Introduction

"Not you. Your [news] organization is terrible," shouted president-elect Donald Trump at White House reporter Jim Acosta of CNN during a press conference, to which Acosta replied, "Since you're attacking us, can you give us a question? Mr. President-elect, since you're attacking our news organization, can you give us a chance?" Trump shot back, "I'm not going to give you a question. You are fake news."[1] Ever since that January 2017 morning, *fake news* has become an omnipresent idiom in American discourse. In fact, during his first year in office, Trump used the phrase over four hundred times.[2] The phrase became a cultural phenomenon, frequently appearing in entertainment media such as *Comedy Central's The Fake News Hour with Ted Nelms,* where "Ted Nelms" is played by actor Ed Helms; Britain's *The Fake News Show,* where participants compete to see who can most often discern a false news story from a real one; and the 2018 reboot of the journalism sitcom *Murphy Brown,* with the premiere focused on fake news.[3]

The popularity of the phrase saw media scholars, political scientists, and news analysts began investigating the influence of fake news on American democracy.[4] They argued that regardless of the medium, fake news was dangerous to democracy and public safety when it was optimized by politicians (such as President Trump),

television news personalities (such as Sean Hannity), and online news outlets (such as InfoWars).[5] In addition to assessing the problems associated with fake news, critics and scholars have offered a series of solutions to diminish the threat posed by fake news, including industry- and government-imposed regulations, as well as legal action against individuals and nations known to engage in the production and dissemination of fake news.[6] However, all of these solutions have showed little promise because they do not address the central factor enabling the legitimization of fake news: news users cannot distinguish between fake news and journalism.

The Need for Media Literacy

In response, scholars argued for the adoption of a media literacy component in American schooling.[7] National media literacy initiatives were implemented in Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and several Asian countries some decades ago,[8] but not in the US. However, fears that fake news had circulated widely on social media and influenced the 2016 election created a sense of public urgency for media literacy in the United States. Only after the post-2016 fear of fake news took root did half of US states pass legislation encouraging media literacy.[9] Media literacy organizations such as the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), one of the biggest media literacy organizations in the United States, define media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication."[10] Proponents of media literacy argued that the news literacy component of media literacy education would provide students with the tools and perspectives to mitigate the negative influences of fake news.[11]

Media scholars who study critical media literacy contend that media education will be ineffective at producing effective news literacy unless it contains a critical framework.[12] A critical approach to

media understands that power dynamics are embedded within the presentation of content, and therefore, meaningful analysis of media content interrogates "the ways media tend to position viewers, users, and audiences to read and negotiate meanings about race, class, gender, and the multiple identity markers that privilege dominant groups."[13] Furthermore, a critical analysis not only accounts for the power inequities of media content but explores pathways to liberation through self-actualization and democracy.[14] They argue that acritical media literacy normalizes and empowers the very actors and tools that produce and disseminate fake news.[15] Although they advocate for a critical framework to be applied to news literacy pedagogy, the lack of comprehensive research on fake news has left critical media literacy scholars unable to conceptualize a critical news literacy pedagogy.[16] This book provides the comprehensive research required to develop effective critical media literacy pedagogy.

What Is Fake News?

It is impossible to develop effective news literacy pedagogy, critical or acritical, that mitigates the influence of fake news without a comprehensive understanding of fake news. Despite the phrase's ubiquity, scholars contend that fake news is difficult to define.[17] A 2018 study of fake news by Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Zheng Wei Lim, and Richard Ling concludes that "there is no agreed upon definition of the term 'fake news.'"[18] In fact, in 2017 Merriam-Webster argued that it "sees no need to even consider it for entry in the dictionary as a separate term" because it is "self-explanatory and straightforward."[19] However, fake news is anything but self-explanatory. It extends far beyond news itself and exists in numerous formats such as rumors, lies, hoaxes, bunk, satire, parody, misleading content, impostor content, fabricated content, and manipulated content.[20]

Fake news has been around for ages. As far back as 1475, the Christian city of Trent was so outraged by the false story of a Jewish man killing a two-year-old boy that they imprisoned and tortured the local Jewish population as punishment.[21] In eighteenth-century Portugal, a fake news story distributed in a pamphlet recounted how the Virgin Mary had rescued survivors from the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake.[22] Fake news is not new. What is new is the amount of fake news being consumed and legitimized. In fact, about two-thirds of Americans report encountering fake news on a regular basis.[23] However, a century of varying definitions and applications of the term *fake news* has complicated its study.

From a historical perspective, the expression was invoked fairly regularly starting in the 1890s, appearing in newspapers such as an 1891 edition of the *Buffalo Commercial* in Buffalo, New York, and across the continent in an 1899 edition of the *San Francisco Call.*[24] Newspapers were employing the phrase, as it would come to be used for a century, to denounce false stories packaged and sold as legitimate news content. By 1992, the phrase appeared again, this time in a *TV Guide* cover story by David Lieberman that rebuked content providers for putting out video news releases (VNRs). Lieberman referred to VNRs as "fake news" because they were public relations content presented to the public as objective journalism.[25] A decade after VNRs, the term *fake news* appeared consistently in academic studies analyzing satirical news programs such as the *Daily Show.*[26] In the early twenty-first century, scholars used the phrase to denounce news content that acted as propaganda.[27]

In 2016, the phrase reemerged in political discourses concerning that year's presidential election. A month after the election, the defeated Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton argued that "the epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year, . . . [has] real-world consequences."[28] Clinton echoed the increasingly popular sentiment that fake news

was a threat to democracy. For his part, Trump exploited the actual threat posed by fake news for his own purposes. Trump weaponized the phrase to dismiss inconvenient or uncomfortable facts illuminated by the news media, whom he referred to as an "enemy of the people."[29]

Trump's use of the phrase was undoubtedly bolstered by the press's low public opinion rating. In fact, a 2018 Knight Foundation–Gallup poll found a 69 percent decrease in the public's faith in journalism since 2008.[30] When people have no faith in the press, they have no universally trusted source to determine falsehood from fact. Oddly, it was the press that primed audiences to conflate Trump's political narratives with truth, and reporting with fake news. Scholars contend that by consistently privileging political narratives over facts, the press has conditioned audiences to view truth as subjective.[31] This creates space for politicians to lie with impunity. For example, Trump lied nearly five times per day when he first took office, but after spending a year and a half in office, this number had increased to eight times per day for a total of 4,229 false or misleading statements.[32] Nonetheless, journalists failed to convince Trump supporters that the president lied consistently. A year and half into Trump's presidency, 91 percent of his supporters relied on Trump as their most accurate form of news and information.[33] Trump's use of the term *fake news* effectively tapped into citizens' existing mistrust of the press.

With regard to fake news, to focus on Trump is to miss a larger problem: most Americans are unable to distinguish objective journalism from fake news. By 2016, less than one-fifth of middle school students could distinguish a news story from a sponsored story, and less than one-third could identify the implicit bias in a news article.[34] In 2018, Stanford University professor Sam Wineburg and his colleagues found that "students struggled to effectively evaluate online claims, sources, and evidence."[35] Older citizens fared worse than youth at detecting fake news. A 2019 study by Andrew Guess,

Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker revealed that people over sixty-five years of age "were seven times more likely to share fake news articles than those aged between 18 and 29."[36] Similarly, a 2019 Stanford History Education Group national survey of nearly 3,500 people found that

> fifty-two percent of students believed a grainy video claiming to show ballot stuffing in the 2016 Democratic primaries (the video was actually shot in Russia) constituted "strong evidence" of voter fraud in the U.S. Among more than 3,000 responses, only three students tracked down the source of the video, even though a quick search turns up a variety of articles exposing the ruse.
>
> Two-thirds of students couldn't tell the difference between news stories and ads (set off by the words "Sponsored Content") on Slate's homepage.
>
> Ninety-six percent of students did not consider why ties between a climate change website and the fossil fuel industry might lessen that website's credibility. Instead of investigating who was behind the site, students focused on superficial markers of credibility: the site's aesthetics, its top-level domain, or how it portrayed itself on the About page.[37]

Scholars' attempts to study and offer remedies for fake news have also suffered from the lack of an agreed-upon definition and comprehensive understanding of fake news. Much of the scholarship on fake news focuses on narrow forms of news communication, such as print and broadcast media, while ignoring the other ways in which fake news is communicated, such as oral transmission and online videos. In 2018, David M. J. Lazer and his colleagues defined fake news as any "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent."[38] Yet this ignores the long tradition of news dissemination via oral communication, which is not

media but can be false news.[39] Similarly, in 2017, Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow defined fake news as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers."[40] However, fake news content exists in formats beyond articles such as oral communication, online videos, and broadcast news media.[41]

Other scholars have looked at the intended purpose of the content as a determining factor in whether to categorize it as a form of fake news.[42] Gillian Bolsover of the Computational Propaganda Research Project argued in 2018 that "fake news is propaganda."[43] In fact, scholars have used the terms interchangeably, including media literacy researcher Renee Hobbs, who wrote, "Often, the true funder of fake news or propaganda is disguised or hidden."[44] Much of the scholarship on falsified news content focuses on how it acts as propaganda.[45] However, other forms of fake news are not propaganda: for example, some journalists misreport in error, fabricate stories to further their career, or publish false stories as April Fools' pranks, such as making up a story about beach towns prohibiting surfing.[46]

Although scholars disagree on a definition of fake news, they tend to agree that fake news poses an existential threat to democracy. Citizens' agency in a democracy is dependent upon accurate information; ultimately, media manipulation prevents meaningful participation.[47] Furthermore, the ubiquitous consumption of fake news not only weakens democracies but promotes totalitarian regimes.[48] Despite the numerous studies on fake news, scholars have yet to synthesize the various elements into a comprehensive understanding of fake news.

To truly address the threat of fake news and to educate students to discern it, we must develop a critical news pedagogy and implement it in US schools. But that effort will require a broad scholarly understanding of the phenomenon's definition, producers, themes, purposes, and influence. This book, to further that end, offers the first comprehensive study of fake news. It employs a critical-historical media ecosystems approach, dissecting fake news to

identify and analyze the structure of its contents and illuminating how it is used, by whom, and why. The findings act as the scaffolding for the effective critical news literacy pedagogy proposed in the final chapter. This study is the first attempt to anatomize fake news for critical media literacy educators.

Methodology: A Critical Media Ecology Approach

Like any other message, fake news is given power and meaning through the communicative process.[49] Media ecology theory argues that we can understand that process through an examination of the relationship between technology, communication, media, and their impact on the human environment.[50] Media ecology scholars value "networks of relations (ecosystems) rather than individual essences and processes rather than entities."[51] Throughout this book, I examine the network of relations and processes by which fake news is produced, disseminated, and legitimized. Media ecology scholars argue that the complex and changing relationships and processes that make up a media ecosystem are best understood through a historical approach to the media environment.[52] As a result, I take such an approach to analyze the technological, communication, media, and human influences associated with fake news.

My analysis follows the tradition of media ecology scholars who integrated the critical framework of the Frankfurt school into their analysis.[53] The critical theory of the Frankfurt school posits that dominant ideologies result from power inequities that are strengthened and fortified through media and communication.[54] They contend that liberation from dominant ideologies is possible through a critical examination of media and power.[55] As a result, this study critically analyzes the power dynamics associated with the production, purpose, and themes of fake news in an effort to synthesize them into a pedagogy of resistance and liberation.

The data in this book came from three areas. First, I performed an extensive review of scholarship in the communication, history, media studies, and media education disciplines. I used key word searches to identify scholarship on journalism, propaganda, news, and media. This enabled access to primary and secondary sources of fake news. Next, I combed through the newspaper and congressional archives for key terms such as "fake news," "false news," and "propaganda" to locate primary news media content about fake news. Finally, via internet searches of corporate and independent news outlets, I examined contemporary news stories from 2016 to 2019 that were false or misleading. I collected both national and international fake news content. This enabled my research to have a global perspective. All of this research was augmented by secondary sources about the influence and outcome of fake news consumption.

Each piece of data was scrutinized to determine if it was in accordance with a baseline definition of fake news: false or misleading content presented as news and communicated in formats spanning spoken, written, printed, electronic, and digital communication.[56] Each of the hundreds of pieces of content underwent three cycles of process coding to determine the producer, purpose, themes, and influence of the fake news.[57] During the initial cycle of coding, I summarized fake news content with words and phrases.[58] During the second cycle of coding, I categorized the codes on the basis of producer, purpose, themes, and consequences. During the final cycle of coding, I looked for reappearing terms and concepts within each category.

The data revealed the producers of fake news; the purpose behind the production of fake news; the themes found in fake news content; and the consequences associated with the consumption of fake news. The producers of fake news are the press; governments both foreign and domestic; satirists; self-interested actors; and political parties and politicians. A series of recurring themes are found in fake news content: nationalism, fear, hate, and celebrity gossip. I

also examined the consequences of fake news. It serves to engender moral panic and outrage; radicalize supporters; marginalize the press; sow division; manipulate democracy; and implement an authoritarian regime.

Throughout the text I classify press outlets on the basis of their funding, ideological underpinnings, and party affiliation. A critical framework understands that economic incentives, ideology, and political affiliation influence the ways in which news, including fake news, is produced and disseminated. Thus, rather than use terms such as *mainstream media,* which assumes that the six corporations who own 90 percent of the news media that America's 330 million people consume are representative of mainstream culture, I refer to them as the corporate press to highlight their corporate funding model.[59] Similarly, rather than use the term *alternative media,* I label the media outlets who are funded by independent sources, such as donors, nonprofits, and foundations, as the independent media. In addition, I use the term *public media* to describe news media that are funded by the government; *liberal* and *conservative media* to illustrate the ideological underpinnings of news media outlets; and *Democratic* and *Republican Party media* to illustrate a media outlet's party affiliation. These terms help the reader better examine the power dynamics that shape and explain fake news.

Layout of This Book

The Anatomy of Fake News offers the first comprehensive examination of fake news for the purpose of creating effective critical news literacy. To understand fake news, we must understand news itself. As a result, chapter 1 examines the concept and functionality of news. It outlines the history of news production and consumption, paying special attention to the news industry, journalistic theory, and the terms essential for understanding the remainder of the book.

The second, third, and fourth chapters provide a historical analysis of the various motives, consumption patterns, and technologies that enabled the pervasive spread of fake news in the predigital age. Chapter 2 begins the examination of fake news through an analysis of the content created and disseminated by press outlets and journalists prior to the digital age. The press began as a disorganized bunch of individuals, with varying degrees of ethics, publishing news stories, which ranged from true to absolutely false. Eventually, they developed into a well-organized structure of reporters with standardized ethics and professional practices. Ironically, it was this homogeneity of practices that led to national fake news stories regarding large events such as the war in Vietnam. By the late twentieth century, the press was again transformed, largely by economic and political factors, into a tiny club of corporate-owned and sensationalistic news outlets that came to rely on fake news over fact-based content.

The third chapter analyzes the fake news produced and disseminated by satirical news programs and political propaganda apparatuses. A political party propaganda apparatus is the loosely connected group of actors and institutions who, sometimes through coordination and other times through overlapping interests and actions, strive to influence public opinion. Over the course of the twentieth century, modern public relations firms working on behalf of political parties built upon the techniques of propaganda and persuasion and became embedded within corporate-structured news organizations that merged marketing with content and blurred the lines between promotion and fact-based reporting. The result was an impotent press, incapable of holding leaders accountable. This transformation resulted from the increased popularity of satirical news and the creation of political propaganda apparatuses. Out of a desire to expand their revenue and audience size, the corporate news media adopted the satirical news practice of privileging divisive content

over facts. Much of the corporate news content originated from political party propaganda apparatuses. The press's pursuit of increased profit through hyperpolarized content weakened their ability to hold leaders accountable. Their ineptitude derived from their repeated conflation of truth and political ideology.

The fourth chapter offers an analysis of the fake news produced by twentieth-century state-sponsored propaganda machines. These propaganda machines organized people and resources in an effort to construct and circulate a dominant message that would control and influence human behavior and attitudes. Originally, they were created for a temporary purpose, such as increasing troop enrollment for the military, but the demands of the Cold War made propaganda machines a permanent component of nation-states. They not only produced and disseminated fake news but worked to construct an environment where that fake news was more likely to be believed by large portions of the public.

The fifth chapter examines the rise of the technology economy and the relationship it cultivated between data collection and fake news in the digital age. The advent of the internet ushered in a new era of fake news. In the preinternet years, governments, political parties, press outlets, and individuals had to rely on conventional wisdom and anecdotal evidence to determine if the design of fake news content would resonate with target audiences. The internet provided fake news producers with something more effective: predictive analytic products. These products exploit user data to predict with precision and some cases direct human behavior. The internet's political economy privileged massive data collection on a scale unrivaled in human history. Suddenly, fake news producers had a road map of users' thought processes. This enabled the construction of effective fake news content with targeted precision. The chapter discusses the platforms and actors that generate and disseminate fake news. It ends with an analysis of how the digitizing of propaganda and persuasion

machines discussed in chapters 3 and 4 created a global information war that spreads fake news across international boundaries.

The sixth chapter assesses news users' media literacy skills while analyzing contemporary discourses on the solutions to combat fake news. Looking through a historical and educational lens, the chapter argues that the proposed solutions to fake news since the 2016 election have failed because they do not address the central factor legitimizing fake news: news users cannot distinguish between fake news and journalism. As previous chapters will illustrate, the only cure for fake news is a media-literate citizenry. However, few media literacy courses are offered in the United States, and the majority of those offered serve to empower fake news producers. The chapter concludes that critical news literacy education is the most effective solution for mitigating the pernicious influence of fake news.

The final chapter is a fake news detection kit that explains how to achieve the learning outcomes of effective critical news literacy pedagogy. It maps out the ten components of an effective critical news literacy pedagogy for addressing fake news. The chapter revisits the main findings of the text, introducing them as a guide for how readers can better distinguish fake news from journalism. The goal of critical news literacy education is to produce intelligent media users through a pedagogy of critical thinking, critical theory, journalism, democratic theory, and an anatomy of fake news.

Throughout history, fake news has been an influential and dangerous force, especially on democratic societies. As this study will illustrate, many of the twenty-first-century proposals for mitigating fake news derive from the very individuals and institutions that have historically produced and disseminated fake news: governments, private industry, technology companies, and political parties. Rather than trust fake news producers to solve our twenty-first-century information problem, we need to develop a solution that empowers

the citizenry to distinguish fake news from journalism. As an educator, I believe that effective critical education is that solution.

This study is the first attempt to anatomize fake news for critical media literacy educators. Armed with a comprehensive understanding of fake news, critical media literacy scholars can incorporate this study's findings into a curriculum with lesson plans, resources, and teacher training workshops that educate students on fake news. The final chapter of this study utilizes its findings to propose effective critical news literacy pedagogy. The presumed impact of this pedagogy will be to diminish the power of fake news machines and/or fake news propagators.