues of polarization and echo chambers (McNair, 2018). Nonetheless, we sought to assess whether, and to what extent, a politician's use of fake news terminologies was contested at the time of utterance.

As noted above, we find minimal contestation of fake news terminologies spoken by political elites, with the language uncontested in 81% of cases.[9] Journalists were often found to introduce the topic, which politicians used opportunistically to criticize the media or reset the agenda; journalists rarely resisted this (25% of press cases). Rather, the media effectively helped distribute a potentially destructive message for journalism (Van Duyn & Collier, 2018). Because news media act as a conduit between politicians and voters (Errington & Miragliotta, 2011), this media amplification of fake news discourse and concomitant failure to contest the underlying premise of these terminologies is a concerning trend for the health of democratic debate—particularly given the research suggesting tangible consumer impacts (Van Duyn & Collier, 2018).

Hansard data showed that politicians' statements incorporating the discourse of fake news were frequently challenged by opposing members. However, the discourse itself was never targeted for contestation. Although the sentiment of the attack was often hotly debated, the lexicon was never singled out for discussion. Because the parliamentary context lends itself to contestation and debate, it is concerning that the use of fake news terminologies was never disputed in this forum. This may indicate that the weaponization of fake news language by politicians is becoming normalized.

On Facebook, public commenters on politicians' posts also fail to contest the discourse of fake news. In fact, citizens often redeploy this language in comments. However, these comments were not in direct response to the use of such terminology by political elites, and therefore not within the bounds of our data set. Yet the redeployment of this language by the public, in politically charged online spheres, is concerning and warrants further investigation. It may indicate that the discourse of fake news is contagious, mirroring findings by Brummette et al. (2018), especially when legitimized by political elites and amplified on social media. Commenters' rhetoric—especially on the Facebook pages of right-wing populists—was often vitriolic. This is consistent with broader research into social media usage and rising populism, the

---

[8] Senators Eric Abetz (Liberal) and Sam Dastyari (Labor) are two such examples.

[9] Twitter data were excluded from this calculation. Because we did not analyze replies to Tweets or conversations via hashtags, we could not ascertain whether the fake news discourse was immediately contested.

combination of which has been associated with aggressive linguistic constructions (Knobloch, 2017; Musolff, 2015), and mirrors research finding that digital technologies facilitate the rapid spread of information pollution (McNair, 2018).

Conclusion

This article examined the use of fake news discourse by Australian parliamentarians across political communication fora over a six-month period. It had two aims. First, to assess the claim (in an Australian context) that the discourse of fake news associated with Donald Trump has "begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). Second, to assess how Australian politicians deploy this discourse across different communications platforms and whether this usage is refuted.

We find evidence in the Australian context supporting the concept of a "fake news" contagion. Fake news language has emerged as part of Australian strategic political communications since Trump's election; however, its usage is not (yet) widespread among MPs. Although we cannot directly assess if the adoption of the discourse of fake news is a form of contagion from U.S. politics, it appears so, reflecting existing findings that the discourse is contagious (Brummette et al., 2018). Repeated searches show no evidence of the use of fake news discourse by Australian politicians before Trump co-opting the term.

Addressing the second aim, we find the discourse was predominantly used by conservative politicians. More specifically, prominent conservatives, or members of smaller populist parties that struggle to attract media attention without employing sensationalist claims. The language also featured most often in conservative newspapers. This finding of a right-wing bias is consistent with global understandings of the phenomenon (McNair, 2018).

Fake news discourse is used to attack the media rather than other politicians, apart from in parliament, with the public broadcaster often singled out for criticism. We find that journalists failed to contest such reputational attacks on their integrity, and interview transcripts demonstrated reporters were often complicit by introducing fake news terms into public conversation. The reasons for this may reflect indexing theory and the logic of political economy. Journalists' failure to challenge fake news usage offers an opportunity for political elites to normalize this discourse.

Despite an international narrative around social media driving the fake news phenomenon and Twitter providing an agenda-setting vehicle for legacy media (Kreiss et al., 2018), we find that the diffusion of fake news discourse across communicative platforms in the Australian context is limited. Yet applying and extending Kreiss et al.'s (2018) framework partly accounts for how and why fake news discourse examples in the data vary across communicative spaces.

The process of weaponizing fake news language to impugn media integrity for political gain arguably occurs at the expense of public trust in the media. Given the lack of contestation, our findings suggest that news media need to carefully consider how they approach and frame politicians' use of fake news discourse before this delegitimization technique further erodes public confidence in the media. We

recommend that journalists adopt a more critical stance with politicians when these terminologies are deployed, and defend their professional legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

References

@HonTonyAbbott. (2017, April 23). Story about me re-entering the ring is fake news. Utter rubbish. Media should be ashamed of themselves [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/HonTonyAbbott/status/855941437849915392

@JoshFrydenberg. (2017, February 13). FakeNews @Mark_Butler_MP Last Sept I said: "But for that weather event, the blackout would have never occurred." http://bit.ly/2lzRj2v [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/JoshFrydenberg/status/831016017732128769

@MRobertsQLD. (2017, February 15). @MarkDiStef you never fail to disgrace yourself or insult a large swathe of the population. Last time u attacked Jews. You are #fakenews [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/MRobertsQLD/status/831820968100188160

Abetz, E. (2017, March 23). New ABC Chairman must end biased fake news fetish (press release). Retrieved from https://abetz.com.au/news/new-abc-chairman-must-end-biased-fake-news-fetish

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*(2), 211–236.

Ansolabehere, S., & Iyengar, S. (1997). *Going negative*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Bennett, W. L. (1990). Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States. *Journal of Communication, 40*(2), 103–125.

Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. G., & Livingston, S. (2006). None dare call it torture: Indexing and the limits of press independence in the Abu Ghraib scandal. *Journal of Communication, 56*, 467–485.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication, 33*(2), 122–139.

Blair, T. (2007). Tony Blair's "media" speech: The prime minister's Reuters speech on public life. *The Political Quarterly, 78*(4), 476–488.

Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1981). Politicians and the press. In D. Nimmo & K. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of political communication* (pp. 467–493). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.

Bourke, L., & Whitbourn, M. (2015, May 17). "Less aggressive": Malcolm Turnbull's advice for ABC journalists Leigh Sales and Emma Alberici. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from

https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/less-aggressive-malcolm-turnbulls-advice-for-abc-journalists-leigh-sales-and-emma-alberici-20150517-gh3f7f.html

Brants, K., de Vreese, C., Moller, J., & van Praag, P. (2010). The real spiral of cynicism? Symbiosis and mistrust between politicians and journalists. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *15*(1), 25–40.

Brennen, B. (2017). Making sense of lies, deceptive propaganda, and fake news. *Journal of Media Ethics, 32*, 179–181.

Brummette, J., DiStaso, M., Vafeiadis, M., & Messner, M. (2018). Read all about it: The politicization of "fake news" on Twitter. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 95*(2), 497–517.

Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society.* London, UK: Routledge.

Carlson, M. (2017). *Journalistic authority: Legitimating news in the digital era*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Carson, J. (2017, March 16). What is fake news? Its origins and how it grew in 2016. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-news-origins-grew-2016/

Conboy, M. (2002). *The press and popular culture*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Cooke, N. (2017). Posttruth, truthiness, and alternative facts: Information behavior and critical information consumption for a new age. *Library Quarterly*, *87*(3), 211–221.

Crawford, C. (2006). *Attack the messenger: How politicians turn you against the media.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Domke, D., Watts, M. D., Shah, D. V., & Fan, D. P. (1999). The politics of conservative elites and the "liberal media" argument. *Journal of Communication, 49*(4), 35–58.

Egelhofer, J. L., & Lecheler, S. (2019). Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: A framework and research agenda, *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *43*(2), 97–116. doi:10.1080/23808985.2019.1602782

Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(8), 1109–1026.

Errington, W., & Miragliotta, N. (2011). *Media and politics: An introduction*. South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.

Flew, T. (2009). Democracy, participation and convergent media: Case studies in contemporary online news journalism in Australia. *Communication, Politics & Culture*, *42*(2), 87–109.

Fuller, G., Jolly, A., & Fisher, C. (2018). Malcolm Turnbull's conversational career on Twitter: The case of the Australian prime minister and the NBN. *Media International Australia*, *167*(1), 88–104.

Griffen-Foley, B. (2003). *Party games: Australian politicians and the media from war to dismissal*. Melbourne, Australia: Text.

Hanitzsch, T., Van Dalen, A., & Steindl, N. (2018). Caught in the nexus: A comparative and longitudinal analysis of public trust in the press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 23*(1), 3–23.

House of Representatives. (2017, March 2). Questions without notice: Workplace relations. *Parliament of Australia.* Retrieved from https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db =CHAMBER;id=chamber/hansardr/470e46e9-8485-4c28-9aec-6790b2e0b9e9/0107;query=Id: %22chamber/hansardr/470e46e9-8485-4c28-9aec-6790b2e0b9e9/0077%22

Ireland, J. (2014, January 29). Tony Abbott blasts national broadcaster: ABC takes "everyone's side but Australia's." *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from https://www.smh.com.au/politics/ federal/tony-abbott-blasts-national-broadcaster-abc-takes-everyones-side-but-australias-20140129-31lt8.html

Knobloch, N. (2017). Xenophobic Trumpeters: A corpus-assisted discourse study of Donald Trump's Facebook conversations. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict, 5*(2), 295–322.

Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). In their own words: Political practitioner accounts of candidates, audiences, affordances, genres, and timing in strategic social media use. *Political Communication, 35*(1), 8–31.

Krippendorff, K., & Bock, M. A. (2009). *The content analysis reader.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Labor. (2016, December 1). Bill's transcripts: Television interview – ABC 730 – Thursday, 1 December 2016. Retrieved from https://www.billshorten.com.au/television_interview_abc_730 _thursday_1_december_2016

Lloyd, J. (2004). Media power: Telling truths to ourselves. *Open Democracy.* Retrieved from https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/article_1712jsp/

Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). Media manipulation and dis-information online. *Data and Society*. Retrieved from https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/

Maurer, P. (2011). Explaining perceived media influence in politics: An analysis of the interplay of context and attitudes in four European democracies. *Publizistik*, *56,* 27–50.

McNair, B. (2018). *Fake news: Falsehood, fabrication and fantasy in journalism*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

McNair, B., Flew, T., Harrington, S., & Swift, A. (2017). *Politics, media and democracy in Australia.* London, UK: Routledge.

Morrison, S. (2017). *Digital platform public enquiry: Directions*. Retrieved from https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Ministerial%20direction.pdf

Mott, F. L. (1962). *American journalism: A history, 1690–1960*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Musolff, A. (2015). Dehumanizing metaphors in UK immigrant debates in press and online media. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict, 3*(1), 41–56.

Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual geographies of social networks: A comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New Media & Society, 11*(1/2), 199–220.

Parliament of Australia. (2016). Parliamentary Sittings 2016. *Parliament of Australia.* Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Sitting_Calendar/2016_Sitting_Calendar

Parliament of Australia. (2017a). Parliamentary Sittings 2017. *Parliament of Australia.* Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Sitting_Calendar/2017_Sitting_Calendar

Parliament of Australia. (2017b). *Future of public interest journalism: Terms of reference.* Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Future_of_Public_Interest_Journalism/PublicInterestJournalism/Terms_of_Reference

Reporters Without Borders. (2019). *RSF index 2018: Hatred of journalism threatens democracies.* Retrieved from https://rsf.org/en/rsf-index-2018-hatred-journalism-threatens-democracies

Roberts, M. (2017, April 10). Turns out the ABC, in-between spewing fake news about our party, ruined ANZAC day for diggers. . . . The ABC are a clear and present threat to democracy [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/malcolmrobertsonenation/posts/you-cant-help-but-admire-paulines-amazing-tenacity-turns-out-the-abc-in-between-/1067876980022848/

Scammell, M. (1995). *Designer politics: How elections are won*. Hampshire, UK: Macmillan.

Schudson, M. (2008). *Why democracies need an unlovable press*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Smith, G. (2010). Politicians and the news media: How elite attacks influence perceptions of media bias. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *15*(3), 319–343.

Tandoc, E. C., Jr., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining "fake news." *Digital Journalism, 6*(2), 137–153.

Tiffen, R. (1990). *News and power*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Turnbull, M. (2017, February 17). Joint press conference with the Rt Hon Bill English, Prime Minister of New Zealand. Malcolm Turnbull 29th Prime Minister of Australia 2015–2018. Retrieved from https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/joint-press-conference-with-the-rt-hon-bill-english-prime-minister-of-new-z

Turner, G. (2005). *Ending the affair: The decline of television current affairs in Australia*. Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press.

U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. (2017). *Open hearings.* Retrieved from https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open

Van Duyn, E., & Collier, J. (2018). Priming and fake news: The effects of elite discourse on evaluations of news media. *Mass Communication and Society*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/15205436.2018.1511807

Wardle, C. (2017, February 17). Fake news: It's complicated. *First Draft*. Retrieved from https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017, September 27). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. *The Council of Europe*. Retrieved from https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PREMS-162317-GBR-2018-Report-de%CC%81sinformation.pdf?x78124