'Big Lies': Understanding the Role of Political Actors and Mainstream Journalists in the Spread of Disinformation

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Abstract

Much of the scholarly attention on disinformation has focussed on the role of social media, thus overlooking the political actors who themselves propagate disinformation, and the mainstream news outlets that report on them. In this article we argue that disinformation has now become so widespread because outright lies are an effective way for political actors to attract and manage public attention. Political strategists have likewise worked out that cognitive biases and social factors are strong enough to overcome the 'rational' impulses of citizens who should, notionally, reject obvious lies. And, finally, journalists, who should be a bulwark against such behaviour, have mostly failed to address this problem because of an overly cosy relationship with those in power, and because of a lingering fealty to 'objectivity'. We conclude the article by arguing that journalism needs to significantly re-think how it approaches the political field.

Introduction

> A hand recount of nearly 2.1 million ballots [from Maricopa county, Arizona] had come up with nearly the exact vote totals as the certified result: Biden had won the county by more than 45,000 votes.
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> ...
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> Trump jumped in the following day at a rally in Perry, Ga. 'We won on the Arizona forensic audit,' he told thousands of screaming fans, 'at a level that you wouldn't believe.' (Rucker, 2021)

Disinformation is widely considered to be one of the more insidious problems of the current global communications environment, and has quickly risen to the very top of the research agenda for numerous academic disciplines. The pollution of our discourse, and the less-informed public that results from it, has major political and social consequences, as it can severely hinder meaningful collective action on major global challenges such as climate change, extreme wealth inequality, and widespread corporate corruption. Since 2020, with the world grappling with the significant challenges associated with managing the COVID-19 pandemic, it has produced serious public health consequences as well. Getting some citizens to take even basic safety measures – like wearing a face mask, or accepting free doses of an overwhelmingly safe and effective vaccine – are now seen to be enormous hurdles, thanks in large part to misleading or patently false information being spread about those measures, and about the nature of the virus itself. As such, this is a major problem that needs to be better understood and appropriately managed (to the extent that it can).

Popular discourse around disinformation often centres on large online platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter/X), and on the malevolent use of those platforms by highly visible but relatively uncoordinated extremist groups (e.g. QAnon, vaccine sceptics, etc.), or by largely *in*visible – often state-backed – operatives (e.g. Russia's Internet Research Agency; see, for example, MacFarquhar, 2018; Dawson and Innes, 2019; Linvill and Warren, 2020), who make highly coordinated attempts to persuade and deceive unwitting users. Social media have thus been seen as absolutely central to the conversation about disinformation, and are often identified as needing to be 'fixed' in order to mitigate the problem. As Kuo and Marwick (2021, p. 6) note, however, "technology did not create the problem of disinformation and technical solutions alone are not the answer".

In this conceptual article, examining literature from a unique range of (often disparate) disciplines – including, among others, journalism studies, political communication, and psychology – and drawing on relevant contemporary examples, we argue that this emphasis on social media platforms has too often overlooked the 'elephant(s) in the room': the extremely influential political actors who themselves propagate disinformation, and mainstream news outlets that report on them. While we of course acknowledge the significant role that online platforms play in the fomentation and propagation of disinformation (including by the political actors we highlight as examples in this article), and are keenly aware of the ways that they can incentivise (through engagement metrics, etc.) the sharing of content that is disinformative (Braun and Eklund, 2019) and culturally divisive (see, for example, Lauer 2021; Hagey and Horwitz, 2021), here we consciously de-centre social media. Instead, we take a high-level view of the disinformation landscape, connecting together some of the many cultural, economic and political factors that have allowed disinformation to become so thoroughly mainstreamed. This takes into account how and why outright lies have become normalised in modern politics, how political actors exploit psychological factors that make some citizens particularly receptive to those lies and disinformation, and how the media have either failed to adequately address the problem, or have unwittingly contributed to it.

Building on the work of Gaber and Fisher (2021), who have analysed "strategic lying" in modern politics, as well as others who have empirically examined the role of specific political elites in the spread of disinformation (notably, Graham and FitzGerald, 2024; Benkler, et al., 2020), we argue that an ill-informed public is not just something that happens by accident, and is not something that happens mostly at the margins of the discourse, moving only occasionally to the centre to disrupt otherwise smooth-running processes. Rather, "information disorder" (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) has infected the very heart of mainstream politics today (see also Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019), and, by virtue of being a 'creeping catastrophe', is something our society has

failed to adequately identify or deal with. By way of recent examples from the UK, and the US in particular, we show that lies (and the powerful reactions they can generate) are an effective means for political actors to attract and manage both public attention and voter enthusiasm, deflect journalistic scrutiny, and help to control media narratives. We go on to argue that journalists need to re-think how they approach the political field, in order to better counteract the significantly more sophisticated communication tactics now being deployed by those in power. Our work therefore connects to other research which has highlighted the ways that the mainstream media can amplify, and thus legitimise, bad-faith actors simply by covering their activities in the first place (Phillips, 2018).

A number of different terms have been used previously to describe the issues we examine (and ones adjacent to them), including 'fake news', 'misinformation', and a series of related concepts. While acknowledging the nuanced differences between these, and their distinct aetiologies (traced by, for example, UNESCO, 2020; Wardle, 2017; Jack, 2017; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2018), in this article we focus on *dis*information, and use it to describe a range of political communication acts and practices that are designed to deceive, manipulate, obfuscate, or knowingly move the discourse further away from reality. Although there are many instances of (accidental) misinformation spread, mild distortions (e.g. political 'spin'), or cases of innocent journalistic error (e.g. factual inaccuracies) that have had serious consequences, we are most interested here in the more extreme end of the spectrum: *intentional* lies by elite political actors in the public sphere.

Scoping the Problem

It is hardly newsworthy to say that politicians lie. As Gaber and Fisher (2021: 461) note, though, "the intensity of such accusations has increased", and a general lack of truth is now a feature of many modern political systems, even in advanced democracies. The extent of brazen lying in politics, and the degree to which it has become accepted as normal, can perhaps be viewed as a type of "creeping catastrophe" (see Schneider, Leifeld, and Malang, 2013). Unlike an acute catastrophe (e.g. a flood or an earthquake), a creeping catastrophe is something that happens progressively over many decades: the slow unfolding of the problem serves to obscure its scale, obfuscate the potential for its resolution, and prevent its recognition as a problem in the first place (akin to the fable of the frog in the pot, failing to notice that it is being boiled slowly). Indeed, this is one of the reasons that, as we have noted, experts have so often turned to the regulation and moderation of social media platforms as a purported solution to the problem of political disinformation. Addressing a *symptom* of disinformation – its spread on social media – through technological solutionism is comparatively easier and less fraught with controversy than addressing one of its major *causes*: the systemic political practice of partisan lying that is now deeply entrenched, and effectively normalised.

To help demonstrate the scale of the problem at hand, it is worth noting that this trend has not been confined to minor or fringe political operatives. In recent years, three major western nations, the USA, the UK, and Australia, have been led by figures with a notoriously bad relationship to the truth. Scott Morrison, Australia's Prime Minister from 2018 to 2022, was caught lying many times – including, famously, when his office denied he was holidaying in Hawai'i with his family while bushfires ravaged large swathes of the country – and was almost certainly lying again when he later claimed that he did not believe that he had ever told a lie in public life (Karp, 2021). UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was engulfed in considerable controversy through 2021-22 for lying to parliament about parties being held in 10 Downing Street, in breach of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions set by his own government. This was not the first time that Johnson had his honesty brought into question, though, having first made a name for himself as a journalist by peddling myths about the legislative agenda of the European Union, getting fired from the Shadow Ministry in 2004 for publicly lying about an affair, and, during the 2016 Brexit campaign, either implicitly endorsing or actively promoting a number of major falsehoods about the cost to the United Kingdom of EU membership.

The slow pace of this creeping catastrophe masks, to a large extent, how extraordinary the current political climate is, relative to historical standards. In his book *When Presidents Lie*, Eric Alterman argued that while lying and a lack of credibility played a significant role in the downfall of US Presidents Johnson and Nixon (for lying

about the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Watergate break-in, respectively), by the time of the Iran—Contra scandal in the 1980s, "lying to the public had become an entirely mundane matter" (Alterman, 2004, p. 294). He then went on to describe George W. Bush's White House as "The Post-Truth Presidency", given the number of lies told by the 43rd President, and their significant consequences (chief amongst them, urging the country to war with Iraq, based on a falsehood; see Kumar, 2006). This label notably pre-dated and foreshadowed more recent arguments from numerous scholars and commentators (for example, Higgins, 2016) that we have entered a 'post-truth' age.

Donald Trump – who, even before officially running for office, was one of the loudest proponents of the 'birther' conspiracy that Barack Obama was born in Kenya, not the United States – took things to another level entirely, making a total disregard for the truth a hallmark of his administration. By the time of his successor's inauguration in early 2021, fact-checkers from *The Washington Post* had calculated that "Trump had accumulated 30,573 untruths during his presidency – averaging about 21 erroneous claims a day" (Kessler, et al., 2021). One 2020 study showed that Donald Trump was, by some margin, "the largest driver of the COVID-19 misinformation 'infodemic'" (Evanega et al., 2020, p.7). Indeed, a prime example is the 2021 statement from Trump used at the opening of this article, claiming (despite the actual evidence presented just hours earlier) that a recount in Maricopa County, of votes for the previous year's Presidential Election, had proven that he was the rightful winner of the state of Arizona. Trump's flagrant contradiction of official evidence is indicative of the kind of blatant lies which have now permeated the political discourse, and which have become so routine that it is easy to overlook their egregiousness. The term 'the big lie' has even entered modern political parlance to help distinguish between the smaller, everyday lies that Trump tells, and the more significant – and enduring – one about the 2020 election that is having such a deleterious effect on the American political system, further shaking faith in democracy among a large portion of the American voting public.

Pushing Lies, Managing Attention

Two fundamental questions that need much more consideration, though, are: *why* have blatant lies invaded political life in this way? And: how is it that spreading obvious disinformation no longer appears to be a significant hindrance in reaching the highest echelons of elected office? There are some more complicated answers to these questions (which we will discuss below), but a simpler one relates to sheer political expediency, where political actors will tell lies in order to deflect attention from malfeasance or error. Boris Johnson's lies about 'partygate' represent one relevant, notable example of this.[1] However, these are the kinds of lies with which most observers are very familiar, and which have been part of the political landscape for many decades (to the point where we have grown to accept them as normal). We are more interested instead in how these have started to be used much more deliberately and strategically by political actors.

One explanation for the current volume of lying in modern politics is that astute strategists have worked out that one lie here and there is not nearly as effective as many being pushed relentlessly over a sustained period. A frequently repeated lie can help to create an alternate reality through a kind of 'brute force attack'; stating something often enough will create the presumption among some citizens that it could, possibly, be true. As we will discuss later, the intent is also to make the media accept such lies as "*potentially* factual and therefore worthy of coverage" (Gaber and Fisher, 2021, p. 468, emphasis added). Muirhead and Rosenbaum (2019) have introduced the term 'new conspiracism' to describe a novel form of disinformation that they believe has invaded modern political life in America. Whereas conspiracist thinking (the quintessential example being speculation surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy) traditionally sought some evidence – however flimsy or circumstantial – and involved some analysis of that evidence to reach a (perhaps fantastical) conclusion, they argue that more modern incarnations are characterised by an almost complete lack of interest in evidence whatsoever; all that matters is the accusation itself, and how it can advance some political goal. "What validates

[1] We also note that a feature of modern political communication strategy (perhaps because political actors are now permanently in a 'campaign' mindset) is to never, ever admit fault for anything: "Offered in the hope of mitigating damage, apologies often instead open the floodgates. By confirming you did something wrong, you give your accusers permission to pursue retribution" (Gill, 2022).

the new conspiracism", they write, "is not evidence but repetition… [it] substitutes social validation for scientific validation: if *a lot of people are saying* it, to use Trump's signature phrase, then it is true enough" (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019, p. 3).

Another compelling explanation for the sharp increase in the volume of disinformation in the political public sphere is that its spread can be a highly effective way of gaining and managing public attention (Gaber and Fisher, 2021). Zeynep Tufekci (2013, p. 849) has argued that "gaining, denying, sustaining, and manipulating public attention is a key concern for all formal, semiformal, and informal movements with a stake in challenging or defending structures of power and authority". In the broadcast era, political figures could rely on public and media attention thanks to relative content scarcity, but in a post-broadcast age, with an almost overwhelming content surplus, attention has become a much more valuable commodity (Wu, 2015). In this climate, lying is an easy way of standing out from the 'noise', particularly as a way of angering political opponents, knowing that the lie itself will outrage voters, and thus attract even more attention. The adage that 'all press is good press' applies here, with political actors perhaps working to leverage citizens' existing sensitivity to political malfeasance, and their broader dissatisfaction with democracy, for their own political gain. This approach seems to follow what has been termed a logic of 'trolling' (see Phillips, 2013; 2015; Greene, 2018), which has evolved from online subcultures into a widely-practiced engagement strategy on social media platforms, even among legacy news organisations (Hurcombe, 2019).

Though it may be tempting to wonder whether our analysis projects a coherent narrative onto haphazard activity by political actors – that is, merely reverse-engineering a 'strategy' onto non-strategic action – several political figures have revealed this to be a quite deliberate tactic. David Plouffe, an advisor to President Barack Obama, used the term "Stray Voltage theory" to describe the way in which public attention and energy could be managed through outrage. This was demonstrated in the 2014 State of the Union address, where the then-President knowingly used an imprecise and largely discredited statistic about the gender wage gap: that, on average, a woman earns only 77 cents for every dollar a man makes doing the same work.[2] His team knew that that statistic would be provocative, but he used it in his speech anyway, because "controversy sparks attention, attention provokes conversation, and conversation embeds previously unknown or marginalised ideas in the public consciousness" (Garrett, 2014). His aim was not to convey information, but to strategically incite a controversy that would help push workplace gender discrimination to the forefront of the media discourse and public mind.

An enormous volume of lies not only helps to create a kind of alternate reality, but can also be an effective strategy for managing media attention. Some observers have argued that Donald Trump may have received much more thorough scrutiny from the press, and faced more consequences for his many falsehoods, had he lied only half as much as he actually did. His ability to simply overwhelm journalists and fact-checkers – to "flood the zone with shit", in the words of his former chief strategist, Steve Bannon (see Illing, 2020) – meant that any one single lie actually received very little attention, because it was immediately followed (often very literally) by a new one that demanded attention and analysis. Knowing that journalists – whose investigative resources are steadily diminishing – are strongly biased towards recency and timeliness, yesterday's or last week's lies were almost entirely forgotten, because there were always new ones to discuss and dissect. Indeed, Boris Johnson himself, in a rare moment of candour, once admitted that his 'blustering' persona is one calculated specifically to distract the media in exactly such a way:

> I've got a brilliant new strategy, which is to make so many gaffes that nobody knows which one to concentrate on… You pepper the media… with so many gaffes that they're confused. It's like a helicopter throwing out chaff, and then you steal on quietly and drop your depth charges wherever you want to drop them. (Boris Johnson [in 2006], in Kuenssberg, 2022)

[2] While it was true in 2014 that, in the United States, women earned, on average, about 77 percent of what men did, that statistic was not accurate when measuring the '*same* work'. And, while Obama was implying that the disparity is solely due to workplace discrimination, labour researchers (e.g. Goldin, 2014) have argued that there are a number of reasons for the lingering wage gap, and is not the result of gender discrimination alone.

Boris Johnson's description of his strategy bears many similarities to what Whitney Phillips (2021) has termed 'smokescreen trolling': "lighting the fuse to every moral panic possible", and then using the backlash to distract attention away from far more nefarious activity. Using an example of Ted Cruz claiming that it is now "controversial" to recite the pledge of allegiance and salute the American flag, Phillips noted:

> When Trumpists post wild accusations to social media, they're not open to having their minds changed, and they will be impervious to whatever facts you think they might be missing. They will, however, be very pleased by your efforts to try. (Phillips, 2021)

We argue that using disinformation to manage public attention should really be considered just one part of a larger malaise of generally bad behaviour by politicians to achieve a greater share of attention. There have been many instances where political figures have made a preposterous (although technically not *false*) statement, or staged an attention-grabbing political event (e.g. grandstanding at a public hearing), in order to attract the attention of journalists and voters (see, for example, Sengul, 2022).[3] One notable example was US Congresswoman Lauren Bobert's 2021 Christmas card, featuring her children standing in front of a Christmas Tree holding assault rifles. Bruenig (2021) argued that Bobert's stunt was almost certainly enacted to generate blowback from liberals who feel that firearms are dangerously fetishised in American life. In other words, eliciting negative reactions was a rationale driving the entire exercise. And, indeed, that reaction, and any press criticism that follows, also produces further proof (at least to their own supporters) of persecution both by their opponents, and by the media.

On a more sinister level, it is also possible that this continuous spread of disinformation, and reprehensible political conduct more generally, are a part of what has been termed 'wrecking crew' politics (see Frank, 2008). Here the end goal is not just to get attention or gain some individual political advantage, but also to advance a much more fundamental, long-term ideological agenda: to sabotage the mechanisms of good government, and undermine the public's trust that *any* politician or government apparatus can work in the best interests of citizens. As Tim Dunlop (2022) outlines, the intent of this strategy is to "rewrite our understanding of the role of government … [and] lower our expectations of government as [a] site of collective response". In theory, this is designed to induce a "legitimacy spiral", favouring minimal government intervention, and thus provides the rationale for massive tax cuts and deregulation; to "govern so badly … that the very machinery of such government is so damaged that it cannot be restored" (Rundle, 2020). We thus argue that politicians telling brazen lies, and then seeming entirely uninterested in the backlash to them, are part of an overall strategy to fundamentally undermine public faith in *all* politics, as well as in the fourth estate. Forcing journalists to take a consistently critical perspective, and continually try (albeit feebly, as we explain below) to call out lies and persistent disinformation, only adds fuel to the claims that 'the mainstream media have a liberal bias', thus eroding confidence in the fairness of journalists. This then encourages some citizens to treat *all* journalism with suspicion and cynicism, and renders its exposure of wrongdoing less impactful (i.e. making people think, 'well, all politicians are corrupt'). In their book on 'new conspiracism' in mainstream American politics, Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019, p. 7) make a similar connection, arguing that such rhetoric is designed to shake at the foundation of the political system: to make "democracy unworkable" and, furthermore, to make "democracy seem unworthy". It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that some the most notorious liars in politics that we have mentioned as examples above are also among those who have overseen marked decay of public services (e.g. the NHS under Boris Johnson), advocated for disengagement from longstanding regulatory regimes (e.g. Boris Johnson, again, regarding Brexit; see Gaber and Fisher, 2021), or openly called for the complete dismantling of the administrative state (e.g. Steve Bannon; see Rucker and Costa, 2017).

[3] While it is far beyond the scope of this paper to prove such a connection, it is worth considering whether the problem of political disinformation may be so pronounced in the US, if only in part, because the political system in that country requires elected officials to be continuously getting attention in order to raise funds for their own re-election campaigns.

Generating and Exploiting Enthusiasm

If the attraction and management of attention is a good strategic reason for a political actor to lie, another reason is to generate enthusiasm in the electorate. The clearest example of this is when disinformation is used to provoke or elevate outrage about political opponents. For example, since 2020, Republicans' claims about 'critical race theory' (CRT) – relating to both what it is, and the extent to which it is being taught to schoolchildren (in short: it isn't) – are a very good example of this. Such rhetoric is designed to make American conservatives believe that young children are being indoctrinated with extreme leftist ideas in school, in the hope that that outrage can be used to the electoral advantage of Republicans. Furthermore, it is possible that the outrage provoked by the initial lie can be used as a justification for wild reactive measures, which (hypocritically) end up 'indoctrinating' students with conservative ideas instead – such as attempts to ban the teaching of "inherently divisive concepts" including CRT) in Virginia (see Perrett, 2022), or the successful attempt to ban any discussion of LGBTIQ issues in Florida elementary schools (what has been dubbed the "don't say gay" bill; see Sainato, 2022).

There is, though, no better example to demonstrate how the spread of political disinformation has its incentives than to return to the example of the 'big lie', pushed by Donald Trump and a swathe of conservative Republicans about supposed fraud in the 2020 election. That lie has been a crucial tool for energising Trump's legion of supporters, indeed to such a degree that it led quite directly to the January 6th riot at the US Capitol. As subsequent investigations of that event have shown, Trump himself managed to raise around a quarter of a billion dollars from his supporters by asking for money for an "election defense fund", much of which merely went into the pockets of Trump and his associates (see Lowell, 2022). Once again, though, the repetition of that lie (and the diminished trust in election security that resulted among a large percentage of the electorate) was also used to justify the implementation of a host of measures (e.g. voter ID laws) which have made it more difficult for marginalised groups in society to exercise their franchise. Starbird et al. (2019; also 2023) have used the term 'participatory disinformation' to describe the co-creative process where politicians – the example they use also being Donald Trump – leverage a highly-engaged and attentive audience to reinforce their disinformation. This occurs through sharing supposed examples or 'evidence' to support the original lie, thus deepening its validity within that community.

The enthusiasm of some citizens to believe these lies, no matter how specious and self-contradictory they may be, prompts the question: why do obvious lies not harm the esteem in which the political figures who assert them are held by their own supporters? How is it that Donald Trump, for example, can continue to be a serious political force, even though he makes so many statements that are demonstrably false? We argue, firstly, that this stark lack of correlation between a political actor's respect for truthfulness[4] and their electoral fortunes underscores that we need to dispense with "a line of argument that fundamentally approaches 'fake news' and 'post-truth' as matters of incorrect knowledge and innocent readership" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868). Secondly, media scholars might do well to look at the fields of psychology and behavioural economics, which have produced significant literature on how beliefs are often, in fact, highly 'motivated' by the (social and economic) costs and benefits of holding them (see Williams, 2022; Bénabou and Tirole, 2016; Jost et al., 2013; Kahan, 2015).

Two theories in particular are worth mentioning here. The first is 'confirmation bias': a well-known phenomenon where people will find information that comports with their existing beliefs much easier to accept than information which contradicts them. A notable example here is that people, in effect, 'see what they want to see' in a piece of political content (LaMarre, et al., 2009). The other, albeit less well-known, is 'commitment bias': the tendency for humans to stick to their initial decisions, as a kind of performance of rationality (Kelly and Milkman, 2013). A related term that has been used since the 1980s to describe broadly the same trait is 'escalation of commitment' (e.g. Staw, 1981): where people tend to become more, and not less, wedded to their bad choices, even after those choices are challenged by new evidence. As one notable article on the topic aptly summarised: "Put simply, people do not like to admit that their past decisions were incorrect; what better way to (re)affirm the correctness of those earlier decisions than by becoming even more committed to them?"

[4] We also suggest this can apply to a political actor's general conduct, too, noting that (as of July 2024) Donald Trump currently leads the Presidential race, according to many opinion polls, even after being judged by a jury to be guilty on 34 felony counts.

(Brockner, 1992, p.40). Working together, these two tendencies – to trust information which confirms existing opinions, and to 'double-down' on current views and beliefs – mean that, in some cases, disinformation is more attractive than the demonstrable truth. And, underscoring the argument we set out in the introduction to this article, such observations pre-date our fragmented, 'high-choice' media environment. In a psychological study on public opinion formation during the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal of the late-90s, Fischle (2000, p.151) noted that voters had engaged in "belief-preserving distortions" of evidence, that justified "the things they believed and wanted to continue to believe".

To overlay these theories onto more recent cases, American conservatives who were shocked by the January 6th insurrection would undoubtedly find the theory that left-wing 'Antifa' were the real instigators of the riot – a spurious claim that entered the discourse and received massive amplification from congressman Matt Gaetz within hours of the event (see Armus, 2021) – deeply reassuring. It is surely much easier, or at least more tempting, to believe such a lie than to confront the reality: that you are on a political 'team' that includes violent, anti-democratic extremists. Similarly, the idea that Donald Trump was/is secretly engaged in a vast Manichean battle against a global cabal of satanic, paedophilic cannibals – the original organising principle of the QAnon conspiracy – may be especially persuasive for those who invested so much social and financial capital into the Trump Presidency. It may serve as a comforting lie that allows many of his supporters to carry on with their existing intellectual trajectory, thus avoiding the hard truth: that Trump was temperamentally and intellectually unfit[5] to be President, made "lethal" mistakes while overseeing the nation's initial response to COVID-19 (Bendor and Bullock, 2021), and failed to deliver on many of the grandiose promises he made during the 2016 campaign. That some continue to believe QAnon 'prophecies', even after they repeatedly fail to materialise, shows us just how powerful confirmation and commitment biases can be. Yes, the QAnon movement started and spread online, but it found an already-willing audience among those who would – perhaps understandably – prefer to buy into an absurd narrative than admit they have been fooled by a con man. As Carl Sagan famously put it:

> One of the saddest lessons of history is this: if we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It's simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we've been taken. (Sagan, 1996, p. 241)

We note these cognitive biases and logical frailties here because they are well-known to (and are thus exploited by) political actors, acutely aware that political identity (and the social connectivity that goes along with it) is more than strong enough to withstand a dissonance between public statements and reality. We should no longer think of the operation of the public sphere in terms of its deliberative rationality, then, as Habermasian conceptions do (cf. Furman and Tunc, 2020). Instead, we should think about politics more like sport, and citizens more like 'fans' (see Sandvoss, 2013), meaning that once a partisan affiliation has been established, people will generally stick by their 'team' no matter what (see also Achen and Bartels, 2017). This form of committed partisanship is also the driving mechanism for what Iyengar et al. (2012) describe as 'affective' rather than ideological polarisation.

The Too-Friendly Press

Truth has always been a critical concept for journalism, and for journalism studies. Modernist definitions of journalism define it primarily in relation to the truth: the pursuit of it, and how that process underpins accountability for those in the public domain. If the entire *raison d'être* for journalism is to act as a bulwark against the lies and disinformation espoused by those in positions of power, then it is clearly failing on that primary objective (see Harrington, 2017). We argue that one of the reasons for this is that the media is not as

[5] While acknowledging that this could be read as a partisan statement, it is not one made without evidence. As Daniel W. Drezner (2020, p.383) has noted, "Even a cursory examination of the Trump literature reveals a peculiarity unique to this president: almost all his biographers, even his acolytes, describe him in terms one would use for a toddler".

antagonistic or as adversarial in its everyday practice as both journalistic theory and journalistic discourse say that it is. In fact, journalism has not just failed to prevent the creeping catastrophe of disinformation from playing out as it has, but actively contributed to it in many cases.

Notably, for instance, highly partisan outlets presenting themselves as mainstream news have deliberately aided the spread of disinformation by political elites, or provided the journalistic 'cover' to normalise and excuse it. In Australia, for example, News Corporation outlets have worked *in simpatico* with conservative politicians by whipping up a moral panic about 'African gangs' in order to justify a pre-planned policy response from the conservative opposition (see Harrington, 2021). In a more recent case, Sky News Australia pundit Rita Panahi was named as a 'key amplifier' of climate disinformation during the COP26 Climate Conference (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022). Meanwhile, Sky's stable-mate Fox News commands one of the largest audiences in the USA, and regularly helps to push lies that further the goals of the Republican party. Fox News' (since fired) star anchor Tucker Carlson even ran a three-part feature pushing the lie that the January 6th insurrection was actually a 'false flag' operation by Antifa (and the 'deep state') designed to discredit Trump and his supporters (Folkenflik and Dreisbach, 2021).

This problem extends well beyond Fox News and propagandistic media outlets (e.g. OAN) like it, though, because even mainstream, centrist news outlets play a significant role in drawing attention to false claims made by political elites (see Budak, et al., 2024). Tsfati et al. (2020) argue that even well-meaning news coverage can dramatically amplify 'fake news' which would otherwise have fairly limited reach. Bruns et al. (2020; 2021) likewise showed how a fringe conspiracy theory about links between COVID-19 and 5G technology only reached a larger audience when mainstream media coverage of the celebrity endorsements for such claims amplified it. Both of these studies usefully complicate the work by other scholars (for example, Wardle, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling, 2018) who have created taxonomies of different kinds of 'fake news' (from those which attempt to actually deceive through to news parody and satire), based on the presumed intent of the *journalist* (and thus do not consider how disinformation spreads via the *subjects* of their coverage). However, where Tsfati et al. (2020) and Bruns et al. (2020; 2021) examined the role that journalists have played in bringing relatively fringe 'fake news' into the mainstream, what we focus on here is blatant disinformation at the very centre of mainstream politics: a positioning that makes it far more difficult for journalists to ignore, yet also significantly complicates their efforts to report the truth. How, for example, is a journalist supposed to avoid giving any coverage at all to statements by the most powerful people in their country, especially when they are made repeatedly?

The problem is further exacerbated if, in addition to having to cover and thus amplify the untruths proffered by powerful politicians, such coverage pulls its punches by failing to clearly identify lies as lies. At the macro level, uncritical reporting may occur because for-profit media organisations can suffer materially from upsetting people in positions of power: something political economists have argued for many decades now, but which is not the only explanation for the mainstream amplification of disinformation. Instead, or in addition to such institutional considerations, at the micro level of the individual journalist, more critical coverage of political lies might upset the 'respectability politics' that pervades the elite circles inhabited by politicians and journalists. In trying to understand the system that largely accepted George W. Bush's lies, for example, Alterman (2004, p.304) pointed the finger at "the insular nature of Washington's insider culture", which he described as "a society in which it is considered a graver matter to label another person a 'liar' than it is to actually be one". Indeed, even *The Washington Post*'s fact-checkers, whose work we noted earlier, only felt secure enough to state that Donald Trump averaged "about 21 *erroneous* claims a day" (emphasis added) during his presidency – avoiding the word 'lies' altogether.

The undue respect that the media thus give to serial liars is also related to the existential need for political journalists to maintain their access to key political figures. The "secretive and highly transactional relationship" (Hutcheon, 2022; see also Harrington, 2017; Moloney, et al., 2013) between political media and political actors in a mediatised age (see Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008) – where 'drops', leaks, exclusive access, and insider gossip are traded by political strategists in return for favourable coverage – necessarily contribute to the failure of many media figures to properly call out lies and disinformation (as well as improper conduct

more generally). Related to this is a lingering, misunderstood fealty to objectivity, which political partisans can similarly exploit: journalists often feel compelled to present 'both sides' of a story, giving each side equal weight even when the balance of evidence clearly favours one of them (see Jenkins and Gomez, 2022). Rather than stating outright that a politician is lying, journalists might thus actively seek out and a provide a platform for the most abstruse of arguments supporting those lies, lest they be viewed as biased, unobjective, and therefore unprofessional.

Conclusion: Shifting Paradigms

In this article, we have argued that previous framings of 'the disinformation problem' in both scholarly and popular forums have largely missed the mark. Whereas the primary focus in much of this previous work has seen this as a bottom—up process that needs to be controlled, an equally large (or even greater) amount of concern should revolve around how it is exploited for political power from the top—down. As we have outlined, ordinary citizens – thanks especially to the social dynamics at the intersection of politics and identity – of course play an important role in the spread of disinformation, and its subsequent impact, but political elites deserve far more scrutiny than they have hitherto received. We have argued, too, that the media has failed to adequately respond to the situation, in part because of professional pressures that require them to remain on good terms with the subjects of political coverage, and also because of the broader cultural expectations for journalists to remain (however performatively) 'objective' or 'neutral' in their posture. In sum, this could be described as a sort of hypermediatisation at the nexus of journalism and politics, and representative of a paradigmatic shift in the practice of political communication (see Harrington, et al., 2024-2027). It is what results when political elites engage a 'full court press' against the fourth estate, leaving as little room as possible for their opponents to move and attack.

It may be instinctive to presume that this malaise can be cured with more good journalism; that the broader mis-/disinformation problem is merely an "absence of correct information" (Waisbord, 2018, p.1869) that can be overcome through a high volume of remedial coverage. Such an approach, however, fundamentally misunderstands the situation at hand. It would be akin to thinking (and continuing the metaphor used above) that the Washington Generals can beat the Harlem Globetrotters by just playing better basketball. The reality is that many elite political actors are playing an entirely different game, with different rules, and with end goals that journalists are yet to fully recognise. As we have briefly outlined in this article, there are a range of factors that can strongly motivate someone to believe a political lie, or dismiss its obvious problematic effects, and 'good information' does nothing to address those underlying causes. It is, therefore, folly to keep looking for *rational* solutions to the problem of political elites exploiting human *irrationality*. Or, to put it bluntly: we cannot 'fact-check' our way out of this.

How should journalists respond, then? We do not yet have clear answers to this question, but it remains critical to not merely accept lies by political figures as 'par for the course', because they are also one of the main causes of a global downward spiral of public trust in both government and democracy more generally (see, for instance, Cameron and McAllister, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2021; Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014). Journalists may need, firstly, to find new and creative ways to actively shame those who lie and spread disinformation for their own political benefit (given our previous models of public discourse relied heavily on shame as a disincentive for such activity). We also suggest that it is important to develop a shared language (among journalists, scholars, and the general public) that labels and accurately describes the disinformation tactics being deployed by political actors, because properly identifying the problem is an important first step in addressing it. We thus hope that this article, and others that build upon it, will aid in the development of that awareness and that language. Part of the challenge, too, will be to alter our operating frameworks so that they no longer assume that those in positions of power, and those granted social licence to operate as the fourth estate holding them to account, are generally oriented towards truth and honesty. And, finally, any solution to this problem must necessarily involve an introspective examination by those in the media of the many behavioural incentives that they have unwillingly helped to create for, or accepted from, political strategists.

These underlying incentives – what Kumar (2006, p. 53) calls "in-built systems of discipline and rewards" – and the largely static and often formulaic rules by which journalism continues to operate, are now being gamed by those in positions of political power, and are thus urgently in need of radical change. As a basic first step, journalists would do well to seriously consider the extent of their own complicity in the disinformation dynamic, and understand that their own power to amplify certain voices should be exercised in a judicious, rather than reflexive, manner.

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