

VALLETTA, MALTA

OCT 10-11



October 10 to 11, Valletta, Malta

# FAKES, HACKS, HOAXES, & TALL TALES

## The State of U.S. Media in the Post-Truth Era



### Michael Bugeja

Paper submitted to the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning as part of the proceedings for the Conference Understanding the Post-truth Society: From Fake News, Datafication & Mass Surveillance to the Death of Trust. October 10 to 11, Valletta, Malta.



OCT 10-11

VALLETTA, MALTA

# Acknowledgements



**Author:** Michael Bugeja

Michael Bugeja, distinguished professor of journalism and communication at Iowa State University of Science and Technology, is author of *Interpersonal Divide in the Age of the Machine* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2018) and *Living Media Ethics* (Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2019).

**Published by:** The Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning

**2019**

To cite this report: Bugeja, M. (2019). 'Fakes, Hacks, Hoaxes, & Tall Tales: The State of U.S. Media in the Post-Truth Era'. Understanding the Post-truth Society Conference, 10-11 October. Malta: Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning.



**Fakes, Hacks, Hoaxes, & Tall Tales:  
The State of U.S. Media in the Post-Truth Era**

Since the 2016 presidential election in the United States, politics and journalism have combined to undermine reality to such extent that facts are alternative, and truth is not truth. All too often, social media are complicit in the obfuscation. This paper investigates that charge, exploring the role of 24/7 ubiquitous online access in creating a culture of lies, exposing inconvenient truths about American politics and news outlets in the post-truth era.

First, some definitions to frame the analysis:

- **Fake:** Unknown origin in use as a slang term for “rob” by 19th Century criminals (Jones, 2017).
- **Hack:** A 13th Century English verb, meaning to “cut with heavy blows in an irregular or random fashion,” with a 1963 reference about cutting phone service between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University (Yagoda, 2014).
- **Hoax:** An adaption of the 17th Century word “hocus,” meaning to “trick” as well as a criminal term, meaning to drug someone (Kelly, 2016).
- **Tall Tale:** Unknown origin about a wildly exaggerated folklore story with the word “tall” associated with the German “toll,” meaning “amazing, incredible and extraordinary” (No author, June 27, 2011).

The etymology of these terms seemingly sums up the state of U.S. media in the post-truth era. Many Americans, robbed of fact via hacked emails and random fake posts, are addicted to incredible tales that affirm rather than inform belief systems.

In the years following the election of Donald Trump, there have been countless reports about fake news, hacked emails, hoaxes, and tall tales.

One of Trump’s initial proclamations came in a July 2016 news conference, asking Russia to hack Hillary Clinton’s 30,000 missing emails: “I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press” (Schmidt). Trump has referred on multiple occasions to the special counsel investigation of Robert Mueller into possible collusion with Russia as a “witch hunt” and “the greatest political hoax of all time” (Axelrod, 2019).

As a candidate, Trump was obsessed with size, ranging from the dimensions of his hands to the tally of his inauguration crowd. Case in point: When then Republican presidential rival Marco Rubio joked about the size of Trump’s hands, Trump defended that (along with another appendage) in a nationally televised presidential debate. As Politico reported, Trump stated: “I have to say this, he (Rubio) hit my hands. Nobody has ever hit my hands. I’ve never heard of this one. Look at those hands. Are they small hands? And he referred to my hands if they’re small, something else must be small. I guarantee you there’s no problem” (Gass, 2019). At the time, this comment seemed outrageous; now, Americans have grown accustomed to hyperbolic remarks. The U.S. media reports such claims regularly. As it happens, Trump’s hands are in the bottom 15th percentile of average male hands according to an investigative report based on a handprint mold left at Madame Tussauds wax museum in New York City (Soffen, 2016).

According to the Washington Post, the president and top aides regularly demonstrate “that no fight is too small, no spat too insignificant,” especially “when it comes to discussion of his inaugural crowds” (Sinderbrand, 2017). The Post article, titled “How Kellyanne Conway ushered in the era of ‘alternative facts’”—discussed Trump’s assertion that his inaugural crowd was larger than that of his predecessor, Barack Obama.

The article focused on an exchange with NBC anchor Chuck Todd in which Conway disputed the charge that the Trump administration lied about the inaugural size. Instead, she asserted, it provided “alternative facts”:

“

CHUCK TODD: Wait a minute— Alternative facts?

KELLYANNE CONWAY: —that there’s—

CHUCK TODD: Alternative facts? Four of the five facts he uttered, the one thing he got right—

KELLYANNE CONWAY: —hey, Chuck, why— Hey Chuck—

CHUCK TODD: —was Zeke Miller. Four of the five facts he uttered were just not true. Look, alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods.

”

Thus entered into our U.S. news lexicon the term “alternative facts,” which dictionary.com defines as: “falsehoods, untruths, delusions. A fact is something that actually exists—what we would call ‘reality’ or ‘truth.’”

Amid the Mueller special counsel probe, which investigated possible Trump collusion with Russia in the 2016 presidential election, the president’s lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, uttered another iconic claim. In an article titled “‘Truth isn’t truth’: Giuliani trumps ‘alternative facts’ with new Orwellian outburst,” The Guardian dissected yet another Chuck Todd interview about the president testifying before Mueller:

“

GIULIANI: “When you tell me [Trump] should testify because he’s going to tell the truth so he shouldn’t worry, well that’s so silly because it’s somebody’s version of the truth, not the truth.”

TODD: “I don’t mean to...”

GIULIANI: “No, it isn’t truth! Truth isn’t truth.”

”

The Guardian summed up that moment in one sentence: “In a world that has given us ‘fake news’, ‘enemy of the people’ – infamously and also to a disbelieving Todd – Kellyanne Conway’s ‘alternative facts’, Trump’s war on reality had just found its jingle” (No author, August 19, 2018).

The reference to “enemy of the people” is particularly revealing. That phrase came in a Feb. 17, 2017 tweet from Trump who proclaimed: “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”

Citing that tweet, the New York Times noted that Trump repeats that phrase when confronted with stories that deviate from his alternative reality (Davis, 2018). That reality, embraced by multitudes at his campaign rallies, defines truth for millions of Americans; reports to the contrary in the mainstream media are labeled “fake.” Truth has been turned on its head.

As of this writing (Spring 2019), the Washington Post’s fact-checking database stands at 10,111 false claims by Trump in 828 days (Kessler, Rizzo & Kelly), including these latest tall tales:

- He took credit for funding a program – the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative – his administration tried to eliminate.
- He claimed he passed the biggest tax cut in history (no) and he said he had cut the estate tax to “zero” (no).
- He falsely said the United States paid for “almost 100 percent” of NATO (no).

Tall tales are part of American lore, and Trump has glommed on to that. Whilst campaigning in Iowa in January 2016, he told his most fabulous tale: "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue [New York City] and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters."

In light of claims such as this, *The Economist* drew the connection between Trump and folklore heroes of U.S. history: "His fame may have been incubated on TV and in the Twittersphere but his persona – big, brash, boastful – goes all the way back to the Wild West" with characters like lumberjack Paul Bunyan who created the Great Lakes to water his ox Babe or pioneer Davy Crockett "who told Congress in 1857: 'I can walk like an ox, run like a fox, swim like an eel, yell like an Indian, fight like a devil and spout like an earthquake, make love like a mad bull'" (Shone, 2016). The article posits, "The truly American attitude, of course, is to suspect a hoax but still go along with it, just for the hell of it."

That attitude has been exacerbated by social media, where most Americans get their news. According to the Pew Research Center, 68% of American adults rely in part on social media for news, but "are skeptical of the information they see there: A majority (57%) say they expect the news they see on social media to be largely inaccurate" (Matsa & Shearer, 2018).

The Pew report notes that Americans turn to social media for news because of ease of use. "Convenience" is by far the most commonly mentioned benefit, (21%), while 8% say they most enjoy the interactions with other people."

That study affirms the hypothesis of Vanishing Act: *The Erosion of Online Footnotes and Implications for Scholarship in the Digital Age*, which traces the history of communication platforms from stone age to present.

As co-authors Bugeja and Dimitrova note, communication on cave rock (drawings) was permanent; to view it, one had to be in the cave at an appointed time. That might be inconvenient. Rock had limited storage space and was not easily portable. However, by the third millennium B.C., clay tablets were in use in Babylonian temples, which one had to visit to access. Tablets were less permanent than rock but had more storage space. Then came scrolls of papyrus and vellum, parchment manuscripts, and, finally, books in libraries, all less permanent than rock and clay with increasing space for content and, more important, portability. What drove innovation in each era? "Throughout history, concerning archives, convenience trumped permanence when it came to fetching something from the archives. Convenience is to portability as permanence is to durability. ... The Internet scrambled all these factors, making physical place insignificant with 24/7 accessible databanks and digital journals and books, owned by others and stored as files on servers" (2010, pp.11-12).

Although Vanishing Act documented disappearing footnotes of primary sources in communication research, endangering social scientific replicability, and recommended what now is in use in most journals, digital object identifiers, the disclosure of convenience as prime factor of innovation holds true today concerning news viewership.

Other factors in Vanishing Act also come into play in ascertaining how news media functioned before omnipresent mobile online access—specifically, place. In the 1970s, during the U.S. Vietnam War and Richard Nixon impeachment, viewers assembled in living rooms at a set time to watch network news. Polls in 1972 and 1974 dubbed CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite "the most trusted man in America" (CBS, 2009) to state the facts and sign off with his signature motto: "And that's the way it is."

Journalism had great impact in that era, primarily because newspapers and networks had noon and evening deadlines every day with ample time to fact-check sources and citations. People waited until the next cycle for updates and reports. Advertising was ample, too, underwriting newsrooms with all manner of editors and reporters across the country and globe. That no longer is the case.

According to the Pew Research Center, U.S. newsroom employment between 2008-2017 dropped by 23%, with newspapers declining by 45%, from 71,000 workers to 39,000 (Grieco, 2018). The decline has spawned so-called news deserts where communities no longer have access to local news and must rely on social media and national newspapers such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal. A University of North Carolina study shows that more than 1,300 communities have lost local outlets with 20 percent of metro and community newspapers (about 1,800) going out of business or merging since 2004 (Stites, 2018).

Readers and viewers living in news deserts rely on social media and national outlets covering politics. Reports there are often partisan, and that has had an impact on voting in recent U.S. elections, according to a recent study.

Authors found that “the decline of local newspapers and the ‘nationalization’ of political news are polarizing vote choice: Voters were 1.9 percent more likely to vote for the same party for president and senator after a newspaper closes in their community, compared to voters in statistically similar areas where a newspaper did not close” (Darr, Joshua P.; Dunaway, Johanna; Hitt, Matthew P. Hitt, 2019). The authors note that 1.9 percent may not seem like much but often is enough to win elections.

In an article titled, “Does Journalism Have a Future,” Jill Lepore discusses the cumulative effect of news deserts in the post-truth era: “The broader problem is that the depravity, mendacity, vulgarity, and menace of the Trump Administration have put a lot of people, including reporters and editors, off their stride” (2019). In the age of social media, she observes, legacy news organizations have amended or violated their own editorial standards, contributing to political chaos and allowing Trump’s Twitter feed to set the daily agenda. She notes a troubling aspect of journalism’s traditional role: The more adversarial the press, “the more broken American public life. The more desperately the press chases readers, the more our press resembles our politics.”

The more our press resembles our politics, the more Americans embrace falsehood, seeking affirmation over information.

A recent study documented the impact of falsehood on Twitter. Investigators analyzed verifiable true and false tweets between 2006 to 2017. “Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. ...

Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust” (Vosoughi, Soroush; Roy, Deb; and Ara, Sinan, 2018).

The study also noted that contrary to conventional wisdom, “robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate, implying that false news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it.”

A 2019 study explored what age group was most apt to spread fake news on Facebook, finding that political conservatives were more likely to share such reports than liberals or moderates, with users over 65 sharing “nearly seven times as many articles from fake news domains as the youngest age group” (Guess, Andrew; Nagler, Jonathan; & Tucker, Joshua). The study utilized a list of verifiable fake domains that intentionally spread “false election-related stories generating the most Facebook engagement,” with results affirming “the tendency of respondents to share articles they agree with.” The study documents, in part, the urge to elevate affirmation over information in the post-truth era.

In a New York Times opinion piece, psychologists Gordon Pennycook and David Rand analyzed what makes people susceptible to fake news and what, if anything, can be done about it. “In general,” they write, “our political culture seems to be increasingly populated by people who espouse outlandish or demonstrably false claims that often align with their political ideology” (2019). The psychologists summarized research that indicates that people who share fake news fall into two categories. “One group claims that our ability to reason is hijacked by our partisan convictions: that is, we’re prone to rationalization. The other group – to which the two of us belong – claims that the problem is that we often fail to exercise our critical faculties: that is, we’re mentally lazy.”

Laziness invites convenience, once again the chief factor in the digital dissemination of fakes, hacks, hoaxes, and tall tales of the post-truth era. That effect will only worsen as big data instantaneously compiles our likes, dislikes and buying habits, expressed via social media, reducing human beings to nodes in the algorithmic cloud. As Facebook and Google attract more U.S. advertising in 2019 (\$129 billion) than traditional media of television, radio, and newspapers (\$109 billion), marking the first time ever that this has occurred (Wagner, 2019),

the impact this year was felt not only in legacy news outlets but also in online ones like Yahoo, the Huffington Post and BuzzFeed, which downsized reporting staffs, something that media futurists failed to foresee in advocating for digital journalism (Arnold, 2019). That effect also is likely to continue, decreasing the diversity of news outlets and potentially creating online news deserts.

There are no short-term fixes. That time has passed. Society at times seems too comfortable being uninformed but friended. Moreover, technology behemoths—Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Facebook et. al.—will continue to frame the news agenda, especially without government regulation in the United States.

There is a glimmer of hope in Americans beginning to realize the negative effects of fake news. The Pew Research Center reports that “nearly seven-in-ten U.S. adults (68%) say made-up news and information greatly impacts Americans’ confidence in government institutions, and roughly half (54%) say it is having a major impact on our confidence in each other” (Mitchell, Amy & Gottfried, Jeffrey, et. al., 2019). Nonetheless, the study goes on to state that U.S. adults blame politicians and activists more than journalists for fake news, believe journalists have a responsibility to fix the problem, and “think the issue will get worse in the foreseeable future.”

Responsibility in the post-truth era also falls to researchers in communication disciplines to document the civic and political ramifications of the current news climate. Perhaps, then, educational institutions will mandate required courses in technology and media literacy in the hope that emerging generations might discern fact from factoid, rightness from rumor, science from fiction, reality from fantasy, hypothesis from hype, and truth from myth.



## References

Arnold, Amanda (February 1, 2019). As Many As 2,100 People Have Lost Media Jobs in the Past Two Weeks. *The Cut*; <https://www.thecut.com/2019/02/vice-layoffs-buzzfeed-huffpost-media.html>

Axelrod, Tal (April 18, 2019) Trump blasts 'Greatest Political Hoax of all time' ahead of Mueller report release. *The Hill*; <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/439460-trump-lashes-out-at-clinton-dirty-cops-dnc-ahead-of-mueller-reports>

Bugeja, Michael & Dimitrova, Daniela (2010). *Vanishing Act: The Erosion of Online Footnotes and Implications for Scholarship in the Digital Age*. Duluth, Minn.: Library Juice Press.

Diamond, Jeremy (January 24, 2016). Trump: I could "shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." *CNN*; <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/politics/donald-trump-shoot-somebody-support/index.html>

Darr, Joshua P.; Dunaway, Johanna; Hitt, Matthew P. Hitt (February 11, 2019). When newspapers close, voters become more partisan. *Colorado State University*; <https://source.colostate.edu/when-newspapers-close-voters-become-more-partisan>. (Note: The authors' study was published in *Journal of Communication*, Volume 68, Issue 6, December 2018, Pages 1007–1028, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy051>. The study can be downloaded without a subscription at Research Gate: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328581050\\_Newspaper\\_Closures\\_Polarize\\_Voting\\_Behavior](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328581050_Newspaper_Closures_Polarize_Voting_Behavior)

Davis, William P. (February 17, 2017). "Enemy of the People": Trump Breaks Out This Phrase During Moments of Peak Criticism. *The New York Times*; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/business/media/trump-media-enemy-of-the-people.html>

Gass, Nick (March 3, 2016). Trump on small hands: "I guarantee you there's no problem." *Politico*; <https://www.politico.com/blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/03/donald-trump-small-hands-220223>

Grieco, Elizabeth (July 30, 2018). Newsroom employment dropped nearly a quarter in less than 10 years, with greatest decline at newspapers. *Pew Research Center*; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/30/newsroom-employment-dropped-nearly-a-quarter-in-less-than-10-years-with-greatest-decline-at-newspapers/>

Guess, Andrew; Nagler, Jonathan; Tucker, Joshua (January 9, 2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, Vol. 5, no. 1, DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aau4586; <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/1/eaau4586#F1>

Jones, Paul Anthony (March 7, 2017). "Fake" Etymology: The Story Behind One of the Dictionary's Most Intriguing Words. *Mentalfloss.com*; <http://mentalfloss.com/article/92556/fake-etymology-story-behind-one-dictionary-most-intriguing-words>

Kelly, John (October 4, 2016). "Hoax": just a little etymological hocus-pocus. *Mashedradish.com*; <https://mashedradish.com/2016/10/04/hoax-just-a-little-etymological-hocus-pocus/>

Kessler, Glenn; Rizzo, Salvador; & Kelly, Meg (April 29). President Trump Has Made More than 10,000 False or Misleading Claims. *The Washington Post*; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/29/president-trump-has-made-more-than-false-or-misleading-claims/?utm\\_term=.f8e0eeb1a85a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/29/president-trump-has-made-more-than-false-or-misleading-claims/?utm_term=.f8e0eeb1a85a)

Mitchell, Amy; Gottfriend, Jeffrey; Fedeli, Sophia; Stocking, Galen; & Walker, Mason (June 5, 2019). Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem That Needs To Be Fixed. *Pew Research Center*; <https://www.journalism.org/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/>

Matsa, Katerina Eva & Shearer, Elisa (September 10, 2018). Most Americans continue to get news on social media, even though many have concerns about its accuracy. Pew Research Center; September 10, 2018 <https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/>

No author (August 19, 2018). "Truth isn't truth": Giuliani trumps 'alternative facts' with new Orwellian outburst. The Guardian; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/19/truth-isnt-truth-rudy-giuliani-trump-alternative-facts-orwellian>

No author (July 17, 2009). Walter Cronkite Dies. CBS News; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/walter-cronkite-dies/>

No author (June 27, 2011). What is the origin of "tall tale?" Stake Exchange Network; <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/31737/what-is-the-origin-of-tall-tale>

Sinderbrand, Rebecca (January 22, 2017). How Kellyanne Conway ushered in the era of "alternative facts." The Washington Post; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/how-kellyanne-conway-ushered-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts/?utm\\_term=.e13addb34e9d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/how-kellyanne-conway-ushered-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts/?utm_term=.e13addb34e9d)

Shone, Tom (May 25, 2016). Why America Loves a Braggart. The Economist; <https://www.1843magazine.com/ideas/the-daily/why-america-loves-a-braggart>

Schmidt, Michael S. (July 13, 2016). Trump Invited the Russians to Hack Clinton. Were They Listening? The New York Times; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/us/politics/trump-russia-clinton-emails.html>

Soffen, Kim (August 5, 2016). Yes, Donald Trump's hands are actually pretty small. The Washington Post; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/08/05/yes-donald-trumps-hands-are-actually-pretty-small/?utm\\_term=.d97ff35ab923](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/08/05/yes-donald-trumps-hands-are-actually-pretty-small/?utm_term=.d97ff35ab923)

Stites, Tom (October 15, 2018). About 1,300 U.S. communities have totally lost news coverage, UNC news desert study finds. Poynter.org; <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2018/about-1300-u-s-communities-have-totally-lost-news-coverage-unc-news-desert-study-finds/>

Vosoughi, Soroush; Roy, Deb; and Ara, Sinan (March 9, 2018). The spread of true and false news online. Science, Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151; <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>

Wagner, Kurt (Feb. 20, 2019). Digital advertising in the US is finally bigger than print and television. Vox.com; <https://www.vox.com/2019/2/20/18232433/digital-advertising-facebook-google-growth-tv-print-emarketer-2019>

Yagoda, Ben (March 6, 2014). A Short History of "Hack." The New Yorker; <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/a-short-history-of-hack>

