

Russiagate, WikiLeaks, and the Political Economy of Posttruth News

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Problems of verification surrounded official claims concerning the role of WikiLeaks and Russia vis-à-vis the release of e-mails stolen from the Democratic National Convention before the U.S. federal election of 2016. In addition to the competing conspiracy theories and false stories promoted by fringe elements, major news organizations tailored their reporting to satisfy divergent truth markets. These developments fit with the emergence of a posttruth environment marked by increasingly fragmented media, irreconcilable portrayals of political developments, and widespread distrust of dominant institutions. However, consistent with the findings of past political economy research, most news reporting incorporated a steady stream of propaganda promoted by powerful political interests. Taken together, these realities should be understood as complementary, reflecting evolving institutional and market-driven media strategies aimed at controlling the nature and quality of information regularly made available to the public.

Keywords: Russiagate, posttruth, political economy, news, propaganda, alternative media

During the run-up to the U.S. federal election of 2016, the whistleblower platform and self-described journalistic entity known as WikiLeaks was able to exploit an ongoing crisis of legitimacy on the part of the two main political parties and influence national politics in the process. Through its disclosure of leaked Democratic National Convention (DNC) e-mails, the activist network cast doubt not only on the willingness of the DNC to back a candidate offering meaningful policy alternatives to those of the Republican Party but also on the DNC's integrity as a democratic institution. The leak was followed by allegations from the U.S. intelligence community that WikiLeaks had received the stolen e-mails from Russian agents as part of a broader campaign aimed at tilting the election in favor of Donald Trump. The fallout, now known as Russiagate, included an intense propaganda campaign facilitated by much of the U.S. media establishment, aimed at discrediting Trump, WikiLeaks, and numerous other individuals and alternative media sources for their alleged ties to Moscow. In a related twist, WikiLeaks received support not only from its traditional allies on the antiestablishment left but also among alt-right sources, and even from Fox News, an outlet that had once labelled the group a terrorist organization (McFarland, 2010).

These and related developments provide the substantive focus of this article. They are deemed significant here because they appear emblematic of an era marked by increasingly fragmented media, politically polarized publics, and widespread distrust of dominant institutions. The latter conditions are now

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often referred to in both academic and popular discourse under the rubric of "posttruth." At the same time, Russiagate underscores the continued relevance of the political economy perspective for appraising the content of mainstream news and its potential influence on public opinion. This is a critical point. On first consideration, posttruth understandings of today's media environment might appear at odds with those informing the political economy approach. The term "posttruth" points to the existence of fragmented publics inherently resistant to unifying portrayals of social reality (Andrejevic, 2013; Gibson, 2018; Harsin, 2018; van Zoonen, 2012; Waisbord, 2018). Mainstream news corporations must now compete not only with one another but also with countless alternative information providers that are highly attuned to the tastes and prejudices of their niche audiences. By contrast, a substantial body of political economy research posits that not only do a handful of media giants dominate the public sphere but also that their news products continue to reflect the interests and outlook of powerful elites (Brevini & Murdock, 2013; Fuchs, 2018; McChesney, 2008; Mirrlees, 2016; Nichols & McChesney, 2013).

The main argument pursued in this article is that despite these apparent discrepancies, insights informing both posttruth and political economy research are essential for appraising the status and character of commercial news products in liberal democracies like the United States. While mainstream news content continues to reflect the interests and outlook of powerful elites, media corporations have also adapted to the conditions of social fragmentation and distrust of authority associated with posttruth politics. Relevant concerns are addressed in three sections. The first reviews the ideas and developments most central to considerations of posttruth communication on the one hand, and the political economy of news on the other. Here, I argue that the premises informing these two approaches may be reconciled for a better appreciation of the evolving relationship between mainstream and alternative sources of "news." The contemporary hybrid (i.e., mass and new) media environment is markedly different from that which preceded the arrival of the Internet. Today, legacy news organizations engage actively with this environment. However, they do so conditioned by the same types of political/economic incentives and constraints that have long shaped the ideological character of commercial news.

The main body of the article considers Russiagate as a case in point. It is divided into two subsections. The first establishes the political significance of the 2016 federal election and the controversies surrounding it. The second analyses the nature of related media commentary through reference to ideas covered in the review. It will be affirmed that the marked proliferation of false claims, rumors, and conspiracy theories during this period was consistent with prevailing understandings of posttruth communication. It will also be demonstrated that the subsequent behavior of mainstream news organizations was consistent with practices of news sourcing and reporting revealed in previous political economy research. Large news operations continue to rely on official governmental and corporate sources for a steady supply of information. Nonetheless, grassroots and/or alternative media networks often provide useful fodder for partisan attacks and commentary. Rumors and conspiracy theories promoted by interested parties and/or of uncertain origin may also be used to reinforce propaganda aimed at discrediting persons or sources genuinely critical of the political status quo.

The concluding section of this article reaffirms that mainstream news coverage of Russiagate was in keeping with longstanding patterns of reporting on contentious issues in which powerful interests have a clear stake. This was reflected in a decidedly limited range of media debate on matters holding considerable

importance to the public. For the most part, relevant reporting reflected an elite consensus within most of the intelligence and political establishments concerning challenges to U.S. foreign policy posed by Russia. Real or imagined threats to American democracy were grossly exaggerated, while critics of the official narrative concerning Russian election interference were demonized or ignored. The one major outlier, Fox News, focused on alternative scandals and conspiracies as a means for bolstering partisan attacks on Democrats. Consistent with the above, major networks like MSNBC and Fox proved adept at exploiting their respective "truth markets" within a polarized public sphere. These and related issues will now be considered in turn, beginning with attention to posttruth and political economy understandings of news and communication in the present media ecology.

Posttruth Communication and the Political Economy of News: Convergent Concerns

The growing academic literature on posttruth foregrounds two closely related sets of issues. The first concerns widespread change in public attitudes toward "truth," authority, and political legitimacy, particularly since the turn of the 21st century (Harsin, 2018). At the popular level, this interest is reflected in increasing media attention to such matters as political lying, "fake news," and the proliferation of conspiracy theories (Bratich, 2008; Corner, 2017). Relevant scholarship has looked broadly to the rise in public distrust within liberal democracies toward political, media, and professional institutions, and a related skepticism toward sources of knowledge formerly viewed as authoritative (Gibson, 2018). The main premise informing this research is not that an era of truth has been left behind in which politicians were more honest or the media more objective. Rather, the assertion is that we have entered a period wherein popular conceptions of truth have become markedly ephemeral, elusive, divided, and contested (Waisbord, 2018). At minimum, this reflects a lack of shared norms and values within a fragmented public. More importantly it suggests the erosion of any consensus to the effect that truth-telling represents "a single, rational assessment of reality determined by official institutions such as government, universities, and science" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 20).

Following Zizek, Andrejevic (2013) and Dean (2002, 2009) describe the current social environment in terms of the demise of symbolic efficiency. The implication is that dominant and widely shared ideological assumptions about social/political reality are losing their given, naturalized, and hence largely invisible character. Symbols travel efficiently when they need not be stopped or questioned (Dean, 2002). Though suspicion and distrust are never completely absent from the public sphere, today the common ground of universalized norms, values, and expectations needed to constitute a public as such is losing its efficacy (Dean, 2002). Citizens must share basic assumptions about what reality is like if policy issues are to be explored or debated meaningfully (Gibson, 2018). They must also have at least some faith in dominant social/political institutions. Such trust is threatened at a time when the previous "regime of truth" or apparatus of legitimate knowledge production appears to be breaking down (Harsin, 2015; Waisbord, 2018). One consequence is that scientists, economists, and other experts associated with state institutions are less apt to be regarded as objective disseminators of knowledge, and more likely to be perceived as interested parties beholden to powerful elites.

Under such circumstances, individuals are inclined to associate truth with their own subjective experiences or "gut instincts" and hence with more micro group allegiances (Andrejevic, 2013; van Zoonen,

2012). This tendency relates directly to the second major area of academic interest in posttruth. At issue are the new channels, networks, and patterns of mediated communication corresponding to the changing conditions outlined above. Citizens of democratic societies are increasingly beholden to their own media and information networks, each with its attendant truth-teller pundits, fact-checker websites, and microcelebrity activists (Harsin, 2015; Tufekci, 2013). This reality has in turn been encouraged and harnessed to suit the needs of capital. Sophisticated techniques for monitoring the tastes and political outlooks of citizen/consumers are now heavily relied on to facilitate commerce. Products and services are refined to hold viewer attention and trigger further consumer engagement and/or "political participation" from the markets identified or created through various processes of dataveillance and sentiment analysis (Andrejevic, 2013; Dean, 2009). In conjunction with the rise of the reflexive economy, resource-rich elites now attempt to manage the breakdown of mass audiences into consumer niche audiences and "truth markets" (Harsin, 2015).

Before proceeding further, several points deserve emphasis. First, the growing public distrust in political institutions referred to above is a well-documented reality, reflecting a general global trend (Castells, 2013). Significantly, this distrust appears closely tied to a sense among citizens that political elites are now more responsive to global capital and/or powerful special interests than to the publics they claim to represent (Castells, 2012, 2013). Secondly, public distrust extends to the media. A Gallup Poll conducted in 2016 found that Americans' trust and confidence in the mainstream media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" has dropped to its lowest level since 1972, with only 32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media (Swift, 2016, para. 1). Finally, it must be acknowledged that major news corporations, whether legacy newspapers like *The New York Times* or television broadcasters like CNN, have felt compelled to adjust their formats to adapt to the Internet environment. As stressed in the posttruth literature, this means coexisting with countless new grassroots, commercial, and governmental providers of services and information online.

Somewhat paradoxically, however, none of these developments need spell an end to the dominant status of the mainstream news media. In fact, the fragmentation of civil society into competing issue-oriented publics and truth markets guarantees that no single media source or verifier/debunker of truth claims will ever emerge as definitive (Harsin, 2015). Hence, no niche-oriented alternative outlet can hope to challenge the status of established brands such as Fox News, CNN, and *The New York Times*. The latter are positioned to endure as the public's primary default sources of news for the foreseeable future, even as they pursue new means for dominating the Web through partnerships with and/or exploitation of leading Internet service providers, social media platforms and search engines (Fuchs, 2018). Moreover, while they increasingly cultivate truth markets along partisan lines, the latter still represent mass audiences. In November 2016, CNN.com represented the most popular online news source in the world (Fuchs, 2018, p. 78). And as Brevini and Murdoch (2013) note, the top 7% of news sites take up 80% of overall traffic in the U.S. The top 10 outlets are all traditional news providers or major online portals and account for 25% of market share (p. 37).

As implied above, expansion into new media formats has not affected the basic character of the corporate-market constraints shaping the character of commercial news content (Brevini & Murdock, 2013; Fuchs 2018; Zollmann, 2018). The latter were concisely summed up by Herman and Chomsky (1988) in their "propaganda model" of news production. Here, the authors refer to five "filters" that work together to set the

parameters of what comes to be accepted as legitimate news discourse. They include the monopoly character and profit orientation of the corporate media, a related reliance on advertisers seeking desirable consumer audiences, dependence on official/institutional sources of information, and fear of “flak” in the form of discipline or sanctions that powerful interests may bring to bear on journalists or media outlets if and when the latter are deemed too critical in their reporting. The final filter concerns a generally shared ideological outlook on the part of media owners and other business leaders and the political elites with whom they interact and share interests. This outlook has historically been expressed in terms of hostility to communism and/or socialism, the promotion of “free” capitalist markets, and support for an unquestioned U.S. right to project its military force at will (Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Zollmann, 2018).

That mainstream news reporting and commentary ultimately serve to legitimate existing relations of power is a basic insight of political economy research. Indeed, Golding and Murdoch’s (1973) initial call for a political economy approach to mass communication was premised on the observation that the frameworks of interpretation media provide “are necessarily articulated with the nexus of interests producing them” (p. 226). This does not mean that the media are monolithic in their approach to news, that serious issues are never debated in the commercial media, or that critical commentary is entirely absent from news opinion and editorial. What it does mean is that the vast bulk of news discourse remains within relatively narrow ideological bounds. Even so, the impression of an open, rigorous, and/or adversarial watchdog press is maintained. What generally escapes notice is that the heated debate and punditry that occurs within and between ostensibly liberal versus conservative news outlets typically reflects disagreements among the powerful concerning generally shared aims. For the most part however, “views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors will be excluded from the mass media even when elite controversies over tactics rages fiercely” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xii).

Today, politicians rely heavily on rumors and scandals to attack their opponents (Castells, 2013), and political parties vie for popular support largely by exploiting “wedge issues.” Emotionally charged topics like abortion, gun control, and same-sex marriage are addressed in a manner geared to agitate and divide the voting public. Attention is thus diverted from such fundamental problems as deepening socioeconomic inequality and the creeping consolidation of the security state. Consistent with this, an ongoing commitment to neoliberal economics and domestic state surveillance practices now reflect a bipartisan consensus as has long been the case with core areas of U.S. foreign policy (Harvey, 2005; Lyon, 2015; Mirrlees, 2016). The same general pattern is visible at election time with an added emphasis on who is leading in the polls. Rarely is attention devoted to the crucial role played by corporate donors in affecting election outcomes. Once again, the “unspeakable” nature of this topic is linked directly to underlying structural realities (McMurtry, 1998). Sustained attention to the financial dependence of both major political parties on powerful special interests would necessarily call the very premise of a democratic system into question (Nichols & McChesney, 2013).

Significantly, posttruth conditions are likely to exacerbate the market pressures identified by political economy researchers as contributing to sensationalism and superficiality as well as inaccuracies in commercial news reporting. A marked push toward infotainment and away from more resource intensive investigative journalism has been ongoing since the 1980s (McChesney 2008; Thussu 2007, 2015). And beginning in the 1990s, the implosion of the new media and mass media environments has transformed the

playing field in which news providers must operate. Today, a crowded and affectively charged attention economy places commercial news organizations under increasing pressure to hold viewer/reader attention and locate scoops quickly (Harsin, 2006). Moreover, while publishing a sensational but misleading or false piece of news may force an eventual retraction or apology, the cost may be outweighed by a boost in ratings and advertising revenue (Jordan, 2019). The posttruth media environment thus encourages news outlets to be less cautious when selecting choice pieces of information, the origins or authenticity of which may be difficult to verify (Harsin, 2006).

The tension and interplay among corporate news organizations striving to exploit posttruth conditions on the one hand, and the growing prevalence of alternative media platforms expressing public disillusionment with the status quo on the other, will now be considered through reference to Russiagate. Because of the ongoing nature of this imbroglio, the emphasis will be on relevant mainstream and alternative media commentary throughout 2016–17. Attention will first be given to the significance of relevant political developments leading up to Russiagate. This will be followed by consideration of the rumor, conspiracy theory, and propaganda war involving competing establishment and alternative information sources that followed on the heels of WikiLeaks' disclosure of stolen DNC e-mails. In the process, it will be made clear that communicative dynamics closely associated with posttruth politics were highly visible throughout this period. It will also be demonstrated that the major American news outlets benefitted from Russiagate, even as they reproduced the ideologically narrow range of viewpoints consistently uncovered in past political economy research.

Prelude to Russiagate

In the months leading up to the U.S. federal election of 2016, a deepening crisis of legitimacy on the part of the two main political parties appeared to be coming to a head. It was Democratic hopeful Bernie Sanders and Republican contender Donald Trump who were best prepared to respond to this crisis, and who proved the most adept at tapping into antiestablishment and anti-elite sentiments. Commensurate with posttruth trends, their popularity reflected resentment of a political system widely perceived to be in the grip of powerful elites. Despite enormous differences in their political programs and target demographics, both Sanders and Trump signaled a willingness to undertake major policy shifts holding widespread public appeal. The most noteworthy of these were directly at odds with the longstanding positions of their respective parties. For example, both candidates promised to rein in free trade, curb the influence of powerful lobbyists, and engage in a less militaristic foreign policy. In addition, Sanders advocated universal health care, while Trump vowed to impose unprecedented restrictions on legal and illegal immigration.

Remarkably, both candidates managed to gain large-scale public support in the face of determined opposition from within the upper ranks of their own party establishments. This, despite ongoing demonization and ridicule, or in Sanders' case, prolonged inattention, from the mainstream news media (Patterson, 2016). Defying the predictions of pundits and analysts, both contenders drew enormous crowds of enthusiastic supporters to their respective rallies. A piece in *The New York Times* headed "The More Donald Trump Defies his Party, the More His Supporters Cheer" captured the dynamic at work within the Republican camp (Gabriel, 2016). Meanwhile, Bernie Sanders was riding a growing tide of popular support, particularly among youthful voters. The latter trend highlighted the discrepancy between the strong support

Hillary Clinton enjoyed from party delegates versus the more even split of voters favoring either Clinton or Sanders among the Democratic base (Cassidy, 2016).

It was against this backdrop that on July 22, 2016, WikiLeaks released the first of 44,053 e-mails and 17,761 attachments stolen from the DNC, the governing body of the Democratic Party. This was soon followed by the release of e-mails taken from the personal Gmail account of Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta, in October and November. Though the correspondence in question dealt with a range of sensitive issues, revelations in two related areas stood out, striking a chord with much of the public. The first and most fateful of these concerned e-mail exchanges suggesting that the DNC was intentionally sidelining Bernie Sanders to ensure that Hillary Clinton would lead her party and ultimately claim the presidency. This included correspondence indicating that the day before Clinton's March 13 CNN Town Hall debate against Sanders, interim DNC Chair Donna Brazile had passed relevant questions to the Clinton campaign in advance. DNC officials also discussed ways to exploit Sanders' potential vulnerability on faith questions. The idea was that by outing Sanders as an atheist as opposed to an observant Jew, he would lose support among evangelical Christian voters.

The second most damaging aspect of the leak concerned Clinton's ties to "big money." It seems clear that even before the leak, Sanders' supporters viewed the self-proclaimed democratic socialist as a more genuinely progressive candidate than his rival. Sanders had already criticized Clinton's close ties to Wall Street, rhetoric that appealed to his growing following of young voters. His image as the more left-leaning choice was surely reinforced when transcripts of Clinton's paid speeches to Goldman Sachs were made public by WikiLeaks. As Confessore and Eder (2016) wrote in *The New York Times*, an outlet generally sympathetic to Clinton, the DNC leak revealed the "transactional exchanges necessary to harvest hundreds of millions of dollars from the party's wealthy donor class" and captured a world where "seating charts are arranged with dollar totals in mind, where a White House celebration of gay pride is a thinly disguised occasion for rewarding wealthy donors and where physical proximity to the president is the most precious of currencies" (paras. 5-6).

The DNC leak provided the Trump campaign with a potent weapon against the Democrats. Trump's ongoing references to "crooked Hillary" placed enormous pressure on the Clinton campaign to formulate an effective strategic response. The necessary ammunition arrived on October 7, 2016. This was when the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Department of Homeland Security issued a joint statement to the effect that the U.S. intelligence community was confident that the Russian government had directed recent hacking of e-mails with the intention of interfering with the U.S. election process. Later, on January 6, 2017, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a National Intelligence Assessment (NIA), *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. It affirmed that the Russian military intelligence service had hacked the servers of the DNC and the personal Gmail account of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta before passing their contents along to WikiLeaks (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). The NIA also asserted that the hacking attempt was part of a broader campaign ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, aimed at hurting Hillary Clinton's chances of winning the election.

The stage was thus set for the eventual investigation of the Trump administration for its alleged ties to the Kremlin, and more immediately for a propaganda campaign aimed at discrediting WikiLeaks and other media outlets that questioned the NIA's claims. Leading news outlets reacted quickly, engaging in rampant speculation about covert Russian election interference and/or exploiting rumors and conspiracy theories likely to appeal to their respective truth markets. On Democrat-friendly networks like CNN and MSNBC, Donald Trump was/is frequently referred to as a "Kremlin puppet" and WikiLeaks as a tool of Russian intelligence. By contrast, commentators on Fox News defended Trump before and after his election victory, with the accusations made against him dismissed as part of a witch hunt. These developments will now be considered in relation to both prevailing dynamics of posttruth communication and the political economy constraints on news production reviewed earlier.

Posttruth Communication Meets Systemic Propaganda

Though typically alternative and/or web-based information sources are condemned as the progenitors of fake news, legacy news organizations may also contribute actively to public ignorance. Of particular concern here, their heavy dependence on official sources may lead to the uncritical repetition and reinforcement of misleading information or spurious claims either originating with, or encouraged and exploited by, actors closely linked to the political or intelligence establishments (Boyd-Barrett, 2004). The Bush administration's successful efforts to implicate Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 9/11 terror attacks provide one such example. Later attempts by commentators on Fox News and members of the Republican Party to encourage beliefs about President Obama's alleged foreign birth and secret Muslim identity provide another (Marmura, 2014). Both types of media behavior—namely, the facilitation of top-down propaganda on the one hand and partisan exploitation of rumors and conspiracy theories on the other, abounded throughout 2016–17. Because of their importance for both political economy and posttruth appraisals of the media and their frequent overlap in the case of Russiagate, relevant cases will necessarily be considered together.

In important respects, mainstream news coverage of Russiagate bore a strong resemblance to that preceding the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then, Americans were bombarded with false or misleading information concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and connections to Al Qaeda. The mainstream news media's role in terms of sensationalizing and uncritically conveying relevant official claims to the public was key to the success of that propaganda campaign (Boyd-Barrett, 2004). Similarly, and regardless of the actual level of Russian "meddling" in the 2016 election, most major U.S. news outlets were quick to join politicians in a chorus of anti-Russian rhetoric based on intelligence claims unaccompanied by proof or verification (see below). In this sense at least, the role played by most of the American media establishment largely transcended partisan disputes, reflecting a broad elite consensus concerning the wisdom of maintaining an aggressive U.S. stance toward Putin's Russia. Russia has directly challenged U.S. foreign policy goals in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere, and appears determined to reassert itself as an independent power on the global stage. Its attempts to forge deeper economic and political alliances with China and increase its influence through institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have been a growing concern to Democrats and Republicans alike.

In partial tension with this reality, the Republican Party has struggled to coopt a rising tide of right-wing populist sentiment. As reflected in Trump's pre-election speeches, the latter has not always aligned

itself neatly with past Republican positions on such matters as immigration, free trade, and “global policing.” Among major networks, Fox has proven adept in terms of cultivating the populist-right market. Its success as America’s leading source of news has also shifted the existing range of mainstream discourse rightward (Andrejevic, 2013; Bellamy Foster & McChesney, 2003). What now passes as “left-wing” critique in ostensibly liberal news outlets has largely been reduced to an often-superficial concern with identity politics. This has pushed attention to structural causes of social inequality and U.S. militarism further to the margins (Pedro-Caranana, Broudy, & Klaehn, 2018). Meanwhile, the major news networks have benefitted from the subsequent division of truth markets. During the first year of Russiagate, total profits from Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN increased by 13% (Jordan, 2019, para. 22).

The posttruth media environment provides these same news organizations with an important resource. Within it, conspiracy theories, rumors, and hoaxes circulate freely, increasing the chances that they will be exploited for political purposes and/or economic gain (Harsin, 2006). This was evident in the readiness with which rumors about the physical and mental health of Hillary Clinton were used by right-wing politicians and media outlets in 2016. During her recovery from pneumonia, Clinton’s frequent coughing fits fueled speculation on social media that she was experiencing health problems ranging from Parkinson’s disease and epilepsy to advancing dementia (Tufekci, 2016). These rumors were in turn linked to the notion that Clinton was able to conceal her frailties because the head of her Secret Service detail was both her hypnotist and a medical doctor. As Tufekci (2016) observes, such stories received a boost when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York, an ardent Trump supporter, stated on Fox News that the news media had failed to cover Clinton’s health. He advised Fox viewers to “go online and put down ‘Hillary Clinton illness,’ take a look at the videos for yourself” (para. 4).

An overemphasis on the news media’s growing tendency to exploit rumors along partisan lines may obscure two important realities. First, widespread distrust of authority is grounded in a genuine crisis of political legitimacy. Secondly, mainstream news commentary routinely marginalizes voices that challenge the status quo. The DNC’s attempts to undermine the Sanders campaign underscores the importance of both points. In the months preceding the leak, those claiming that the DNC was biased in Clinton’s favor were often ridiculed as conspiracy theorists. Meanwhile, leading news outlets like *The New York Times* suggested that Sanders’ “radical” policies made him unelectable (Naureckas, 2015). Relative to the other candidates, his campaign was also underreported (Patterson, 2016). Yet various polls indicated that Sanders stood a better chance of defeating Trump in a federal election than did Clinton (Johnson, 2016a). DNC officials were clearly aware of the suspicions of Sanders supporters. In May 2016, three weeks before the critical California primary, a DNC staffer e-mailed Communications Director Luis Miranda, “wondering if there’s a good Bernie narrative for a story, which is that Bernie never had his act together, that his campaign was a mess.” The message ends with the statement, “It’s not a DNC conspiracy, it’s because they never had their act together” (Marmura, 2018, p. 116).

Verifying the authenticity of newsworthy information represents a potentially serious problem for journalists, especially when they must rely exclusively on official sources (Harsin, 2006). In the case of Russiagate, fundamental problems of verification derived from both the nature and content of the intelligence report concerning the alleged Russian hack of DNC e-mails. Though it has routinely been presented as such—the *Times* did not retract its own misrepresentation of the issue until June 29, 2017—

the report in question did not take the form of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). NIEs are generally considered authoritative because they are based on a consensus among all 17 U.S. intelligence services (Ritter, 2017). By contrast, the Russia National Intelligence Assessment (NIA) did not represent such a consensus, nor was it the product of careful coordination among the CIA, NSA, and FBI (Ritter, 2017). Analysts from the three agencies were involved in the NIA's production. However, as former DNI James Clapper testified before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee on May 8, 2016, "the two dozen or so analysts for this task were hand-picked" for the job (Marmura, 2018, p. 119). Specifically, they were part of a separate, secretive task force operating under the close supervision of the CIA Director, and not as an integral part of their home agency or department (Ritter, 2017).

At least as importantly, the NIA provides no real evidence that the DNC e-mail server had been hacked. For the most part, however, major news outlets were quick to repeat the NIA's claims as established truths. This is a noteworthy trend given the admission of the assessment's authors that their judgements "are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, p. 13). The main thrust of the assessment is that numerous actors were involved in Russian efforts to influence the election in Trump's favor. These included covert intelligence operatives as well as "Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or 'trolls'" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, p. 2). However, as emphasized by Herman (2017), rather than presenting evidence of serious Russian election interference, the NIA is largely devoted to defaming the reporting practices of the Russian news network Russia Today (RT). Significantly as well, mainstream news outlets have largely ignored a credible—though not definitive—study suggesting that the DNC e-mails were not hacked at all but rather passed to WikiLeaks by a DNC insider (Herman, 2017; Lawrence, 2017).

If history is any guide, efforts by powerful countries to influence one another's domestic politics are best understood as an ongoing, if unfortunate, feature of relations among nation-states. In the case of ongoing U.S. interference in the affairs of other countries (e.g., spying, drone assassinations, supporting coups), such activity tends to be given either little attention in the American press or presented as the responsible conduct of a benign world leader (McChesney, 2008; Mirrlees, 2016). The latter approach was adopted by *TIME* in July 1996, when the magazine's cover boldly announced covert U.S. efforts to ensure that Boris Yeltsin won the Russian election against his Communist rival. The featured article was titled, "Rescuing Boris: The secret of how four U.S. advisors used polls, focus groups, negative ads and all the other techniques of American campaigning to help Boris Yeltsin win." The piece ended by declaring, "Democracy triumphed—and along with it came the tools of modern campaigns, including the trickery and slickery Americans know so well. If those tools are not always admirable, the result they helped achieve in Russia surely is" (Kramer, 1996, p. 37).

The above points underscore the propagandist nature of the campaign being waged against Russia. Given both the ubiquitous nature of information warfare among nation-states and the murky character of the charges levelled against Russia in the January 6 NIA, the subsequent behavior of the news media cannot be accounted for in terms journalistic responsibility. Glenn Greenwald (2017a), of *The Intercept*, notes the credulity and enthusiasm with which multiple accusations of Russian meddling were greeted by major outlets, only to be debunked shortly thereafter. They include the headline-making claim that Russia

attempted to hack into the voting stations of 21 states, the charge made in *The Washington Post* that Russia had hacked the U.S. electricity grid, a story carried by *The Slate* that Trump had created a secret server with a Russian Bank, a *Guardian* story asserting that WikiLeaks had a long relationship with the Kremlin, and the suggestion in *Fortune* that Russia Today (RT) had hacked into and taken over C-SPAN's network. It is also worth observing that while Russia's use of social media has been an ongoing concern in outlets like *The New York Times*, no credible evidence presented to date suggests that it had any meaningful effect on U.S. voter behavior (Porter, 2018).

News organizations have a long record of being reckless with unsubstantiated claims when there is a low probability that such action will invite costly retribution (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008). Another salient example occurred on Friday, December 8, 2017, when CNN announced that Wikileaks had secretly offered the Trump campaign special access to the DNC e-mails on September 4, 2016. This was 10 days before the whistle-blower platform allowed access to the material online. As it turned out, the e-mail in question was really dated September 14, after WikiLeaks had made the e-mails public. Later, when compelled to retract the story, CNN claimed that it did not possess the e-mail in question and that "multiple sources" had provided it with the false date (Greenwald, 2017b). The same pattern occurred in the cases of CBS and MSNBC. CBS News claimed that it had independently confirmed CNN's story and published its own article discussing the grave implications of the discovered collusion. And in the case of MSNBC, "intelligence and national security correspondent" Ken Dilanian also claimed independent verification of the false report (Greenwald, 2017b).

In times of alleged threats to national security, even baseless attacks on critics of the establishment are unlikely to invite dissension (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). That much was apparent after "intelligence expert" Malcolm Nance falsely stated before MSNBC viewers on August 20, 2016, that Green Party leader Jill Stein had her own show on RT (Johnson, 2016b). MSNBC never issued an apology or attempted to correct the misinformation in question. Later, Nance falsely claimed on Twitter that Glenn Greenwald was "an agent of Moscow" who is "deep in the Kremlin pocket" (Greenwald, 2018, para. 15). Other attempts to discredit dissenting voices were more ambitious. On November 24, 2016, *The Washington Post* provided its readers with a link to a report by PropOrNot, a group that insisted on public anonymity. The news story went under the headline "Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread 'Fake News' During Election, Experts Say" (Timberg, 2016). PropOrNot in turn provided readers with a list of 200 websites—WikiLeaks among them—that it claimed intentionally or unwittingly served as "routine peddlers of Russian propaganda" (Herman, 2017, para. 37). As Herman (2017) observes, many of the websites listed in the group's report were independent news outlets whose only shared trait was a critical stance toward U.S. foreign policy.

The U.S. intelligence community clearly felt it had a stake in 2016 election. Former CIA head Michael Morell endorsed Hillary Clinton in an August 2016 op-ed in *The New York Times*. Another former CIA director, Michael Hayden (2016), published an op-ed in *The Washington Post* days before the election, titled "Former CIA Chief: Trump Is Russia's Useful Fool." Hayden is now in the employ of CNN, as is former DNI Director James Clapper. Television interviews of these and other intelligence figures are now commonplace on major news networks. Broadcasting their "expert talk" is cheaper than filling 24 hours of airtime with reporting (Shafer, 2018). This practice, in addition to the examples cited above, takes on added significance when considering the long history of U.S. intelligence efforts to use major news outlets for

political purposes. As Boyd-Barrett (2004) documents, this once included the publication of hundreds of books aimed at undermining the Soviet Union and Communism, aided by CIA ownership of dozens of newspapers and magazines worldwide. In 1977, it was revealed that more than 400 U.S. journalists had been employed by the CIA for more than 25 years, with almost every major U.S. news organization penetrated by the CIA at some level (Boyd-Barrett, 2004, p. 436).

None of the above means that the Russian government made no attempt to influence the 2016 election. However, the zeal with which most media outlets were prepared to accept official claims and/or unsubstantiated rumors on the matter cannot be explained through reference to the available weight of evidence. Nor can it be accounted for by pointing to WikiLeaks' "subversive" role in disclosing the DNC e-mails, and act fully in keeping with the journalistic imperative to serve as public watchdog. As previously indicated, however, the mainstream media's behavior was and remains consistent with the more general interest of news organizations in obtaining scoops, combined with a well-documented tendency to uncritically accept claims widely backed by establishment interests. Moreover, as was the case in 2003, when the American public was being prepared for an illegal war in Iraq, Russiagate enabled a major propaganda achievement (Herman, 2017). Regardless of whether Trump really intended to normalize ties with Russia, it has now become all but impossible. And, as Herman (2017) adds, "evidence free claims of a Russian Hacking intrusion have helped divert attention from the real electoral abuses disclosed by the WikiLeaks material" (para. 32).

In addition to facilitating top-down propaganda, Russiagate paved the way for the exploitation of rival truth markets. MSNBC was particularly aggressive in terms of catering to the sentiments of pro-Clinton Democrats and by extension those of neoconservative foreign policy hawks. This was most apparent in the case of *The Rachel Maddow Show* (TRMS). A quantitative study conducted by *The Intercept* concerning all 28 TRMS episodes in the six-week period between February 20 and March 31 found that Russia-focused segments accounted for 53% of these broadcasts (Mate, 2017, para. 9). Aaron Mate (2017) points out that this figure is conservative, excluding segments where Russia was discussed, but not the main topic. Maddow's pursuit of all things Russiagate was relentless. After Trump ordered a bombing operation in Syria in April 2017, gaining praise from virtually all major news outlets in the process, she concurred with her co-anchor that Putin may have helped set the stage for the operation to boost Trump's domestic support (Mate, 2017).

Certainly, it was inevitable that many right-wing media sources would rally to the president's defense, appealing to the populism and anti-elitism of his base. While most of the outlets in question are widely regarded as fringe media, one giant, Fox News, also attempted to cast doubt on the dominant narrative of Trump/Russia/WikiLeaks collusion. These efforts reached their peak in May 2017, when Fox's Sean Hannity chose to promote a particularly sensational conspiracy theory initially encouraged by WikiLeaks' leader, Julian Assange. This concerned the notion that a 27-year-old, mid-level DNC staffer named Seth Rich had leaked the stolen e-mails, secretly passing them along to WikiLeaks. In this version of reality, Rich was then murdered to prevent discovery of the leak's true origins. In addition to the attention it received on Fox News, the story circulated rapidly within alternative forums online, was defended by Rush Limbaugh on his talk radio show, and received coverage on RT. Newt Gingrich stated that the matter deserved further investigation, and even referred to Rich's death as an "assassination" (Dreyfuss, 2017; Weigel, 2017).

Seth Rich was indeed killed, having been shot twice in the back by an unknown assailant or assailants. The incident took place near his home in Northeast Washington on July 6, 2016. The DC police maintain that Rich was shot during a botched robbery attempt. Nothing was stolen from him, but there had been a string of recent robberies in the area, and bruises on Rich's hands and face showed signs of a struggle (Greenberg, 2017; Weigel, 2017). The conspiracy theory surrounding his death has received critical scrutiny in a range of publications and/or fact-checking websites including *The Nation*, *New York Magazine*, *Wired*, *Snopes*, and *Media Matters*. The various holes and problems identified in relation to it will not be reviewed here. For present purposes, it is enough to point out that on May 17, 2017, Fox News felt compelled to drop the story due to the absence of any hard evidence to back it up, even as Sean Hannity vowed to personally continue his investigation of the matter.

Assange had once hinted that Rich might have been WikiLeaks' source for the DNC e-mails. During an interview on YouTube on Aug. 9, 2016, he stated that

whistle-blowers go to significant efforts to get us material, and often take very significant risks. A 27-year-old, that works for the DNC, was shot in the back, murdered, just two weeks ago, for unknown reasons, as he was walking down the street in Washington. (Dreyfus, 2017, para. 9)

When pressed as to whether he was suggesting a murder Assange stated further that "others have suggested that. We are investigating to understand what happened in the situation with Seth Rich" (Dreyfus, 2017, para. 9). WikiLeaks also offered a \$20,000 reward for information about Rich's murder. Whether Assange himself truly believes or once believed that Seth Rich was the source of the alleged leak, or whether he was more interested in fueling rumors that might gain WikiLeaks greater publicity—or some combination of the two—is unclear. It appears significant, however, that he felt compelled to participate in a rumor and conspiracy theory war involving the establishment media rather than simply rely on WikiLeaks' unbroken record of protecting the identity of its sources and verifying the authenticity of the leaked information it discloses.

Conclusion

In important respects, the attention given to Russiagate within the broader, new media environment exemplified the character of posttruth communication. Rumors and conspiracy theories emanating from myriad grassroots and alternative sources, as well as more serious criticism of the dominant Russiagate narrative, competed with official claims concerning the alleged machinations of Russia, Donald Trump, WikiLeaks, and others. At the same time, the behavior of major news organizations throughout 2016–17 followed a consistent pattern. The degree to which potential news stories or sources of information were treated as serious, or alternatively were ignored, condemned, or ridiculed, was not attributable to responsible journalistic assessments of their plausibility. Rather, it was primarily a reflection of political and commercial pressures and incentives. Consistent with the above, the facilitation of top-down propaganda and ongoing attempts on the part of major news networks to divide audience share along partisan lines should not be viewed as contradictory processes. Rather, they represent overlapping, strategic responses to market conditions at a time of growing distrust of the political and media establishments and accompanying processes of social fragmentation.

Even when distrust of authority is widespread, people require adequate points of reference with which to navigate the world. Today, this means that skepticism toward the news media "is combined with an increased division between who watches what and who trusts whom" (Dean, 2009, p. 163). Insofar as news production remains overwhelmingly profit driven, the result can only be an accompanying impoverishment of public discourse. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a review of the first three presidential debates by Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting found that most emphasis was on Russia and Putin, followed by terrorism and taxes (Johnson, 2016c). Climate change, education, and campaign finance barely received mention, while attention to the NSA and state surveillance practices was nonexistent. As a large body of political economy research attests, such narrow debate and sensationalist discourse has long been reproduced through the commercial manufacture of news. Today, it contributes to a feedback loop involving strategies of audience cultivation and political polarization within the citizenry. The ironic result is an enhancement of the very features of posttruth communication now routinely lamented in mainstream news commentary.

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