

# Responding to “Fake News”: Journalistic Perceptions of and Reactions to a Delegitimising Force

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## Abstract

The “fake news” phenomenon has permeated academic scholarship and popular debate since the 2016 US presidential election. Much has been written on the circulation of “fake news” and other forms of mis- and disinformation online. Despite its ongoing proliferation, less effort has been made to better understand the work of those engaged in daily news production—journalists themselves. Funded by the Australian Research Council project *Journalism Beyond the Crisis*, this study investigates how journalists perceive and respond to this phenomenon at a time when the industry has come under significant attack, and trust in news media has fallen globally. To do so, it draws on in-depth interviews with journalists in Australia and the UK, providing topical insights on their perceptions of and reactions to this profoundly delegitimising force. While on one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about the rise of “fake news,” they also proactively seek—and, in some cases, implement—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies range from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists’ professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

## Keywords

fact-checking; fake news; journalism; misinformation; objectivity; professional roles; Trump election; news verification

## 1. Introduction

It was a sombre scene on Capitol Hill. A group of people had gathered, motionless, and in complete silence, for several minutes. The only sound was the flicker of the candlelights they held, around 100, as night fell over the building behind them, the very same building that had been the scene of a deadly insurrection on this day one year ago. Fuelled by former President Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric in which he incited his crowd to “walk to the Capitol” and warned that “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (“Capitol riots,” 2021), they had done just that: Right after midday, on 6 January 2021, an angry mob of Trump supporters overwhelmed law enforcement, broke through barricades, and stormed Capitol Hill to stop the certification of the 2020 election results. Law enforcement only regained control over the rioters six hours later. But for some, it was too late: 138 police officers were injured, 15 of which were hospitalised with severe injuries, and five people died (Schmidt & Broadwater, 2021). Fast forward to 6 January 2022, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi addressed the lawmakers on the steps of Capitol Hill directly, saying: “We prayerfully mark one year since the insurrection, and patriotically honour the heroes who defended the Capitol and our democracy that day” (Wagner et al., 2022). They were attacked, simply for doing their job.

While these physical attacks marked the end of Trump’s dismal presidency, they were not the first of their kind: In 2017, the year of his inauguration, a white supremacy rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, resulting in one death, after which Trump remarked that there were “very fine people” on both sides of the rally (Holan, 2019). Likewise, verbal attacks by the president himself were a defining feature of his four-year term: He ridiculed female protesters at the Women’s March (Quigley, 2017), denounced Mexicans as “drug dealers, criminals, rapists” (“Drug dealers, criminals, rapists,” 2016), and labelled undocumented immigrants as “animals” (Korte & Gomez, 2018). Many of his verbal attacks, however, were targeted at a different group altogether, the very people supposed to report on him—journalists. In his eyes, journalists were “terrible,”

“nasty” purveyors of “fake news” who were “never going to make it” (Colarossi, 2020). Not *all* journalists, of course—only those he accused of a left-leaning, liberal “bias.” Whenever Trump faced scrutiny, he either did not like or did not agree with, he attacked journalists as “fake news”—again, simply for doing their job. This had its intended effect: In the US, trust in news by those on the political right fell sharply—from 17% in 2018 to 9% in 2019 alone (Newman et al., 2019).

But how did those at the forefront of daily news production—journalists themselves—perceive attacks on their profession during such significant political upheaval, and at a time when the authority and legitimacy of their work were increasingly put into question? What reasons did they see for its proliferation, and what consequences did such antagonistic discourse have on their work? Most importantly, what strategies, discursive or otherwise, did they develop to counter hostile accusations of illegitimacy? This study investigates precisely that: Using theories of journalists’ professional roles as a theoretical framework, we explore their perceptions of and explanations for the rise of the “fake news” phenomenon, before moving on to the perceived consequences of and counterstrategies against “fake news.” While on one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about its rise, they also proactively sought—and, in some cases, implemented—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies ranged from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists’ professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including improvements to newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Journalism and “Post-Truth”

Although “fake news” is not a new phenomenon as such—the Merriam-Webster dictionary traces the use of the term back to the late 1800s (“Donald Trump takes credit,” 2017)—following the 2016 US presidential election it permeated public discourse significantly more. A search in the newspaper database Factiva yields 1,243 hits for 2015, 7,933 for 2016, and then on average 62,439 occurrences each year between 2017 and 2021. Interestingly, since 2018, when the use of the term reached its peak with 77,269 hits, its salience in public discourse has steadily decreased. This may be due to an increased public awareness of the problematic nature and “definitional ambiguity” (Funke, 2017) of the term, which not only connotes a broad range of false information from news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, and advertising to propaganda (Tandoc et al., 2018) but, more importantly, is also weaponised by anti-democratic politicians and other nefarious actors to discredit certain sections of the media. The scale of the problem is further evidenced by the fact that governments around the globe have set up independent working groups to combat its spread: In the UK, the House of Commons has examined the issue of disinformation and “fake news” since 2017, and, in 2018, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s Digital Platforms Inquiry examined audience exposure to less reliable news. In the same year, the European Commission set up a high-level expert group to advise on counterstrategies to fight the spread of “fake news” online. In its final submission, the group defined the term as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (High Level Expert Group, 2018, p. 3). Given the increased awareness of the dangerous normalisation and nefarious weaponisation of the term, scholars have since made a concerted effort to differentiate between different types of false information, especially mis- and disinformation. The main differentiating factor between these different types is *intent*: While both terms indicate “false information,” only disinformation is *intentionally* deceptive and used as a deliberate political instrument with specific delegitimisation objectives.

According to Bakir and McStay (2018), five underlying features of the digital media ecology have contributed to the spread of the “fake news” phenomenon: the economic decline of legacy news outlets over the past two decades, the increased immediacy of the news cycle, the rapid circulation of “fake news” and outright propaganda through user-generated content, the increasingly emotionalised nature of online discourse, and the capitalisation on algorithms used by social media platforms and search engines. Similarly, Carlson (2018) lists as contributing factors for its rise a public prone to partisan, selective exposure; a media sector willing to provide partisan content; and traditional media already anxious and criticised for their delivery of the news. Since then, the information politics of journalism in a “post-truth” age have been described as “a major political battleground in which the American right-wing struggles with mainstream media” (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 307), attributed to “a fundamental shift in political and public attitudes to what journalism and news represent and how facts and information may be obtained in a digitalized world” (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 97), and even characterised as “symptomatic of the collapse of the old news order and the chaos of contemporary public communication” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868). More recent trends in the digital information environment appear

to demonstrate that the phenomenon is here to stay: Advances in digital technologies adding to the proliferation of misinformation, the emergence of automated bots, and sophisticated, deep-learning techniques using forms of artificial intelligence to create deliberately distorted audio-visual material known as “deepfakes” are likely to intensify the issue of mis- and disinformation—which the Trump presidency made especially visible in public discourse—even further. His frequent labelling of reporters critical of his leadership as “fake news” not only sought to attack individual reporters but, consequently, to delegitimise journalism as a democratic institution in general.

## 2.2. The “Fake News” Label

According to Van Dalen (2021), who investigated specific delegitimation strategies by outsider politicians, such strategies can be broadly summarised as attacking journalists’ character, connecting their work to other institutions that are perceived to be “illegitimate,” questioning their ethical standards, casting doubt on their claims to be working in the public interest, and questioning the benefits of their work more broadly. Such strategies are also apparent in Trump’s anti-press rhetoric, which ultimately seeks to sow doubt in the media as a central pillar of democracy, specifically by claiming that “mainstream media companies are biased and [are] deliberately attempting to promote liberal agendas instead of representing ‘the people’” (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 306). Such perceived disenchantment by regular voters has given rise to the “silent majority,” a term first popularised by former US President Richard Nixon which later became a defining image of the Trump presidency: During his frequent rallies, some supporters held placards stating, “The silent majority stands with Trump.” Pitting “the people” (i.e., the “silent majority”) against “the elite” is a delegitimation strategy rooted in populist politics, which not only includes antagonistic discourses against “the elite” in general terms but specifically discourses of antagonism against “the media,” perceived as part of the “establishment” and thus not representative of “the people.” Such trends might explain record low levels of trust in the media towards the end of the Trump presidency, exemplary of a broader trend of distrust in institutions, elites, and experts. According to Hanitzsch et al. (2017, p. 7), “the erosion of trust in the media is broadly connected to a public disenchantment with and widespread disdain for social institutions more generally, but for political institutions most particularly.”

Needless to say, then, such levels of eroding trust can have damaging and potentially lasting consequences for journalistic work, consequences which are so stark that they go well beyond academic, niche discussions, and to the very heart of public trust during times of political upheaval or global health emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Already in 2017, the United Nations, along with the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights expressed concern “at instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including stating that the media is ‘the opposition’ or is ‘lying’ and has a hidden, political agenda” (United Nations et al., 2017, p. 1). On a higher level of abstraction, such developments also have the potential to threaten journalistic authority and associated legitimacy claims of the profession (Carlson, 2017). According to Lischka (2019, p. 291):

Trump’s fake news accusations can be regarded as a means to retain direct interpretative authority about his political legitimacy ... . When political actors take up fake news accusations, they seek to damage news outlets’ sovereignty of interpretation and legitimacy and attempt to gain interpretative power for themselves.

Consequently, such delegitimation strategies may have the intended effect of negatively influencing audience perceptions of news media as credible purveyors of information.

## 2.3. Impacts on Journalism

These credibility attributions rest on journalists having gained discursive authority and legitimacy associated with the “noble” characteristic traits of their profession (Deuze, 2019). Such discourse is grounded in normative perceptions of journalism’s positive benefits to a functioning democracy: “It is through discourse that practices gain legitimacy [as norms] by becoming attached to a language of virtue associated with journalism’s institutional mission” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2003). According to Tong (2018), claims to journalistic authority and legitimacy rest on three pillars that maintain and sustain its hegemony: the establishment of professional norms and the public’s subsequent acceptance of them, the discursive construction of professional norms and ideals to maintain journalism’s boundaries and legitimacy, and the coupling of professional norms and readers’ trust to grant journalism legitimacy and cultural authority. However, it is important to remember that claims to journalistic authority are by no means static—They are dynamic and embedded in a constant process of negotiation and re-negotiation as journalism *as an institution* is either subject to general scrutiny or specific

legitimate or illegitimate media criticism. As such, journalistic authority is a site of struggle between those wanting to sustain it, and those intent on destroying it. Put differently, “maintaining journalistic authority is an ongoing project that rests in part on journalists’ discursive construction of their roles in the midst of discursive struggles with others who also lay claim to such authority or who challenge that of journalists” (Lawrence & Moon, 2021, p. 157).

Traditionally, claims to journalistic authority and legitimacy rested on an almost dogged pursuit of the ideal of objectivity. According to Schudson (1978, n.p.), “the belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts,’ a distrust in ‘values,’ and a commitment to their segregation.” In journalism, the objectivity norm is based on a commitment to reporting “the truth,” requiring journalists to present all sides of an argument and to let audiences draw their own conclusions. By adhering to the notion of objectivity, discursively highlighting that journalistic work is in the public interest (Van Dalen, 2021), and underscoring journalism’s ethical standards (Tong, 2018), claims to authority and legitimacy are upheld. However, the objectivity norm in journalism is both a contested and vexed topic, rooted in a somewhat simplistic belief that there is such a thing as one objective, absolute truth. Instead, journalists often “acknowledge that their informed opinion cannot lay claim on the absolute truth, but instead remains tentative, contested, and open to revision whenever new information comes forth and doubts about the correctness of the available information are raised” (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021, p. 1342). Not least thanks to the subsequent proliferation of the “fake news” phenomenon, scholars have since begun to question what could emerge “after objectivity” (McNair, 2017). Increased transparency in journalism—such as by giving audiences more insights into the news production process, demonstrating, in detail, *how* stories were produced and *what* sources were consulted in the process—has gained traction as an alternative to the outdated objectivity norm. For example, the live blog as a journalistic format may well be so popular with readers because it is defined by its increased transparency measures (Thurman & Schapals, 2017).

More broadly, however, increased transparency measures may not suffice to safeguard journalism from discursive threats to its authority. Critics bemoan that, while well-intended, their real value remains at best symbolic (Lischka, 2021). Nonetheless, measures that enable journalism to enter into a conversation with itself as a form of self-reflective practice (Wang et al., 2018) are on the rise: Such measures go hand-in-hand with an increase in fact-checking initiatives (both by independent entities, as well as through operations internal to a newsroom), coordinated editorial campaigns by US newspapers to counter the “fake news” narrative (Lawrence & Moon, 2021), and even wholesale re-branding strategies by major US news brands whenever the profession is threatened by external forces.

External forces threatening journalism’s jurisdiction also include unrelated developments such as the rise of peripheral actors (Schapals, 2022; Schapals et al., 2019), a development which has seen traditional actors discursively defend existing norms and values characterising their profession. Specifically, “through isolating and expelling deviant actors, scorning deviant practices as ‘un-journalistic’ and policing the boundaries of their field, journalists maintain their cultural authority and the privileges that accompany it” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2003). In such instances, journalists engage in field repair, fixing the profession from *within*. However, in the context of the “fake news” phenomenon, journalists are rather upholding the profession’s institutional myth: Its *internal* norms are not breaking down; rather, an *external* crisis is threatening the profession (Koliska et al., 2020). The severity of this external crisis is such that the rise of “fake news” has been described as a real watershed moment—a critical incident (Tandoc et al., 2019)—prompting journalists to reconsider the central tenets of journalistic practice. This not only includes stressing and re-asserting the profession’s *institutional* value as a public good but also journalists’ *individual* role conceptions as they are faced with a profoundly delegitimising force. This emphasis on journalistic roles is even more critical “at a time when journalism’s social legitimacy and epistemic authority are being existentially questioned” (Standaert et al., 2021, p. 920).

Scholarly work on journalistic roles in both Western and non-Western contexts dates back several decades. Helpfully, and most recently, Standaert et al. (2021) offered an elaborate framework focusing specifically on the roles of journalists in political (as opposed to everyday) life. This includes six roles: the informational/instructive role (journalists providing citizens with relevant information to enable them to participate in political life), the analytical/deliberative role (journalists directly intervening in the political discourse, e.g., through news commentary), the critical/monitorial role (journalists acting as a “fourth estate,” a role most pronounced in Western contexts), the advocative/radical role (journalists taking a stance in political matters and having that stance reflected in media coverage), the developmental/educative role (journalists’ profoundly interventionist role, actively promoting change and contributing to public education), and the collaborative/facilitative role (journalists acting as constructive government partners). In their analysis of journalists’ roles in political life, they find largely unquestioned *doxa*—the system of rules governing the journalistic field—and contend that, “despite the manifold, and in some places dramatic, changes in the profession, journalism’s normative mythology seems to be surprisingly intact” (Standaert et al., 2021, p. 932). Similarly, in a study of German journalists’ role

perceptions in the face of the “fake news” phenomenon (Koliska & Assmann, 2021), journalists continued to defend their best practices in news reporting, roles, and values, and, as such, discursively insisted on traditional journalistic principles.

In this study, we focus on Australian and British journalists’ responses and reactions to the delegitimising force of the “fake news” phenomenon. Specifically, and in referring to the above theories on journalists’ professional roles as a reference point, we ask: How do journalists perceive attacks on their profession during such significant political upheaval, and at a time when the authority and legitimacy of their work were increasingly put into question? What reasons did they see for the proliferation of such attacks, and what consequences did such antagonistic discourse have on their work? Most importantly, what strategies, discursive or otherwise, did they develop to counter hostile accusations? In so doing, we heed the call both for more research on the fake news “label” as a political instrument to delegitimise news media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) as well as for a better understanding of whether and how journalistic roles evolve in response to a profound professional threat (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). As already noted, harassment, intimidation, and threats towards journalists ought to be newly considered within a Western context (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), even in places that were long perceived as stable democracies.

### 3. Method

In order to capture Australian and British journalists’ perceptions of and reactions to the delegitimising force of the “fake news” phenomenon, in a first step, it was necessary to carefully devise a list of news organisations in each country. For this study, this primarily included mainstream media organisations with a significant online audience, but also some emerging outlets having attracted a significant online following over time. To determine audience reach in the UK, data was gathered from the digital marketing intelligence service SimilarWeb; in Australia, such data was gathered through Hitwise, an audience insights marketing tool. In addition to audience reach as a determining factor, in some cases, the researchers also relied on convenience sampling of staff they already had an established rapport with. Following this initial identification of outlets, in a second step, staff working at these outlets were identified. Excluded staff included those covering only one beat (e.g., sports) or otherwise specialised reporters (with the obvious exception of the “politics” beat). This consultation process was aided through Cision, a media database of journalists’ contact details frequently used for PR purposes. Staff were contacted via email, and, if necessary, with a follow-up email to remind them of the opportunity to take part in the interview. While some staff at both mainstream and emerging media outlets were unavailable for an interview, in total, N = 33 in-depth interviews were conducted, 15 of those in London and 18 in Sydney and Melbourne (Table 1). Interview participants were de-identified and assigned a code so as to ensure anonymisation.

**Table 1.** Sample of interviewees including media outlet and position held.

<b>Australia</b>		<b>UK</b>	
1A	The Australian	1U	Al Jazeera English
2A	Sky News Australia	2U	BBC News
3A	Techly	3U	The Guardian
4A	The Age	4U	Bellingcat
5A	BuzzFeed Australia	5U	openDemocracy
6A	The New York Times	6U	BuzzFeed UK
7A	New Matilda	7U	The New European
8A	BuzzFeed Australia	8U	The Guardian
9A	Junkee	9U	The Mirror
10A	ANZ Bluenotes	10U	Daily Record
11A	VICE News Australia	11U	The Telegraph
12A	The Herald Sun	12U	The Independent
13A	Australian Financial Review	13U	The Guardian
14A	The Saturday Paper	14U	The Telegraph
15A	The Age	15U	The Times
		16U	The Guardian
		17U	The Mirror
		18U	The Guardian

Two deliberately broad research questions were asked: (a) “How do you perceive the rise of the ‘fake news’ phenomenon?” and (b) “how should journalism deal with ‘fake news’?” Upon elaborating on the first question, journalists also provided more detailed responses on the possible *reasons* they saw for its rise, as well as identifying potential *consequences* the phenomenon could have on their work. Importantly, in answering the second question, interviewees focussed on specific *counterstrategies*—discursive or otherwise—that they believe could address the issue. This observation validated the study’s methodological approach: Using in-depth interviews, participants would take the opportunity to elaborate freely on the issue at hand, prompting the researchers to ask follow-up questions, and thus allowing “for a much freer exchange between interviewer and interviewee” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). Interviews in general, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews in particular, are widely seen as “one of the most effective methods for collecting rich data on newsroom practices and attitudes among decision-makers in news organisations” (Koliska & Assmann, 2021, p. 6).

Following the interview transcription process, the transcripts were read several times to distil possible themes in the interview data. Known as thematic analysis, this approach allows for qualitative, exploratory research to take place (Boyatzis, 1998) and to identify and analyse patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this identification process, the data were subsequently clustered and analysed further using the qualitative research software package MaxQDA. Overall, this analysis has resulted in four broad themes: (a) *perceptions* of “fake news,” (b) *reasons* for the proliferation of “fake news,” (c) *consequences* of “fake news” for journalistic work, and (d) *counterstrategies* to fight the spread of “fake news.” Within these four broader themes, several sub-themes emerged, such as trust in news more generally, or the issue of online polarisation more specifically.

It is important to point out here that the interviews were conducted within a two-year time span: from early 2017 to late 2019, which is when research for the much broader Journalism Beyond the Crisis project funded by the Australian Research Council took place, and of which this article is an excerpt. This means that the interview data reflect these themes at the beginning, and at the very height of the Trump presidency. Consequently, on the one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about the rise of “fake news,” but on the other, they also proactively seek—and, in some cases, implement—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies ranged from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists’ professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Perceptions of “Fake News”

Broadly speaking, the vast majority of journalists expressed significant concern about the rise of “fake news” and other forms of misinformation (a theme most dominant in the interviews conducted at the time of Trump’s inauguration), while some journalists also felt empowered by the “Trump bump” experienced in the aftermath of his election.

For example, a journalist at the corporate-sponsored financial journalism website *ANZ Bluenotes* described the rise of the “fake news” phenomenon not just as a challenge for journalism and journalists, but also for society as such. He said:

It does worry me because what it shows is that you have participants ... who have a vested interest in the public not knowing the truth. He [Trump] and other opponents of transparency have succeeded in convincing people that news is not legitimate ... . That’s a sort of societal challenge. It’s a challenge all around; it’s a more existential challenge than just journalism. It’s the nature of truth. (10A)

A journalist at the Australian *Saturday Paper*—a long-form, narrative journalism publication—mirrored this sentiment and stressed that, frequently, high-ranking politicians themselves were guilty of spreading misinformation and pushing their agenda for their own, nefarious reasons, not just in the US, but also in Australia. He said:

At the moment, purveyors of fake news are politicians we need to report on, so it’s very difficult in the case of people like Trump and a lot of right-wing Australian politicians who are knowingly perpetuating myths and division. So, when they’re citing fake news sources as verified news sources—that’s a very difficult thing to get around. (14A)

In Australia, this even includes backbenchers of the ruling Liberal Party, who continue to knowingly perpetuate falsehoods about Covid-19 vaccinations under the guise of exercising their right to freedom of speech. In the UK, a journalist at *The Guardian* underscored the dangers of the fake news “label” to a functioning democracy, highlighting its potential to act as a delegitimising force. He said:

Trump has done a great disservice to not so much journalism alone, but journalism as functioning in a democratic society. He does this in two main ways: By calling things fake when they are not fake, it puts in danger the idea that there can be an approximation of truth. And unless a society accepts for the purpose of public debate that you can have facts, and that you can have an approximation of truth, society finds it difficult to make correct decisions. (8U)

His colleague at *The Guardian* concurred, and referred to the “destructive” nature of the “fake news” phenomenon when he said:

The whole “fake news” discourse has really poisoned the environment for journalists. If something as authoritative as the NYT [*The New York Times*] ... can be dismissed as “fake news” by the president of America, then that seems to be really, really not a good scenario ... . I think that in the short term, this is going to continue, and I’m sure that the same treatment is being given to all kinds of other serious journalism offerings ... . I don’t expect that situation to get any better for a bit. (18U)

Empowered by the “Trump bump” phenomenon experienced in the aftermath of Trump’s inauguration, however, some journalists discursively stressed the value of journalism as a public good, and, in so doing, defended their profession (see also Jahng et al., 2021). One journalist at *The Age* newspaper in Australia stressed the normative role of journalism as a pillar of democracy—a role she believed had become even more important at the height of his presidency. She said:

I do believe in journalism as a pillar of democratic society. There is absolutely no doubt that that is the case ... . So, to me it’s very clear journalism has a duty of care to society, and I think that’s part of the reason why journalists do what they do: They believe they’re being useful. (4A)

Similarly, a journalist at the Australian version of *The New York Times* provided a more nuanced answer when he referred to the rise of the “fake news” phenomenon as a double-edged sword. In his words:

To some degree, Trump and the argument of fake news has undermined faith in journalism for a lot of people. But I think on the other hand, it’s also brought a lot of people back to journalism and made them see the value of it. So, I think it’s sort of a mixed bag in that regard. (6A)

## 4.2. Reasons for “Fake News”

Frequently, whenever journalists were asked about their perceptions of the “fake news” phenomenon, they also explained what they believed led to its rise in the first place. Overall, journalists identified three reasons for its proliferation: first, the use of the term by politicians to distract from unwanted scrutiny; second, the use of the term as discursive means to sow distrust in authorities and institutions as a whole; and third, the rise of the broader issue of online polarisation.

On the former, a journalist at the Australian masthead *The Age* newspaper said: “There’s no doubt that people in power are afraid of journalists, afraid of negative or untoward coverage—so much so that the first thing that dictators do is to crush the press: They don’t want any scrutiny” (4A). A journalist at *The Telegraph* newspaper mirrored this sentiment and expressed concern about Trump’s verbal attacks on journalists who were simply doing their job in holding his office accountable. He said:

I do find that very worrying. Especially this ratcheting up against journalists—It’s his way not to respond to the story but to attack the journalists, and that’s what I’ve found: People attack you because they don’t want to answer what you’re asking. And Trump is playing this really, really dangerous game. I would be worried about any minority or profession being made the scapegoat in any situation. (14U)

For the second reason, journalists stressed that the “fake news” phenomenon was part of a broader trend seeking to sow distrust in authorities and institutions more broadly. For example, a journalist at the lifestyle and

tech publication *Techly* said that people “distrust politicians, which is where you’ve seen lots of dis-establishment sentiment. So, people are turning against tradition, and perhaps turning against media ... . There’s obviously a sentiment that’s sitting around there—There’s distrust, there’s a lack of understanding” (3A). Similarly, a journalist at *The Guardian* referred to the same broader, eroding trend when he said:

The discrediting of the reliability of news has been around for a very long time, and it goes hand in hand with a general erosion of confidence in institutions in the United States and in governments. So, I don’t necessarily think it’s a passing phase—I think it’s a reflection of a broader kind of attitude towards institutions and authority, and the press really is institutional anyways. (13U)

Third, journalists expanded on factors they believed had contributed to the broader issue of polarisation and were surprisingly self-critical of their own trade when doing so. For example, a journalist at the masthead *The Australian* believed that certain sections of the media were to blame for people’s distrust, thus enabling the “fake news” accusation to take hold so effectively. She said: “I think we have lived, unwillingly, in a cocoon of our own making ... . But the notion that you have to recognise is that some people have got different realities, and that is really, really important” (1A). Similarly, a journalist at *The Guardian* blamed sections of the media for the polemical nature of their reporting, which he believed led to widespread misrepresentation and polarisation. In his words:

From a reporter’s point of view, I notice it in certain places that when you say you’re a reporter, you’re met with a hostility that you wouldn’t have had 10 years ago. And the other things are the attacks on the media and the credibility of mainstream media, not just by Donald Trump, but generally. To which I think the media has a lot to answer for ... . They’ve all gone a long way to undermine journalism through their lies and misreporting and hate campaigns. (13U)

Another journalist at *The Guardian* specifically referred to a lack of diversity in major news organisations when he said:

To a large extent, I think it’s something that journalism has brought on itself ... . The idea that the media is distrusted is something that the media has to take a lot of blame for because it has gone along and has been lazy. It used stereotypes to vilify certain parts of the population and it’s ignored even greater parts of the population. So, when people say, “I don’t trust what the press says,” I don’t blame them. (16U)

Another *The Guardian* journalist based in the US bemoaned a lack of newsroom diversity, too, and believed that such conversations would go a long way to aid public understanding of *who* counts as a journalist in a contemporary news environment. He said:

We get into diversity and all its forms [here], and the US has been very bad on class diversity ... . So, I think it’s forming the assessing of who becomes a journalist in the United States, which can only be a good thing” (13U).

These accounts are in line with a recent report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism on newsroom diversity, which found that only 15% of the top 80 editors across five countries (including the UK) were non-white (Robertson et al., 2021).

### 4.3. Consequences of “Fake News”

The interviews demonstrated a noteworthy dichotomy between journalists’ palpable concerns about the rise of “fake news” and their firm confidence that the present moment of crisis could be turned into an opportunity for journalism: for the profession to reassert its professional authority, and for audiences to return to trusted, established news brands (a feature especially pronounced in the later interviews). For example, a journalist at *The Age* newspaper said that:

Two years ago [in 2017], everybody was in a state of flux because of Trump and fake news, and there was this period where he almost succeeded in making people believe that all media are untrustworthy. And I think that actually made people realise—after a little stumble—that you need to pay for good journalism, and ... you need to be able to trust them. (4A)



Similarly, a journalist at *ANZ Bluenotes* believed that the present moment would force journalists to be more self-critical and self-reflective in their work and to communicate the public value of the profession to audiences. He said: “It’s positive that people have started to realise, particularly post-Trump, that good news matters ... . I think that’s positive: the idea that journalists have had to think more about what they do” (10A). Similarly, a journalist at the *Australian Financial Review* concurred when she said:

I don’t think [fake news] is something that is going to go away very quickly. But I think, as traditional media, if we continue to provide good quality journalism that people can trust, I think that will stand traditional media in good stead. Because people know, “okay, I can turn to x news organisation for credible news.” (13A)

Despite the present moment of crisis, another journalist at *The Age* newspaper put it bluntly when he said: “I think the whole industry of fake news has actually been a good thing for the [legitimate news] industry” (15A). This underscores these journalists’ belief that, by highlighting and re-asserting journalism’s authority, the delegitimising crisis brought about by the “fake news” phenomenon may well be turned into an opportunity to emphasise the value of journalism as a public good (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

Similarly, in the UK, and buoyed by the “Trump bump” experienced in the aftermath of the Trump inauguration, when traditional news outlets registered record levels of digital subscriptions, journalists were positive about a return to established journalism mastheads. For example, a journalist at *The Mirror* felt that the consequences of the “fake news” phenomenon were not actually a reason for concern for journalism—but quite the opposite. He said: “In some regards, I’m really optimistic. There’s some really good journalism out there. It’s holding people to account. It’s exploring new streams. It’s listening to concerns. It’s championing people. It’s a service ... . So, that gives me cause for optimism” (9U). A journalist at *The Telegraph* similarly saw a return to established journalism mastheads and believed that people would consequently be more willing to subscribe to and pay for respectable news brands. He said: “There has been a rebound in the last year or so, with people returning to newspapers ... . People are willing to pay small amounts ... and there’s a slow move back towards trusted and mainstream news sources” (11U). His colleague at *The Telegraph* put it especially eloquently when he said:

I do think that in this era things can be quite scary in terms of some of the volatility we’re seeing. But I do feel that we’re valuing journalism again. We’re making the case again why journalism is so important. And it is important. Sometimes there’s this feeling where the best days are all behind us and everything’s in decline, but I don’t buy that for a minute. Journalism is now more important than it’s ever been. (14U)

Such narratives show an interesting dichotomy between journalists expressing significant concern about the proliferation of “fake news” on the one hand, and a great deal of optimism on the other that such concern has led to a revaluing of journalism as a profession. In a similar vein, they also came up with relatively specific strategies to counter the spread of online misinformation.

#### 4.4. Counterstrategies for “Fake News”

Five strategies stood out from the journalists’ accounts whenever they referred to specific strategies to counter misinformation. This included both general and specific recommendations: on a general note, higher journalistic standards, including verification; on a more specific note, improved editorial standards such as increased transparency in the news production process, more investment into and training of staff in open-source intelligence, and strengthened media literacy among news consumers.

On the former, a journalist at *The New European*—a pro-European, hardcopy newspaper established after the Brexit referendum—believed that:

We need to make sure that ... standards are lifted. If that happens to the fake news scandal, then that’s all well and good. For me, as a journalist, I think we’ve just got to ... carry on making sure that our standards are the very highest possible so that our readers know that we’re not fake news ... . If we carry on doing that then actually the whole thing is an opportunity for us. (7U)

Similarly, a journalist at *The Guardian* believed that the proliferation of “fake news” forced media organisations to take a look at themselves and to re-examine their relationship with audiences. He said:

On the whole, fake news has been a very good thing for journalism. I take an optimistic view, but I think that it forced proper journalism to up its game. The Guardian has been forced to carve out a very specific place

for itself in journalism as a way of saying: “This is what we do, and this is why you need to take notice of us.” (13U)

On a more specific note, other journalists felt that increased transparency in the news production process—a reinvigorated measure in light of the outdated notion of objectivity—could serve as a useful countermeasure so as to provide audiences with detailed insights into editorial operations. The *ANZ Bluenotes* journalist suggested that:

The way to combat it is just a ground war [of] constantly reminding people of “this is where this comes from.” This analysis relies on this evidence, [and] even if you don’t believe our conclusions, you can go back to the evidence and follow it through. (10A)

A journalist at *Bellingcat*—known for its in-depth investigations into events such as the shooting down of flight MH–17 using transparent means—agreed, and specifically referred to the rise of open-source intelligence, which he would want to see more widely used across news organisations. He said:

If all these organisations start to do this kind of work, it would be good. But traditional news organisations struggle to integrate this kind of work into their day-to-day team. Often, we find it difficult to find content and stuff to write about every single day, and that might not be how news organisations want content on a regular reliable basis. I think this is a big issue. (4U)

Other journalists were hopeful that strengthened digital literacy across audiences would help people distinguish “real news” from “fake news” and made a point of stressing its value. For example, a journalist at *VICE News Australia* said that:

I think audiences will get smarter, just naturally ... . It’s a technological evolution, we’re just going through the baby steps of the kind of effect the internet has on our culture. I think it will continue to evolve ... . We’re just starting to see it and it will increase. (11A)

A journalist at *BuzzFeed UK* concurred and said: “Fundamentally enough, people are not so stupid as to constantly believe fake stuff if the truth is reported well ... . I just sort of think the truth will come out in the end” (6U). In a similar vein, a journalist at *The Daily Record* believed that “I don’t really think we can fight fake news. People just have to get better at recognising it” (10U).

## 5. Conclusion

This study was motivated by an effort to better understand the work of those engaged in daily news production—journalists themselves—at a time when the industry as a whole has come under significant attack, and individual journalists were subjected to a profoundly delegitimising force at the height of the Trump presidency. Using theories of journalists’ professional roles, we sought to highlight these journalists’ perceptions of and reactions to accusations of “fake news.” In our interviews, we explored the possible reasons they saw for its proliferation, the consequences they had observed, and the potential strategies they believed could act as a defence mechanism to counter the spread of online mis- and disinformation. It is worth reminding the reader that theories of journalists’ professional roles were used as a reference point—or guiding principle—in this study, rather than as a strict, theoretical framework examining specific roles.

In terms of journalistic *perceptions*, the journalists’ narratives pointed to an interesting dichotomy between initial concerns and subsequent optimism in light of the “Trump bump.” While initial accounts referred to the “destructive” weaponisation of the term, subsequent interviews suggested renewed levels of confidence, affirming the institutional value of journalism as a public good. The longitudinal nature of this study—with interviews carried out between early 2017 and late 2019—may well explain this imbalance, a noteworthy finding also evident whenever journalists referred to the *consequences* of “fake news”: On one hand, there was palpable concern that attacks and forms of hatred were increasingly directed at journalists in otherwise stable democracies (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). On the other hand, again, there was a newfound, noticeable confidence amongst journalists interviewed in the latter stages of the study, who were upbeat that audiences would re-orient themselves back to established journalistic mastheads when faced with prolonged periods of public crises. For journalism as an industry, the developments brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic are thus

a reason for careful optimism: The significant upheaval caused by the global health emergency has made audiences return to trusted news brands during periods of isolation, and trust in news has increased slightly year-on-year (Newman et al., 2021).

Journalists also referred to the *reasons* they believed had allowed the phenomenon to take hold so effectively. This included the use of the term by politicians to distract from unwanted scrutiny, as a discursive means to sow distrust in authorities and institutions as a whole, as well as the broader issue of online polarisation. Their accounts referred to the “fake news” label and its deliberate weaponisation (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), and its longer-term effects on public distrust and disdain towards social and political institutions more generally (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). They revealed a surprisingly self-critical stance when it came to polarisation, a development they believed could at least partly be attributed to a lack of organisational diversity in the news industry (Robertson et al., 2021) and a sense of disenfranchisement amongst audiences.

Importantly, when it came to *counterstrategies*, journalists identified a range of measures they sought to implement. This included both general and specific measures: on a general note, a call to raise journalistic standards, including verification; on a more specific note, increased transparency in the news production process, investing into and training staff in open-source intelligence, and strengthening media literacy among consumers of news. As such, while journalists engaged in a form of self-reflective practice (Wang et al., 2018) when it came to their profession—and the challenges it was subjected to—they also highlighted issues with the audience’s reception of and engagement with news and noted the need for substantial improvements in news users’ ability to detect mis- and disinformation.

While these findings do raise significant concerns—the delegitimising effects of being labelled as “fake news,” an introspective self-critique of journalism as not being sufficiently representative of the public and increasing attacks on and hatred towards journalists in previously stable democracies—journalists also made a concerted effort to highlight specific countermeasures they believed to be valuable. These included collective US newspaper editorials as a defence strategy (see also Lawrence & Moon, 2021); increased fact-checking and verification, including the use of open-source intelligence; and increased transparency in the news production process, explaining to the public *how* journalists work in an attempt to reduce perceptions of bias in their reporting. In addition, journalists stressed the value of existing standards and best practices, affirmed the authority and legitimacy of their work, and, in doing so, emphasised the value of journalism as a public good overall—irrespective of whether they worked for a mainstream or emerging outlet. As such, these findings align with similar studies in the US (Jahng et al., 2021) and Germany (Koliska & Assmann, 2021) which have found editors defending their best practices when faced with the external force that the “fake news” phenomenon represents. In the authors’ words, “the editors’ discursive practices...aim to shore up trust and justify journalistic authority and legitimacy, but especially to ensure institutional survival” (Koliska & Assmann, 2021, p. 2742). Overall, journalists thus held on “to their democratic roles as normative anchors in unsettling times” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2007).

Our findings from this study are limited in that both countries—Australia and the UK—are major parliamentary democracies; with regards to media systems, both can generally be grouped within the liberal media model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), thus operating within broadly similar media environments. It is therefore unsurprising that the journalists’ narratives most closely resembled the critical/monitorial role (Standaert et al., 2021) we have also seen in studies emanating from the US (Jahng et al., 2021), thus underscoring that the implications of the “fake news” phenomenon are also broadly applicable in other Western contexts. Elsewhere, however, and perhaps especially in countries where democratic structures are currently even more significantly threatened by a slide towards populism and illiberalism, we may well have found different perceptions of and responses to external threats. Important work already exists in this space: For example, Prager and Hameleers (2021) have looked at the role perceptions of Colombian journalists facing conflict; similarly, Balod and Hameleers (2021) have investigated the role perceptions of Filipino journalists in an age of mis- and disinformation. More such work is needed, particularly outside the US where the phenomenon has attracted significant scholarly attention—a natural consequence of the popularisation of the term “fake news” in the wake of the Trump presidency.

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