

**“FAKE NEWS!”:  
President Trump’s Campaign Against the Media  
on @realdonaldtrump  
and Reactions To It on Twitter**

**A PEORIA Project White Paper**

**Michael Cornfield  
GWU Graduate School of Political Management  
[corn@gwu.edu](mailto:corn@gwu.edu)  
April 10, 2019**

*This report was made possible by a generous grant from William Madway.*

**SUMMARY:**

This white paper examines President Trump’s campaign to fan distrust of the news media (Fox News excepted) through his tweeting of the phrase “Fake News (Media).” The report identifies and illustrates eight delegitimation techniques found in the twenty-five most retweeted Trump tweets containing that phrase between January 1, 2017 and August 31, 2018.

The report also looks at direct responses and public reactions to those tweets, as found respectively on the comment thread at @realdonaldtrump and in random samples (N = 2500) of US computer-based tweets containing the term on the days in that time period of his most retweeted “Fake News” tweets. Along with the high percentage of retweets built into this search, the sample exhibits techniques and patterns of response which are identified and illustrated.

The main findings:

- The term “fake news” emerged in public usage in October 2016 to describe hoaxes, rumors, and false alarms, primarily in connection with the Trump-Clinton presidential contest and its electoral result.
- President-elect Trump adopted the term, intensified it into “Fake News,” and directed it at “Fake News Media” starting in December 2016-January 2017.

- Subsequently, the term has been used on Twitter largely in relation to Trump tweets that deploy it. In other words, “Fake News” rarely appears on Twitter referring to something other than what Trump is tweeting about.
- Trump’s primary purpose in using the term has been to cast doubt on news media organizations and reporting as “Fake News.” Of the top twenty-five retweeted Trump “Fake News” tweets between January 2017 and August 2018, only four referred to policy issues (immigration, North Korea). Another four concerned Trump, Putin, and the investigation into ties between them and their associates.
- In attacking the Fake News Media as a dishonest institution that has become “an enemy of the [American] people,” Trump has relied on eight tactics: demonization, division, blurring, distortion, diversion, self-glorification, intemperate language, and reversal.
- Many tweeters have responded in a tone similar to Trump’s aggressive and personal style. Fact-check assertions (i.e. this is true and this is not) have been common, and sometimes come with purportedly documentary links. Reality-check statements attempting to remind readers about, and shift a conversation to, other public affairs topics have been rare.
- Communications practices evident in tweets about Fake News have generally exhibited a lack of self-governance in both the micro interpersonal and macro democratic politics senses of that word.

Just stick with us, don't believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news.

And just remember: What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening.

--President Donald J. Trump, speech to Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention, Kansas City MO, July 24, 2018.

### **I. "Fake News!" and fake news.**

In the first nineteen months of his presidency, from Inauguration Day in 2017 through the end of August 2018, Donald Trump tweeted the term "Fake News" or "Fake News Media" 291 times. That's about 7% of the total tweets he issued (4,091) via @realdonaldtrump, his primary and personal Twitter outlet. By comparison, "MAGA" (78) or "Make America Great Again" (79) appeared 157 times, "Witch Hunt" 124, "No Collusion" 50, and "Enemy of the People" 9 times, each time coupled with Fake News in the post.<sup>1</sup> In the same time period President Trump tweeted "Fox," as in Fox News and especially the program "Fox and Friends," 170 times.

Donald Trump, of course, is the world's leading emitter of political tweets. He's not the most followed political tweeter (Barack Obama has more), but that says more about the limited value of the follower metric than the state of political Twitter. Behold the amplifying power of Trump's repeating a phrase: during the same time period he tweeted "Fake News" 291 times, that two-word epithet appeared in 24,981,671 Twitter posts originating in the United States, according to data collected by the monitoring and analytics company Crimson Hexagon. In other words, on Twitter people (and bots) echoed Trump's term approximately 100,000 times for each time he used it. That's not necessarily in direct response to his usages, but given the presidential provenance and thrust of the term, it's a fair ratio to invoke. By comparison, #metoo surfaced in 4,612,100 posts from October 15, 2017, the day it took off, until the end of August 2018; in that same time span there were more than twice as many "fake news" tweets: 11,126,556.

My central argument in this report is that the president has deployed and hyped the phrase "Fake News" mainly in order to get people to think that the news media deliberately distribute a lot of information about him that they know not to be true, as part of a concerted effort to undermine his presidency.<sup>2</sup> As we will see, the reverse is closer to the truth: Trump has

---

<sup>1</sup> Statistics compiled via the invaluable TrumpTwitterArchive.com, checked March 6, 2019. By that date the percentage of Trump tweets with "Fake News" had dipped slightly to 6%: 366 out of 5,790.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the analytic platforms do not reliably differentiate between "fake news" in lower case and "Fake News" with caps, "FAKE NEWS" all upper case, and "FAKE NEWS!" with an exclamation point.

relied on a set of tactics to discredit the media (excepting Fox) and propagate verifiably flawed renditions of reality. In other words, Trump has disseminated fake news under the guise of railing at “FAKE NEWS!”

Along with identifying his tactics, this report describes how people have reacted to Fake News tweets in their comments. The reactors include news media figures, as one would expect.

To start, I review how Trump developed “Fake News” as a propaganda term. (From here on I will dispense with the all-caps and exclamation points, except in direct quotes).

### **The emergence of “fake news.”**

Fake news names a social phenomenon: information that appears in news forms and outlets but lacks verified correspondence to an actual statement or observed occurrence. It strikes people as news but has not been vetted through a journalism process of fact-checking and editing. Fake news sometimes has a political purpose behind it, such that it may be additionally classified as a type of propaganda and disinformation. But that may not be the only or primary motivation.<sup>3</sup>

The term “fake news” entered the public vernacular just before the 2016 election, when journalist Craig Silverman and researcher Laurence Alexander published a [report](#) on the online news site *Buzzfeed* in which they identified more than 140 pro-Trump websites being run from Veles, a town of 40,000 in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.<sup>4</sup> One post from one of these sites assured readers that Hillary Clinton would be indicted in 2017 for crimes relating to her email server. Another had Clinton saying in 2013 that she wanted people like Donald Trump to run for office because they were honest and could not be bought. The Macedonians adapted these fake news stories from what they read on US right-wing websites. Every time a Facebook user in the US clicked on one of them, they made money, because Facebook reaped and shared ad revenues from customers seeking to be seen by Trump supporters.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a useful taxonomy see Claire Wardle and Hossain Derakhshan, “Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking,” *Council of Europe Report* September 27, 2017.

Nathaniel Persily’s analytic distinctions are also worth consulting: “In evaluating which types of fake news may have electoral impact, though, it may be helpful to differentiate between fake news as satire, fake news for profit, political propaganda, and reckless reporting.... Propaganda can overlap with satire, profit-seeking fake news, and conspiracy theories, but it involves much more: It is the deliberate use of misinformation to influence attitudes on an issue or toward a candidate. Fake news as propaganda can originate from any node on the diffuse party network and campaign organization described above. It can come from official campaign organs, unofficially allied interest groups, friendly media organizations and websites, foreign actors, or even the candidate himself.” From “Can Democracy Survive the Internet,” 28 *Journal of Democracy* 63 (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Craig Silverman and Laurence Alexander, “How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News,” *BuzzFeed News*, November 3, 2016.

Silverman followed that report with a bigger story: “This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook.” To be precise, as the subheadline put it, fake news stories garnered “more total engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined.” Silverman tabulated shares, reactions, and comments of the top twenty election story performers originating on “hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs” and the nineteen online sites for established news outlets for the three months just prior to the election; the tally was fake 8,711,000, real 7,367,000. All but three of the fake top twenty were pro-Trump or anti-Clinton. Two of the top ten, cited above, appeared on Facebook via Macedonia. The most recirculated and mentioned story claimed the Pope endorsed Trump for election.

This story appeared on November 16, 2016, a week after Trump won in a shocking upset. Contemporaneous readers, including journalists, Democratic activists, political professionals, and Clinton herself, could have been forgiven for concluding that enough American voters had been duped by fake news to have swung the election.<sup>5</sup> As Walter Lippmann pointed out nearly a century ago, people tend to link simultaneous news events in their minds as causally related.<sup>6</sup> However, definitive analysis by Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, while acknowledging the possibility of swung votes, concludes the effect was minor.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in the final paragraph of Silverman’s report he scrupulously noted that “Facebook engagement did not necessarily translate into traffic.” In other words, Silverman’s Facebook data --like the Twitter data in this report-- measured user activity, not visibility to users.

At any rate, fake news was now an issue, a topic for discussion and study, and one implicating social media in particular. While fake news has multiple long roots in individual mischief, social psychology, political conflict, media economics, communications technology, diplomatic maneuver and information warfare, the digital grid which makes Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so forth ubiquitous delivery systems for information adds new and distinctive qualities to what used to be known chiefly as hoaxes. As the Silverman examples illustrate, social media monetize, decentralize, globalize, automate, and disguise fake news in new ways. It looks like real news on real news outlets. Social media presentations add to the believability of fake news and motivate viewers to spread it and become an agent of what can be seen to be a

---

<sup>5</sup> In her post-election book *What Happened* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017) Hillary Clinton devoted a chapter to “Trolls, Bots, Fake News, and Real Russians.” As the chapter title suggests, Clinton puts fake news in the context of her acrimonious relationship with Vladimir Putin and other instances of disinformation. She does not claim fake news alone made the difference in the election. Instead she flags it as a concern for the public policy agenda.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922).

<sup>7</sup> *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). They write that “the political effects of clickbait factories...are external costs imposed on democracy as a side effect of the [Facebook & other social media] business model of matching advertising dollars to clicks” by human users acting according to system one decision-making.” (280) They characterize fake news as a “grandchild of the tabloid headline.” (286) But their data show that user/citizen/voter exposure to online fake news was tiny.

“trending topic.” Online fake news also persists in public through archiving and bot activity. Matthew Hindman and Vlad Barash found that of the “more than 6.6 million tweets linking to fake and conspiracy news or outlets published in the month before the election,” 80% of the accounts that generated them were still operating in spring 2018, despite the concerted and well-publicized efforts of Twitter to remove them.<sup>8</sup>

What is now called fake news has been dropped from the skies during war and has adorned supermarket checkout lines for decades.<sup>9</sup> Fake news waxes in influence to the extent it caters to sensational pleasures and ardent dreams. It bubbles up from rumors. People tend to think fake news fools a lot of people other than themselves. They --we-- have been right and wrong about that.<sup>10</sup>

Enter Trump as president-elect.

### The emergence of “FAKE NEWS!”

On December 8 2016, Hillary Clinton gave a speech in which she mentioned “the epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year.” Two days later, Donald Trump posted his first tweet with the term:

```
Reports by @CNN that I will be working on The Apprentice during  
my Presidency, even part time, are ridiculous & untrue - FAKE  
NEWS!
```

Ten days before the 2017 inauguration CNN and *Buzzfeed* reported that intelligence officials briefed the president-elect about a document alleging that the Russian government possessed “compromising” information about him. He tweeted:

```
FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!
```

---

<sup>8</sup> “Disinformation, ‘Fake News,’ and Influence Campaigns on Twitter,” *Knight Foundation Report*, October 4, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Media columnist Jim Rutenberg argued that the *National Enquirer* was a more effective fake news conduit regarding the 2016 election than Facebook. Its publisher, David Pecker, became embroiled in the Russian involvement scandal. “More Powerful Than a Russian Troll Army: The National Enquirer,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> On the diffusion of “true and false news” online (the authors consciously avoid the word “fake”), see S. Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The spread of true and false news online,” *Science* 359, 1146-1151 (2018). Sixteen social scientists outlined a multinational program for research into “The science of fake news” in the same issue, 1094-1096. Historical essays and public opinion research about “The Anatomy of Fake News” may be found in a forthcoming volume from LSU Press.

The next day at a press conference Trump refused to allow CNN's Jim Acosta to ask a question, saying "Your organization is terrible" and "You are fake news." He called the leak of the document "a disgrace...something that Nazi Germany would have done and did do."<sup>11</sup>

The anti-Fake News campaign was on. CNN was the principal target of the president-elect's ire that day and would remain so. The temper trigger was a leak, something most presidents decry and attempt to curb. Trump soon abandoned the forum of a press conference and became the first president to rely heavily on Twitter for public communication. A table with the texts of his twenty-five most retweeted "Fake News" tweets and a time series graph showing the frequency of the words "Fake News" on Twitter in English from US based accounts may be found in the Appendix. These are two overlapping but not identical swathes of tweets.

## II. Three "Fake News" Events, as Relayed on Twitter.

Like all media channels, Twitter collapses context. It shrinks the *ambient* information in which we can comprehend a message, although it also vastly increases certain kinds of *available* information to help us understand, should we choose to break away from a thread or feed and head into the rest of the web. With respect to campaign communications and persuasion generally we may conceptualize the helpful contextual information available to us in five categories: personal, procedural, situational, ideological, and linguistic. Personal denotes biographical information about key figures; procedural, an institution or organization where decision-making occurs; situational, the here and now shared by decision-makers and constituents; ideological, the complex of preferred means and ends which help crystallize issues and controversies; and linguistic, words and phrases loaded with special meaning for a community or shared jurisdiction.

Twitter also shrinks our sense of the people a message reaches, not just because they are not in the room with us but because they may share our messages with others without our knowing much more than the number of times it has been shared, an organizing piece of evidence for this report.<sup>12</sup> Political professionals may target, test and poll social media audiences to learn how well a message plays in Peoria (the inspiration for the name of this project). Leaders may speak to imagined audiences; FDR conducted his radio talks as though seated by a fireside in upstate New York. Increasingly, digital media themselves permit analysis of audience feedback on the same channel starting in virtually no time at all. But audience researchers are still, for all of Twitter's ease and ubiquity of use, in a mysterious communicative

---

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Savransky, "Trump berates CNN reporter: 'You are Fake News,'" *The Hill*, January 11, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> The collapse of multiple audiences (not perspectives or considerations) is what the authors of the phrase had in mind. Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience," *New Media & Society* 13(1) 114–133 (2010). Another metric gauges the aggregate number of people who see retweets, but that falls beyond this report's analysis.

situation. The channel has been in existence only since 2006. Trump is the first president to use it in earnest.

The two-dimensional shrinking of what can be tacitly understood about tweets (by types of rhetorical considerations and by audience responses), along with their rapid-fire, multiple-origin, post-at-any-time, uniform look qualities, makes for a new kind of political event as constructed and experienced. An event on Twitter consists of a spike in tweeting, a viral flurry, a wide distribution of a trending topic. It may correspond to an event staged for the press to cover (like a news conference or rally), or it may not. And it may relay in its rapid-fire pointillistic fashion a factual picture of reality, or it may be faked.

To get a flavor of this, and as a first cut at what Trump has been up to with his “Fake News” tweeting, here are contextually enhanced accounts and excerpts of tweets associated with the three one or two-day periods within the seventeen-month time band under study when “Fake News” was most mentioned on Twitter. Two of these three Twitter spike events also ranked in the top twenty-five most retweeted @realDonaldTrump tweets; a sign, again, of how much the president dominates the use of the phrase on the medium. When he tweets Fake News, lots of people retweet him and otherwise mention or refer to his tweets.

The spikes correspond to a tumultuous presidential press conference held after the departure of National Security Adviser Michael Flynn in February 2017, an internally corrected and Trump-castigated reporting error by CNN in June 2017, and a classic pseudo-event (that is, an event staged solely for the purpose of making media organizations treat it news) called the “Fake News Awards,” which was broached in November 2017 and promoted and announced in January 2018.

*The Top Spike: Trump’s First and Only Solo White House Press Conference of 2017.*

The second-most retweeted post of the President Trump Fake News tweet set originated on February 17, 2017, the day after a Trump press conference was judged by the *Washington Post* to contain fifteen departures from the facts.<sup>13</sup> (It appears as Tweet #2 in the table.) This televised showdown also sparked the largest Fake News onrush in U.S.-based Twitter to date, nearly half a million posts in a three-day span. (This is represented by the “towers” on the left-hand side of the bar chart.)

Trump had just accepted a resignation letter from National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. News was cresting about ties between members of the inner circle of Trump’s election campaign and Russian intelligence agents. A New York Times editorial that morning called for a special prosecutor to investigate. A scandal “-gate” was swinging open.

---

<sup>13</sup> Glenn Kessler and Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “Fact-Checking President Trump’s News Conference,” *Washington Post*, February 16, 2017.



In the tweet the new president went beyond “Fake News” and invoked a phrase with authoritarian and even totalitarian provenance:

“The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people!”

In response, Twitter users linked frequently to news media commentators. Especially popular was an embedded video clip in which Shepard Smith of Fox News turned to the camera (knowing the president watches Fox) to express solidarity with Acosta; the president, Smith declared, should have answered Acosta’s question about the Russia ties at the news conference. (The embedded clip had 4.6 million views as of August 15, 2018.) The subtext, of course, was that even a Fox reporter objected to Trump’s behavior. On the other side, activist Michael Nöthem exhorted his readers to tweet if they agreed that Smith should depart Fox News and that the Fake News Media is the enemy of the American people.

Trump did not hold another news conference that year; in 2018 he met with reporters in a solo session twice, both times away from the White House and Washington D.C.

On February 18, with retweet and especially mention traffic still at a peak, derision permeated user reactions to Trump’s tweeted assertion that:

“Don’t believe the main stream (fake news) media. The White House is running VERY WELL. I inherited a MESS and am in the process of fixing it.”

The defensiveness of the tweet spurred commenters to bring up numerous White House gaffes uttered since the term began a month earlier: a mythical (if not fake) massacre in Bowling Green Ohio referenced by presidential communications lieutenant Kellyanne Conway, a Trump remark at a rally about terrorism in Sweden (which he would modify and later claim vindication for), and Trump mistakenly placing the 2016 Orlando mass shooting in Atlanta. Among the president’s defenders animus was directed at CNN’s Don Lemon for cutting off a pro-Trump guest,

The bridging theme: presidential communications were contentious and sloppy and obfuscatory, and this was of intense interest for being early in the presidency, and as such a potential augury of how the rest of the term would fare.

### *Spike Two: CNN Makes (and Corrects) a Mistake*

A second Fake News spike on general US Twitter occurred around June 27 2017 –the one-day high of the post-inaugural period under review, at 208,645 mentions– and the following day. It revolved around the resignations of three CNN investigative reporters who published a story that ran briefly on the CNN website. Trump entourage member Anthony Scaramucci

denied the account of his involvement in the Russia scandal. CNN apologized to him and he accepted it. The story was retracted.

That first day Trump tried to broaden the incident, blowing a wrong news story into an ominous Fake News Media force:

"Wow, CNN had to retract big story on 'Russia,' with three employees forced to resign. What about all the other phony stories they do? FAKE NEWS!"

"So they caught Fake News CNN cold, but what about NBC, CBS & ABC? What about the failing @nytimes & @washingtonpost?"

But "they" was CNN itself, which investigated after Scaramucci complained. Journalist Brian J. Karem sub-tweeted (i.e. used a tweet to comment on a tweet appearing directly above it):

"So, when we are wrong we correct ourselves but when has POTUS ever done that? We are not FAKE news."

Karem also told Sarah Sanders at a news conference that her use of "Fake News" was inflammatory. Her response: "if anything has been inflamed, it's the dishonesty that often takes place by the news media." A Trump supporter recapped the exchange:

"Lying MSM puts out Fake News Sarah Huckabee Sanders asks them to be more responsible Fake News starts screaming at her."

Karem sounded agitated but did not scream.

Users took to Twitter with fangs bared. A Trump defender dubbed CNN "#AmericanPravda" and lauded videographer trickster James O'Keefe of Project Veritas as the "only journalist left." Others retweeted a video link to Fox News star Sean Hannity so people could watch him as he "SKEWERS CNN's 'Fake News Chief.'" Trump opponents seized on the revelation in a *Washington Post* article that he hung vanity facsimiles of himself appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine in his resort property buildings. Trump tweeted a threat to the newspaper's owner, calling for "AmazonWashingtonPost" to pay internet sales taxes.

This was a remarkably insider event to attract such high tweet volume from outside the presidency-press relationship.

*Spike Three: The "Fake News Awards"*

The third and rightward-most volume skyline on the “Fake News” on Twitter frequency time-series graph stretches from late November 20, 2017 until mid-January 2018. It corresponds to Trump’s teasers for and delivery of the “Fake News Awards.” No trophies were awarded, as promised at the outset; however, some Twitter reactions included photoshopped trophies. No ceremony took place; the awards were announced on a blog post at [gop.com](http://gop.com), nine days after the promised date and one hour after the website was fixed. The awards went to journalists (and academic/columnist Paul Krugman) for lapses and errors that were corrected and in some cases (such as the aforementioned CNN flub) cost reporters their jobs. The last “award” referenced no media organization, consisting instead of a blanket denial of “Russia Collusion!”

These were, in essence, fake awards. Yet many media outlets covered it. “Easy to mock but difficult to ignore,” as a report in the “failing” New York Times put it.<sup>14</sup> And many people tweeted about it under the Fake News rubric. From Trump supporters enough would-be nominations surfaced to suggest that the White House missed an opportunity by not soliciting them. “They’ll never report the awards,” predicted one tweeter in early January. From the mockers, conservative editor and podcaster Ben Shapiro wrote “The winner of the Fake News Award is the Fake News Award.” Both Arizona Senators weighed in with graver criticisms; a retweeted excerpt from a Jeff Flake floor speech quote pointed out that journalists risk their lives on the job “and this effort to dismiss their work is an affront to their commitment and sacrifice.”

Amid the swarm of air quotes appeared this post from self-identified “Resister” nickiknowsna:

“Puerto Ricans still suffering is not fake news. CHIP families are not fake news. Nuclear threats are not fake news. GOP Tax Scam is not fake news. Trump-Russia is not fake news. 45 & family using the presidency for Trump business profit is not fake news.”

### Summary

In only one of the three most talked-about instances of a Trump Fake News outcry was fake news as a social phenomenon (ie that people had been misled into taking information wrongly called news as verifiable news) even a possibility, and in that one the incorrect news was removed along with those making the error. In the other two cases, as Shapiro observed, Trump was doing the faking, first lying and demonizing during the press conference and then ballyhooing an awards show that turned out to be merely a news release.

---

<sup>14</sup> Matt Flegenheimer and Michael M. Grynbaum, “Trump Hands Out ‘Fake News Awards’, Sans The Red Carpet,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018. The photo above the print edition of this news article showed a big billboard in Times Square featuring talk-show host Stephen Colbert dressed to resemble Edward R. Murrow, posed pensively before an old microphone. The billboard offered to Trump “for your consideration” a nomination for “The Most Dishonest and Corrupt Media Awards of the Year.”

To judge from these three examples, the heavy traffic for “Fake News” tweets stemmed from the compound product of Donald Trump’s unusual talent for publicity, multiplied by the perennially heavy public interest in the presidency, multiplied again by media people’s penchant to talk about themselves. (There is no shinier object that wins media attention more than a mirror.)

In only 8 of the 25 most retweeted Trump Fake News tweets were there references or allusions to real-world lower case fake news or to news pertaining to policy issues. The prevailing context on the @realdonaldtrump threads and the US-based twitterdom was the celebrity-studded conflict between the president and the news media he categorically deemed dishonest. Tweeters behaved as fans, internalizing the dramatic exchanges they saw at the forsaken forum of the White House news conference and in spike/events on social media.

By the time of the Fake News Awards a Gallup/Knight Foundation survey reported that 56% of respondents to a multiple-choice question classified fake news (lower case, no quotation marks) as a “very serious threat to democracy,” the most severe option provided.<sup>15</sup> The jousting and jeering had generated concern among the general populace.

### **III. How Trump Has Promulgated “Fake News.”**

This section illustrates communication techniques Trump has deployed while tweeting about “Fake News,” and how other tweeters have responded to them. The techniques are:

1. Demonization: The Media Mean Harm.
2. Division: It’s Us versus Them.
3. Blurring: Vague References and Unsupported Assertions.
4. Distortion: False, Exaggerated and Misleading Claims.
5. Distraction and Diversion: “Don’t Look at That, Look at This.”
6. Self-Glorification: My Efforts for You are Historic and Heroic.
7. Bad Behavior: Intemperate Language.
8. Deflection by Reversal: It’s Them, not Me.

#### *1. Demonization: The Media Mean Harm.*

The gateway tactic is Trump’s accusation that the media publish fake news *deliberately*. While he has singled out several journalists and organizations, the ascription of bad motives applies indiscriminately, in keeping with the common treatment of “the media” as a coherent institution instead of a competitive industry that uses (and sometimes even pays) guests from other walks of life.

---

<sup>15</sup> “American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy,” *Knight Foundation Report* published January 15, 2018.

Trump has expounded his accusation in terms of standard journalistic practices.  
January 13, 2018:

"So much Fake News is being reported. They don't even try to get it right, or correct it when they are wrong."

As the incidents discussed in the previous section demonstrate, this was not so. The trigger for this tweet was the publication of Michael Wolff's book *Fire and Fury*, as its second, motive-imputing part makes clear:

"They promote the Fake Book of a mentally deranged author, who knowingly writes false information. The Mainstream Media is crazed that WE won the election."

Two of the top twenty respondents to this post noted an irony: the same morning that Trump railed against Fake News about himself and brought up his election fourteen months earlier, the president was silent regarding a real-time dangerous instance of fake news resulting from a miscommunication by a government authority. Joshua Dysart:

"This was Trump's first tweet three hours after Hawaii's false missile alarm terrified the entire island. Never once did he use Twitter to help assuage the situation. No one this self-involved should be a leader of anyone but themselves."

Two weeks earlier Trump suggested he regarded his role as media critic as an unpleasant burden to be borne:

"I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair 'press,' now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent 'sources' are being used more often than ever. Many stories and reports a pure fiction."

What set Trump off that day was news about his former campaign aide George Papadopoulos. On October 5, 2017, Papadopoulos had pled guilty to perpetrating fake news: in particular, to giving false statements to the FBI about his contacts with Russians during the 2016 presidential campaign. He would serve time in federal prison for this crime. The news on December 30 was that Papadopoulos, while drinking at a bar in London in May 2016, let Alexander Downer, Australia's top diplomat in Britain, know that Russia had political dirt on Hillary Clinton. After that dirt surfaced months later on Wikileaks, Australian officials passed the information about Mr.

Papadopoulos to American counterparts, which in turn spurred the F.B.I. to launch its counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign that July.<sup>16</sup>

None of these details are evident or even alluded to in the tweet. Instead, Trump transitions from the word “press” (in skeptic’s quotes) to the “now often referred to as Fake News Media.” This insinuates that many people have adopted Trump’s appellation. It is a self-serving and self-obscuring generalization, and it smears journalism wide and deep.

In response on Twitter some did indeed refer to the Fake News Media. In dissent, Aaron Gouveia, posting under the handle @DaddyFiles as “a proud husband, father of three boys (7, 2, and 5 months), and director at a Boston PR firm currently living in southeastern Massachusetts,” tried humor and high dudgeon in pushing back:

“First of all, you LOVE social media because you’re an attention crazed drama queen. Second, only you and your army of undereducated miscreants call the press ‘fake news’ in earnest. Third, you lie more than any 100 people picked at random. Lastly, shut the hell up.”

This was not specific regarding the convicted liar and the origins of the Russian investigation, either.

After the Charlottesville tragedy Trump complained not just of unfair treatment but malevolence as well:

“Made additional remarks on C’ville and realize once again that the #FakeNewsMedia will never be satisfied,..truly bad people!”

By May 2018 Trump was ascribing bad intentions by adverb [emphasis added]:

“Fake News Media had me calling immigrants, or illegal immigrants, “Animals.” Wrong! They were **begrudgingly** forced to withdraw their stories. I referred to MS 13 Gang Members as “Animals,” a big difference - and so true. Fake News got it **purposely** wrong, as usual.”

Trump inflamed a genuine gotcha with bearing on a big issue into an institutional indictment of malevolence.

## *2. Division: It’s Us versus Them.*

---

<sup>16</sup> Sharon LaFraniere, Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, “How the Russia Inquiry Began: A Campaign Aide, Drinks and Talk of Political Dirt,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2017.

Conceivably, demons work their mischief on everyone and Trump could be battling against them on behalf of the entire nation and world, but that's where technique number two comes into play. Trump puts the Fake News Media into the opposition and enemy camps, a distinction which reflects Trump's intensification and promotion of a partisan and polarized America. In this rendering, Trump and the American People ("We") are real, while Fake News Media and Democrats ("They") are allied against them. He depicts himself not as the president of all the people, but as "your president" or "your favorite president." He does not mention Republicans as part of the "we" as often, a tacit acknowledgement perhaps of the continuing rift within the party between his supporters and opponents, or a blurring to isolate Democrats as fringe.

Primary contests and special elections supplied a handy pretext for sowing division. This tweet surfaced on June 20, 2017 right after Republican Karen Handel defeated Democrat Jon Ossoff in GA 08:

"Well, the Special Elections are over and those that want to Make America Great Again are 5 and 0. All the Fake News, all the money spent = 0."

The top three comments came from @deepstate expose, the Twitter address of Jeremy Stone, whose self-published book "History of the Deep State Exposed" can be purchased on Amazon. Hard to tell if a real person. His comments consist of three photoshopped graphics: Trump drinking from a coffee mug labeled "CNN Tears," Chelsea Clinton holding up a license plate reading "Hillary for Prison 2017," and Elizabeth Warren, her thumb and forefinger gesturing a little bit, captioned "This is how much I know about economics." This triptych was followed on the comment string by counter-photoshops, a few cuss words, and even a policy reference:

David Lazarus: "Way to heal the nation's wounds, bro."

Genesis 1:1: "And just what are you doing to improve things???????"

David Lazarus: "I'd strengthen the mandate to stabilize and lower premiums."

A little over a year later, on August 8, 2018, after Troy Balderson had apparently retained an Ohio House seat for the Republican party (the victory would be confirmed three weeks later after absentee and provisional ballots were tabulated), Trump took the occasion to complain about Fake News Media bias :

"The Republicans have now won 8 out of 9 House seats, yet if you listen to the Fake News Media you would think we are being clobbered. Why can't they play it straight, so unfair to the Republican Party and in particular your favorite President!"

In lining up on partisan sides, none of the tweets examined questioned the assumption that the media were apart from that division. Indeed, replies to the June 2017 Handel-Ossoff election tweet matched Trump's enemy-level animus; they steamed with vitriolic calls of impeachment for Trump and incarceration for Hillary Clinton. By summer 2018 this had calmed slightly; the exchanges consisted mainly of cartoon and cartoon-comment skirmishing and partisan analysis of the election data. Instead of Clinton, the oppositional face belonged to Obama.

When the context shifted to a Trump scandal, the divisiveness sometimes took on a different emphasis, with Democrats as the perpetrators of fake news and Fake News Media abetting. December 12 2017:

"Despite thousands of hours wasted and many millions of dollars spent, the Democrats have been unable to show any collusion with Russia - so now they are moving on to the false accusations and fabricated stories of women who I don't know and/or have never met. FAKE NEWS!"

In this instance, the supposedly partisan-driven accusations against Trump actually originated on the *Megyn Kelly Show* the day before, with Trump's famous interlocutor having moved from Fox to NBC. The program, broadcast at the height of the #MeToo scandals, aired sexual misconduct allegations from three women, who called for a Congressional investigation. There was a partisan dimension, in that the Roy Moore-Doug Jones contest to fill an Alabama Senate seat occurred that day, and Moore's pedophilia was a main theme in that race. And there was another fake news angle as well, in that ABC had just suspended Brian Ross over a Russian investigation story. So the jumbling together of the three stories in a partisan frame made some sense.

Tweeted comments embraced the divisive theme. Sharp exchanges between White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders and several journalists were marbled into reactions to the sexual misconduct charges. A sprinkling of retweets of a *Washington Post* story by Ashley Parker slightly raised the salience of the fact that "the idea that he does not know or has not met any of the women who have accused him of sexual misbehavior — as he claimed in his tweet Tuesday — is simply false."<sup>17</sup>

### *3. Blurring: Vague References and Unsupported Assertions.*

Tweets about Fake News can, abetted by their uniformity, terseness, and scrollability, mask their lack of verification in weasel words. Here is a much-retweeted Trump missive from July 1, 2017:

---

<sup>17</sup> Ashley Parker, "Trump seeks to dismiss sexual harassment allegations as 'fake news'," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2017.



"I am extremely pleased to see that @CNN has finally been exposed as #fakenews and garbage journalism. It's about time!"

The adverb "finally" and the proclamation "It's about time" suggest a definitive judgement after a long period of investigation. Trump's "extreme pleasure" evokes the emotions of a triumphant courtroom verdict.

What was this about? Hard to determine by restoring the context of the news day. It could have been referring to CNN having relied on a fake National Enquirer headline in a segment, or a James O'Keefe gotcha secret recording of a CNN producer disparaging voters. Perhaps the president was harkening back to the June 27 firings of three CNN reporters, the third big spike analyzed in the previous section of this report.

Direct responses to a blurred post consisted in part of quasi-religious praise. Ernest Pearson of Goose Creek SC, a "Christian warrior --corporal in the Light Brigade --Special Ops Division," told Trump "Don't listen to the haters, many more of us love you than the minority of haters!" He kept pledging love and faith in the mode of his self-description as others criticized Trump's "fake leadership."

Blurring deepens when a tweet refers to multiple incidents, doubly so when there are multiple actors involved. For instance, this Trump post from early on October 4, 2017 railed:

"Wow, so many Fake News stories today. No matter what I do or say, they will not write or speak truth. The Fake News Media is out of control!"

The actors and acts are indeterminate; all a reader knows is that Trump, once again, has been wronged. This could have been in reference to Rex Tillerson, who was \*not\* leaving the State Department as reported in places. And/or word that Jared and Ivanka had been close to being charged with felony fraud in 2012. And/or a walked-back promise by the president to zero out Puerto Rico's debt. The tweet makes plain only the bad motives of the sinister force on the opposing or enemy side.

When facing a blur a proximate news account can serve as a clarifying lens. The top-displayed responses to this tweet in the @realdonaldtrump stream when I checked it in the fall of 2018 consisted of a tweetstorm from Jack Schofield, a London based "Tech journo who covered IT for the Guardian (1983-2010)," and had 43K plus followers. Schofield anchored his first tweet to a story by *Toronto Star* reporter Daniel Dale. According to Schofield, Dale had been blocked from Trump's feed presumably for having published an eyewitness and otherwise well-documented account of the president's visit the day before to Puerto Rico, during which he

tossed rolls of paper towels to an audience and claimed that only 16 persons had perished from Hurricane Maria.<sup>18</sup>

Schofield did not stop there. His second tweet featured a screenshot of a story about a CNN poll finding more Americans trusted the network than the president. Number #3 linked to a BBC clip about how dictators demonize the media. Number #4: a screen shot of an unsourced article in which Trump referred to in blue highlight here as “mentally limited” which Schofield echoed and modified as MENTALLY WEAK in his cover tweet. Number #5: a screen shot from a Schofield search for articles with the keywords “Trump” and “Mental.” #6 and last, another unsourceable clip from an article describing Trump as “the Muscovian Candidate,” an allusion to the Manchurian Candidate.

The journalist was documenting how crazy Trump was making him. Keith Olbermann, the sports anchor who has made a career out of calibrated outrage, tweeted in a similar mode:

“Is this about Rex calling you a moron? Or about a bribe saving Jr and Ivanka from being indicted? Or Mueller linking Facebook to WI/MI? Or”

The abrupt cutoff could have been an allusion to the final episode of *The Sopranos*. Or

#### *4. Distortion: False, Exaggerated and Misleading Claims.*

Trump rose to political prominence by peddling fake news already in circulation. His birther tweet of August 6 2012 read:

“An extremely credible source has called my office and told me that Barack Obama’s birth certificate is a fraud.”

This is an old trick where the falsehood comes wrapped as an attribution to an anonymous informant. It seemed false to many, but Obama did not put the matter to serious rest until he released his long-form birth certificate was not publicly refuted until 2011, and even then, as the tweet indicates, the calumny persisted. Trump had aired the charge as early as 2011. He retreated from it in the fall of 2016 while the Republican nominee, his statement ensconced in credit-claiming and a false shot at his opponent, claiming Hillary Clinton had begun the controversy.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Dale, “In bizarre visit, Donald Trump compares Puerto Rico to ‘a real catastrophe like Katrina’ — and congratulates himself: Analysis,” *Toronto Star*, October 3, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough view of the controversy, including disputations of fact and interpretation, see the Wikipedia entry “Barack Obama citizenship conspiracy theories.”

Since his election Donald Trump has passed off and presided over factually wrong claims under cover of the upper case Fake News charge. The wildly inflated crowd count at his inauguration, voiced originally by Sean Spicer, exemplifies how some President Trump distortions have been so immediately and blatantly at odds with evident facts as to transport the public square into the vertiginous territory of contradiction we associate with the works of Lewis Carroll, George Orwell, and the Marx Brothers.<sup>20</sup> The fifth most retweeted Trump tweet from the time period, sent August 26, 2018, read:

"Over 90% approval rating for your all time favorite (I hope) President within the Republican Party and 52% overall. This despite all of the made up stories by the Fake News Media trying endlessly to make me look as bad and evil as possible. Look at the real villains please!"

According to the Real Clear Politics aggregate, Trump's job approval rating that day was 52.7% disapproval and 43.6% approval; Gallup's reading was 54-41 disapproval. Yet none of the one hundred randomly sampled posts with "Fake News" in them that day discussed the poll numbers, much less checked them. Many were preoccupied spreading the tweet verbatim and a Breitbart headline that Jim Sciutto, a CNN reporter, had been "busted for two fake news scoops in one week."

On July 19, 2018 Trump tweeted "Will the Dems and Fake News ever learn? This is classic!" The accompanying link being teased showed a ten-second clip of Hillary Clinton saying we want a strong Russia. Clinton promptly pointed out in a tweeted reply that she had said that when Dmitry Medvedev was president, and appended a video in which she condemned Putin. On his thread he fought this to a draw in responses. But several commenters noted that the icon in the top right of the clip belongs to *Russia Today*, a propaganda arm of the Kremlin. The historical context for the thread involved Clinton having criticized Putin while Secretary of State, Putin retaliating during the 2016 election campaign, and then Trump, whose ties to Putin remain under investigation, took advantage.

The press has responded to distortion institutionally through the format of fact-checking columns, in which a story is devoted to investigating a political leader's claim and often awarding it a rating for truthfulness. The Poynter Institute launched an International Fact-Checking Network in 2015. *Toronto Star* DC bureau chief Daniel Dale maintains a publicly searchable database of false claims made by President Trump; the contents topped 4,500 entries as of March 24, 2019. A comparable database compiled by the Washington Post had more than double that on the same day, 9,179.

The wide disparity does not exonerate Trump, but it demonstrates that fact-checking has limits. Statistical facts can be checked to the point of presenting clerical inaccuracies, as above, but not to resolving genuine discrepancies among polls or differences of opinion within.

---

<sup>20</sup> The epigraph to this report evokes the line spoken by Chico in *Duck Soup* while impersonating Groucho: "Who Ya Gonna Believe, Me or Your Own Eyes?"

Sentences with past tense verbs can be checked through documentary records; but sentences about the present and future cannot. Wikipedia can make incomplete, unverified, and disputed claims evident; journalism, for the most part, does not. Political journalism relies on methods of extracting information from individuals (interviews, primarily) which take time: to find the right people to talk with, to win sufficient trust for them to talk, and to set the resulting words against what has been previously documented and what other sources say.

Twitter, like ordinary conversation, has no such method.

##### *5. Distraction and Diversion: “Don’t Look at That, Look at This.”*

Twitter, like other Big Tech platforms, continuously serves up distracting information by design. Mesmerization keeps people on the site.<sup>21</sup> Counters change the numbers of likes and retweets for the handful of tweets on the screen, and when a post is going viral the changes look like spinning slot machine components. When the counters are not moving, the user can scroll to check more of one’s amalgamated dynamic news feed.

Trump, similarly, veers from one sensational topic (sex, violence, celebrities, money, win/loss scores) to another with no evident cost on Twitter to his sustaining attention and getting news media and their audiences to shift in step with him. Tweetstorms accomplish this so well that the fact of one has become a topic for news stories along with speculation about his mental health.<sup>22</sup>

For example, on January 2, 2018, President Trump tweeted a nuclear button double entendre about North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. After five days it had garnered more than 193,000 retweets and megatons of mentions in other media. It was the most-talked about of the sixteen tweets Trump issued that day. He also expressed support for Iranian protesters, urged the Justice Department to prosecute and “Jail!” Hillary Clinton aide Huma Abedin and take action on former FBI Director James Comey, took credit for the safety record of US commercial airlines spoke about wasted US aid to Palestine and Pakistan, the retirement of Senator Orrin Hatch, war veterans, the Border Patrol, Democrats and DACA, “companies giving big bonuses to their workers because of the Tax Cut Bill” and more. He also promised to “announce THE MOST DISHONEST & CORRUPT MEDIA AWARDS OF THE YEAR” (52,000 retweets) on January 8th at 5:00 pm eastern time.

June 21, 2018 brought a double distraction:

---

<sup>21</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.)

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Derek Robertson, “The Day Trump Never Stopped Tweeting,” *Politico Magazine*, December 31, 2018, a narrative account of August 29, 2018, when Trump issued twenty-two tweets. The author attributed this prolixity to a compulsion.

"I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U?" written on the back of Melania's jacket, refers to the Fake News Media. Melania has learned how dishonest they are and she truly no longer cares!"

Melania was visiting the U.S./Mexico border. She did not wear the jacket while visiting children separated from her parents. Comments on Twitter sparred over a *Time* magazine cover which photoshopped a crying toddler next to the president. As discussion on Twitter and elsewhere debated the proposition that the photo was fake because the child had not been separated from her mother, *Time* issued a clarification of that point. Trump, perhaps in league with his wife, had started a second topic of concern.

Trump has engaged in the diversionary convention known as "whataboutism." On July 14, he sought relief from the Russia scandal that has lasted longer than his presidency. It was an especially excruciating moment; Special Counsel Robert Mueller had just indicted twelve Russian intelligence officers and Trump's summit with Putin lay three days ahead. The tweet dropped the top two usual red herrings:

"These Russian individuals did their work during the Obama years. Why didn't Obama do something about it? Because he thought Crooked Hillary Clinton would win, that's why. Had nothing to do with the Trump Administration, but Fake News doesn't want to report the truth, as usual!"

Supportive comments sported a meme advanced by a campaign begun in May: "#walkaway." The idea is to quit the Democratic Party. Punish the fake news media by depriving them of revenue. This fit with a Trump theme in previous "Fake News" tweets and another one that day, to the effect that Fake News Media were failing financially. One read:

"CNN FAKE NEWS Gets Served. Failing Network Loses to Food Network in Latest Ratings."

[REVISE In this way, tweeters responded to Fake News tweets by the president encouraged people to ignore news outlets carrying bad news about Trump. If effectuated it would have the salutary effect of punishing those who deliberately, perniciously, erroneously, dishonestly sought to bring him down. It was not a boycott so much as a satisfying retort.]

## *6. Self-Glorification: My Efforts for You are Historic and Heroic.*

Trump's obsession with his image and reputation are well known. In the context of "Fake News!" tweets, in classic celebrity fashion, "your favorite president" solicits fan identification with his spectacular success, cultivating admiration for his brand, and gratitude for his embrace of their safety from foreign invaders as his utmost cause. He flashed false modesty opening a tweet with "I use Social Media not because I like to..." (the full tweet appears

above in the demonization section). He expressed mock fatigue at constantly winning (something he promised audiences at campaign rallies that *they* would experience) in a June 15, 2018 reflection:

"I've had to beat 17 very talented people including the Bush Dynasty, then I had to beat the Clinton Dynasty, and now I have to beat a phony Witch Hunt and all of the dishonest people covered in the IG [Inspector General] Report...and never forget the Fake News Media. It never ends!"

Conversely, he vented "I can't win" frustration in this July 20 2018 plaint. It forgoes the use of a public channel for diplomatic communications to a whine about how poorly he gets treated when he practices diplomacy:

"I got severely criticized by the Fake News Media for being too nice to President Putin. In the Old Days they would call it Diplomacy. If I was loud & vicious, I would have been criticized for being too tough. Remember when they said I was too tough with Chairman Kim? Hypocrites!"

Opponents regarded this as damage control for a botched summit with the Russian leader, and several brought up recent murders in an Annapolis MD newsroom to imply that Trump fostered a dangerous social atmosphere for journalists. Supporters seemed to lend credibility to that view by picking up the "media as enemy" refrain.

Like P.T. Barnum, Trump plays on "the desire of a democratic audience to become involved in the show as much as they were involved in their politics."<sup>23</sup> This presumed yearning for intimate details extends, as in past presidencies, to reveals about his family. Here is an August 2, 2018 tweet ranking just outside the top twenty-five retweeted, at thirtieth:

"They asked my daughter Ivanka whether or not the media is the enemy of the people. She correctly said no. It is the FAKE NEWS, which is a large percentage of the media, that is the enemy of the people!"

While this received a few retweets in the random sample of one hundred "Fake News" tweets on that day, there were no comments. Instead, the usual rhetorical sniper-fire at CNN personalities took precedence. The same pattern exists in responses to the other tweets in this subsection. Perhaps self-glorification elicits only silent attention from admirers even as it provokes rage from opponents.

## *7. Bad Behavior: Intemperate and Immature Language.*

---

<sup>23</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.500.

Trump is notorious for his derisive nicknames and emotionally supercharged words. The top retweeted tweets reflect this in words applied to the Fake News Media: “Disgraceful.” “Disgusting.” Above all “Dishonest.”

Commenters on highly circulated intemperate “Fake News” tweets by the president have often embraced the license to talk nasty. A favorite motif has been to post video links of on the air confrontations and use violent verbs as both click-bait and vicarious fighting: Watch so-and-so get “destroyed,” “whipped,” “wrecked.” These hard verbs came from comments in a January 7, 2018 sample of reactions to a tilt between CNN’s Jake Tapper and Administration official Stephen Miller.

While this behavior gets rationalized and excused by those sympathetic to his political project and dependent on his supporters for votes, it may also be the case (and the tweets support it) that it attracts those supporters in the first place, much as bad boys from time immemorial have manifested an allure by defying rules of civility and getting away with it.

#### *8. Reversal: It’s Them not Me.*

Reversal may be the summative tactic. It resembles the psychological concept of projection, attributing the very qualities to others which one exhibits in the process of attribution.

In twelve tweets in the time period Trump coupled “Fake News” with “Witch Hunt.” The witch hunt has been allegedly conducted not just by the press and Democrats but by such executive branch officials involved in the Russia investigation as Attorney General Jeff Sessions, FBI Director James Comey, Peter Strzok, Bruce Ohr. Lisa Page. Andrew Weissmann. Andrew McCabe, and above all Special Counsel Robert Mueller. This is, in short, a witch-hunt-by-means-of-crying “Witch Hunt!”

As a sort of a mirror imaging or double reversal, many of the comments in the sampled tweets elicited by Trump tweets manifesting this tactic, usually in combination with others, was to ironize (see the Ben Shapiro comment above on the Fake News Awards, a textbook reversal), imitate, and retaliate in kind.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Editorial Day And Beyond**

An August 16, 2018 Trump tweet read:

"There is nothing that I would want more for our Country than true FREEDOM OF THE PRESS. The fact is that the Press is FREE to write and say anything it wants, but much of what it says is FAKE NEWS, pushing a political agenda or just plain trying to hurt people. HONESTY WINS!"

This display of self-glorification, reversal, division, and demonization was sparked by the appearance that day of more than three hundred editorials criticizing the president's attacks on the press. These ran in response to a call from the editorial board of the *Boston Globe* and the American Society of News Editors. I am dubbing this demonstration of vocational pushback "Editorial Day because the concerted action had no name of its own, a telling point about the peculiarly journalistic non-campaign counter-campaign effort.

There was no campaign pledge, hashtag, or call to action. Old-school journalists don't do that as part of their objectivity ideology: they see their mission as describing from the stands, not getting into the arena. However one judges the appropriateness of that ideology in today's public world, the effect was to tamp down the impact of the editorials. When the editorials ran the online news aggregation site Memeorandum.com slotted the coverage and commentary in its "Mediagazer" index instead of the main site designated for "politics, opinion, and current events."

In online comments veteran journalist (and able student of rhetoric) Howard Fineman high-horsed it: "We are flawed, but we work for YOU: not feds, presidents, courts, states, police or ANY governmental entity. Our freedom is YOUR freedom, based on the Declaration, the Constitution and We the People. It's as simple — as indispensably American — as that." That prompted several on his thread to point out that he worked, in fact, for MSNBC. The U.S. Senate passed a resolution stating that it "affirms that the press is not the enemy of the people;" the unanimity of the act attested to its flimsiness and amplified the phrase.

The protest met a familiar media fate of being eclipsed by a bigger story, the death of Aretha Franklin.

All told, Editorial Day had a calvary charging against drones feel to it. Press critic Jay Rosen told Ezra Klein on his podcast that October<sup>24</sup>:

"Yeah, I think we're completely losing this battle. On every level. And fighting about truth itself, there's something inherently polarizing about that. We're just at the beginning of understanding some of his methods for profiting in an environment where truth is exploded."

----

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Ezra Klein Show*, October 18, 2018.



The techniques on display in Trump's "Fake News!" campaign and the delegitimation purpose they serve are not the sum and total of the emotions, ideas, and actions Trump has communicated through Twitter. But because the tweets examined here and the remaining 266 in the time period were about the news media, they were writ large and amplified by the news media, and become signature traits of Trump's political style and purpose.

At the most basic level Trump's seizure of "fake news" and weaponizing it into "Fake News" was accomplished through insistent repetition from a big and omnipresent communication platform, an offensive from a new kind of bully pulpit. But even in a short burst medium there were details to deal with, and it is in how Trump has sought to impose his context over others that his campaign of words has been most troubling.

His primary context –I am fighting a monster– has, through reversal, trampled other contexts for apprehending public affairs. Presidents are presumed leaders, so Trump has exhibited and excused in others a stomping type of tweeting. The retweets, the likes, the piling on responses and the responses in kind from "the resistance." all spread the meta-message that this is how to speak of American politics today.

Findings from extending the time series to March 2019 [show that] the first helped cement the phrase as Trump defined it in the vernacular.

What we need to stem this tide as it approaches institutionalization: 1) to promote tweets that offer reality checks as well as fact checks in the threads of politics-media figure tussles. Dan Rather has been on this. [In how many of the 25 did Trump specify what was fake? In how many was the topic something other than the Trump-CNN et al battle?] 2) the equivalent of calming humps, signals, and bollards that can serve as counter-phrases and memes. For example: the practice of eschewing inflammatory adjectives and adverbs. Tweeting "calm down" seems as unlikely to work on Twitter as it does in person. 3) above all, telling the truth as one knows it.

What is at stake is the capacity for self-governance, both in the micro of conversational life and the macro of democratic politics and governance. Timothy Snyder, a historian specializing in twentieth century eastern and central Europe, published a best-selling pamphlet in 2017 entitled *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century*. Reviewing Trump's first year from the book's perspective, it should be noted that two big democratic circuits have yet to be broken: Trump has not assembled a paramilitary palace guard, and prior restraints on publication have yet to be mounted. But Lesson Ten implores us to be vigilant believers in the value of truth:

To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticise power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.

Should the techniques in evidence in the Fake News tweets become normal, much less “the” norm, in how Americans discuss public affairs, they will lose touch with the best approximations of truths about the world, and will find it harder trust in the efforts of both the president and the news media to present them.

“HONESTY WINS!” We’ll see.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

In late August Trump turned his Fake News guns on Big Tech. He picked up on the anti-conservative bias charge leveled by Republican Senators and Representatives at Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg when he testified before Congress in February, and widened the target range to include Google and Twitter. This showed sharp instinct. Big Tech was under public fire for several reasons, including of course its role in lax policing against Cambridge Analytica and the Russian Internet Research Agency. Trump’s August 24 post rocketed to the top of the most retweeted list:

“Social Media Giants are silencing millions of people. Can’t do this even if it means we must continue to hear Fake News like CNN, whose ratings have suffered gravely. People have to figure out what is real, and what is not, without censorship!

A few days later, Trump Googled himself:

“Google search results for “Trump News” shows only the viewing/reporting of Fake New Media. In other words, they have it RIGGED, for me & others, so that almost all stories & news is BAD. Fake CNN is prominent. Republican/Conservative & Fair Media is shut out. Illegal? 96% of..

....results on “Trump News” are from National Left-Wing Media, very dangerous. Google & others are suppressing voices of Conservatives and hiding information and news that is good. They are controlling what we can & cannot see. This is a very serious situation-will be addressed!”

There was no second annual Fake News Awards in early 2019.

APPENDICES:

The top 25 table.

- [Aug 24, 2018 06:34:13 AM](#) Social Media Giants are silencing millions of people. Can't do this even if it means we must continue to hear Fake News like CNN, whose ratings have suffered gravely. People have to figure out what is real, and what is not, without censorship! [Twitter for iPhone] [link](#)
- [Feb 17, 2017 04:48:22 PM](#) The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People! [Twitter for Android] [RT 52654] [link](#)
- [Jan 2, 2018 08:05:10 PM](#) I will be announcing THE MOST DISHONEST & CORRUPT MEDIA AWARDS OF THE YEAR on Monday at 5:00 o'clock. Subjects will cover Dishonesty & Bad Reporting in various categories from the Fake News Media. Stay tuned! [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 51056] [link](#)
- [Dec 30, 2017 05:36:41 PM](#) I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair "press," now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent "sources" are being used more often than ever. Many stories & reports a pure f
- [Aug 26, 2018 07:39:38 PM](#) Over 90% approval rating for your all time favorite (I hope) President within the Republican Party and 52% overall. This despite all of the made up stories by the Fake News Media trying endlessly to make me look as bad and evil as possible. Look at the real villain
- [May 18, 2018 05:51:43 AM](#) Fake News Media had me calling Immigrants, or Illegal Immigrants, "Animals." Wrong! They were begrudgingly forced to withdraw their stories. I referred to MS 13 Gang Members as "Animals," a big difference - and so true. Fake News got it purposely wrong, as us
- [Jun 13, 2018 08:30:49 AM](#) So funny to watch the Fake News, especially NBC and CNN. They are fighting hard to downplay the deal with North Korea. 500 days ago they would have "begged" for this deal-looked like war would break out. Our Country's biggest enemy is the Fake News so eas
- [Jul 19, 2018 01:14:25 PM](#) Will the Dems and Fake News ever learn? This is classic! <https://t.co/KSX3ROI4QG> [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 42344] [link](#)
- [Nov 27, 2017 09:04:51 AM](#) We should have a contest as to which of the Networks, plus CNN and not including Fox, is the most dishonest, corrupt and/or distorted in its political coverage of your favorite President (me). They are all bad. Winner to receive the FAKE NEWS TROPHY! [Twitter fo
- [Jan 17, 2018 08:00:05 PM](#) And the FAKE NEWS winners are... <https://t.co/59G6x2f7FD> [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 41677] [link](#)
- [Jun 21, 2018 04:51:07 PM](#) "I REALLY DONT CARE, DO U?" written on the back of Melania's jacket, refers to the Fake News Media. Melania has learned how dishonest they are, and she truly no longer cares! [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 41413] [link](#)
- [Jul 14, 2018 01:17:37 PM](#) These Russian individuals did their work during the Obama years. Why didn't Obama do something about it? Because he thought Crooked Hillary Clinton would win, that's why. Had nothing to do with the Trump Administration, but Fake News doesn't want to rep
- [Dec 31, 2017 05:18:20 PM](#) As our Country rapidly grows stronger and smarter, I want to wish all of my friends, supporters, enemies, haters, and even the very dishonest Fake News Media, a Happy and Healthy New Year. 2018 will be a great year for America! [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 39698] [link](#)
- [Mar 17, 2018 12:34:21 PM](#) The Fake News is beside themselves that McCabe was caught, called out and fired. How many hundreds of thousands of dollars was given to wife's campaign by Crooked H friend, Terry M, who was also under investigation? How many lies? How many leaks? Comey
- [Feb 18, 2017 08:31:53 AM](#) Don't believe the main stream (fake news) media. The White House is running VERY WELL. I inherited a MESS and am in the process of fixing it. [Twitter for Android] [RT 39020] [link](#)
- [Oct 4, 2017 06:29:43 AM](#) Wow, so many Fake News stories today. No matter what I do or say, they will not write or speak truth. The Fake News Media is out of controll! [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 38432] [link](#)
- [Jul 16, 2017 05:35:44 AM](#) Hillary Clinton can illegally get the questions to the Debate & delete 33,000 emails but my son Don is being scorned by the Fake News Media? [Twitter for iPhone] [RT 38330] [link](#)
- [Dec 12, 2017 07:10:58 AM](#) Despite thousands of hours wasted and many millions of dollars spent, the Democrats have been unable to show any collusion with Russia - so now they are moving on to the false accusations and fabricated stories of women who I don't know and/or have never
- [Jan 7, 2018 03:35:39 PM](#) The Fake News Awards, those going to the most corrupt & biased of the Mainstream Media, will be presented to the losers on Wednesday, January 17th, rather than this coming Monday. The interest in, and importance of, these awards is far greater than anyone
- [Jun 15, 2018 12:49:38 PM](#) I've had to beat 17 very talented people including the Bush Dynasty, then I had to beat the Clinton Dynasty, and now I have to beat a phony Witch Hunt and all of the dishonest people covered in the IG Report...and never forget the Fake News Media. It never ends!
- [Dec 9, 2017 08:21:24 AM](#) CNN's slogan is CNN, THE MOST TRUSTED NAME IN NEWS. Everyone knows this is not true, that this could, in fact, be a fraud on the American Public. There are many outlets that are far more trusted than Fake News CNN. Their slogan should be CNN, THE LEAST T
- [Jul 20, 2018 04:50:30 PM](#) I got severely criticized by the Fake News Media for being too nice to President Putin. In the Old Days they would call it Diplomacy. If I was loud & vicious, I would have been criticized for being too tough. Remember when they said I was too tough with Chairman
- [Aug 16, 2018 09:10:17 AM](#) There is nothing that I would want more for our Country than true FREEDOM OF THE PRESS. The fact is that the Press is FREE to write and say anything it wants, but much of what it says is FAKE NEWS, pushing a political agenda or just plain trying to hurt people.
- [Feb 6, 2017 07:01:53 AM](#) Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting. [Twitter for Android] [RT 36259] [link](#)
- [Aug 8, 2018 10:14:26 AM](#) The Republicans have now won 8 out of 9 House Seats, yet if you listen to the Fake News Media you would think we are being clobbered. Why can't they play it straight, so unfair to the Republican Party and in particular, your favorite President! [Twitter for iPhone]

The time series chart.

## Volume

Over the selected time period:

