

Real Fake News versus Fake Real News in the Trump Era : Analyzing the Effects of Erroneous News Reports on Public Confidence in the Press

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Abstract : This paper begins by briefly reviewing the details of President Trump's "Fake News Awards," and then proceeds to analyze how errors like those featured on President Trump's list affect audiences. To do this, we first examine what exactly constitutes "fake news," and then demonstrate how the erroneous news stories on his list do not constitute what can be properly termed "fake news." This analysis then proceeds to demonstrate how such stories can nevertheless potentially affect audiences in ways that are similar to the ways that actual "fake news" stories affect audiences. This paper then proceeds to consider the broader implications of these erroneous news reports by showing that they can erode trust in the press as an impartial institution since these mistakes not only diminish perceived reliability, but they also lead to suspicion in some segments of the public with regard to motives since these mistakes seemingly align with the political leanings of most of the mainstream press. Furthermore, as the boundary between factual news reports and commentary blurs, such errors will likely lead audiences to further question the impartiality of the mainstream press. As this paper concludes, journalists do indeed play an instrumental role in preserving democratic institutions by serving as observers who can uncover government misconduct and disseminate such findings to the public. Since impartiality is central to credibility in news reports, any semblance of the press taking on an activist role may lead large segments of the population to view journalists as being not much different than politicians, and so the apparent bias often seen in news reports, coupled with journalistic errors that seemingly tend to align with those biases, may lead to a situation where the press will increasingly diminish its ability to fulfill this role as a check on government. It may thus become increasingly more appropriate to view the press as what is sometimes called "the fourth branch of government," insofar as it has the potential to operate as an additional check in the American government's system of checks and balances, but as with the other branches of government, it is guided by the ideological leanings of those who control a particular branch.

Keywords : United States President Donald Trump, Fake News Awards, fake news, American politics, impeachment, journalism, the press, mainstream media, corrections, retractions, bias

1. Introduction

Disputes between politicians and the press are not particularly unusual, but in the case of the Trump presidency, the antagonism between the two has developed into what can be best characterized as a bitter

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feud. This feud predates his presidency, when several news outlets seemingly routinely sensationalized and at times twisted candidate Trump's comments,¹ and he in turn would openly criticize reporters. This feud began in earnest, however, on the first full day of his presidency when, in response to several news outlets pointing out that the crowd size for his inauguration was smaller than the crowd size for Barack Obama's inauguration,² the President had his press secretary claim that the crowd size at his inauguration was larger than visual evidence seemed to indicate.³ Since then, the President has at times referred to the press as the "Fake News Media" and "the true Enemy of the People,"⁴ while most mainstream news media outlets have featured coverage of the President that has been overwhelmingly and unrelentingly negative in comparison with the previous three presidents.⁵ It is thus clear that relations between the press and President Trump are far more strained than they have been when other presidents in recent history were in office. Though the President's claims about "fake news" stray dramatically from presidential norms, there have been numerous notable journalistic errors while covering his administration. In unconventional fashion, the President decided at the end of his first year in office to announce what he called the "Fake News Awards," which featured what he presumably considered the most significant mistakes by journalists, ranging from mistakes about allegations that could have meant the beginning of impeachment proceedings, to trivial matters about supposedly embarrassing diplomatic incidents.

This paper builds on our previous analysis of the President's "Fake News Awards" by considering how errors in news reports affect audiences, and then situating this analysis in the context of current attitudes toward the press in the United States. Our previous research project focused specifically on the President's Fake News Awards in order to consider why he chose to highlight the specific stories he selected, and what may have been responsible for the errors made in the selected news reports.⁶ In this paper, however, we shift our focus to the ramifications of these incorrect news reports in the current political climate, particularly the impact on audiences and on the role of the press as government overseers who help preserve democratic institutions. To that end, Section 2 starts off with a brief review of our previous research on the President's "Fake News Awards." Section 3 then begins by considering what exactly constitutes "fake news," and proceeds to demonstrate how most of the erroneous news stories presented in the President's "Fake News Awards" do not constitute fake news in the strictest sense. However, while they are likely mistakes made while attempting to genuinely report about actual events, Section 3.2 illustrates how they can nevertheless potentially influence audiences in ways that are similar to the way actual fake news affects audiences. Section 3.3 then demonstrates that while erroneous news reports obviously undermine the credibility of the press, this is especially costly for the press when mistakes in news reports seemingly align with the political leanings of journalists who are part of the mainstream press, a problem that is further exacerbated by the blurring of reporting facts and expressing opinions.

Ultimately, as Section 3.3 demonstrates, it is important to remember that the press plays an instrumental role in preserving democratic institutions by overseeing government activities and reporting them to the public. However, credibility is vital to the press being able to fulfill this role. Since impartiality is central to its credibility, any semblance of the press taking on an activist role or displaying overt bias may lead large segments of the population to view journalists as being little different than politicians, and so, as this paper concludes, the apparent bias often seen in news reports, coupled with journalistic errors that have aligned with those biases during the Trump presidency thus far, may be leading to a situation where the press is effectively diminishing its ability to function as a vital check on government power that is central to the preservation of democratic institutions.

Section 2: President Trump's "Fake News Awards"

President Trump released his "Fake News Awards" on January 17th, 2018.⁷ These "awards" highlighted ten stories by specific reporters and news agencies, and included an eleventh listing that featured vague comments about the investigations into possible ties between Trump campaign members and Russian officials. Our previous research examined nine of the eleven entries on this list. Two were omitted from our study since one of the entries (an opinion piece by Paul Krugman, from The New York Times) did not include specific demonstrably false information, and the other (a declaration that "Russian collusion" is a "hoax") made no specific reference to any particular journalist or news agency. Our research examined each of these nine stories in order to specify what mistakes were made, how they were discovered (when applicable), and what the relevant news agencies did in response to these errors (when applicable). This section briefly summarizes the data presented in our previous paper on these nine stories, which we sorted into three categories and assigned a case name to facilitate clarity in the subsequent analysis.⁸

Four of the nine entries on President Trump's list are news stories that feature claims that, if true, would contribute to the beginning of the downfall of the Trump presidency due to Russian collusion allegations (Category A). The first story in this category is Case A1, which is an ABC News story from December 2, 2017. The original news report stated that Michael Flynn was prepared to testify that Donald Trump had directed him to make contact with Russian officials during the 2016 presidential campaign, but it turns out that he had only directed Flynn to make contact with Russian officials after the election.⁹ ABC News corrected the story hours later, and suspended the relevant journalist for four weeks without pay.¹⁰ Case A2 is a CNN story from December 8, 2017, claiming that Donald Trump's son, Donald Trump, Jr., received an e-mail with information on how to access hacked e-mails from the Democratic National Committee before WikiLeaks made these hacked documents publicly available. The date of the e-mail was actually September 14, one day after WikiLeaks made the documents publicly available,¹¹ and so CNN corrected the story, stating: "The new information indicates that the communication is less significant than CNN initially reported."¹² Case A3 consists of a CNN story released on June 22, 2017, that involved alleged connections between Anthony Scaramucci, at the time an ally of President Trump who later briefly served as his White House Communications Director, and investigations into the Russian Direct Investment Fund. CNN later retracted the story,¹³ and three journalists were asked to resign,¹⁴ but it is unclear how inaccurate the story was and precisely why the story was retracted.¹⁵ Finally, Case A4 is a CNN story from June 6, 2017, that stated that former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey was going to dispute President Trump's claim that the former director had assured him that he was not under investigation, but as it turns out James Comey recalled three conversations during which he did in fact tell the President that he was not personally under investigation, and so CNN went on to correct the story.¹⁶

Three of the nine entries on President Trump's list are news stories that feature information that, if true, would embarrass him personally (Category B). Case B1 is not actually an official news story, but instead a tweet sent by a Washington Post reporter on his own personal Twitter account.¹⁷ The December 9, 2017, tweet featured a photo of the Trump rally venue with many empty seats, which gave the impression that the President had falsely claimed that the venue was "packed to the rafters."¹⁸ The photo the reporter tweeted was actually from when the President had not yet come on stage, and the reporter ended up deleting the tweet twenty minutes later, and apologized. Case B2 is a CNN story that is technically accurate in the most literal sense, but grossly misleading. The headline appears to give readers a sense that the president blundered a diplomatic event that involved feeding fish, and the story's page features a tweet with

a brief zoomed-in GIF clip that distorts the actual scene in comparison with the full-length video of the event. The GIF clip is brief and shows President Trump give just a few spoonful of fish food and then dump the rest of the food that was in his container. In reality, however, the full-length video shows a longer feeding session that concludes with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tossing the rest of his fish food into the pond, after which President Trump follows suit and dumps the rest of his food into the pond. Case B3 focuses on a July 6, 2017, *Newsweek* story that seemingly distorts President Trump's handshake with Polish First Lady Agata Kornhauser-Duda. The story includes a tweet with a three-second clip that shows the Polish first lady walk past President Trump as he extends his hand toward her in what appears to be an attempted handshake that is brazenly rebuffed. A longer video clip, however, appears to show that the Polish first had begun moving toward Melania Trump as President Trump was still shaking hands with the Polish president, and thus walked by President Trump as he, unbeknownst to her, reached out to shake hands with her. The story was updated a little under three hours later, and it stated that an extended version of the video clip shows the Polish first lady "eventually shaking the president's hand,"¹⁹ which in itself seems misleading by using the term "eventually" in reference to just a few seconds.

Finally, two of the nine entries on President Trump's list are news stories that feature information that, if true, would contribute to negative perceptions about the President's ideological views (Category C). Case C1 is a report from January 20, 2017, stating that the bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. had been removed from the Oval Office. A White House correspondent for *Time* magazine told other reporters that he had not seen it when they asked him about it, which resulted in another reporter sending out a pool report stating that "the MLK bust was no longer on display."²⁰ Within an hour, however, the *Time* correspondent sent multiple e-mails to reporters and sent out tweets, stating that a White House aide confirmed that the bust was still there.²¹ Case C2 is a *New York Times* story from August 7, 2017, that featured a copy of a climate report that allegedly had not yet been made public, and stated that there were scientists who feared that the report would be suppressed. However, the report had already been publicly available for several months. The *Times* corrected the story two days later by stating: "While it was not widely publicized, the report was uploaded by the nonprofit Internet Archive in January; it was not first made public by The New York Times."²²

Section 3: Analysis

3.1: Real Fake News versus Fake Real News

The term "fake news" is problematic since it can mean different things to different people, and the meaning can vary based on the circumstances. One could employ a broad definition of the term and make the case that any news with incorrect information is fake news, as President Trump seemingly did in his Fake News Awards, while the narrowest definition would allow one to argue that only news articles that are pure fabrication constitute fake news.²³ Each extreme is obviously problematic. On the one hand, the former definition would include what are honest errors that invariably pop up in journalism from time to time, while the latter would mean that a deliberate distortion of key aspects of a news story does not constitute fake news if some facts are accurate. At the heart of this distinction is intent. In the case of honest mistakes that result in factual errors in news reports on political issues, for example, there is neither an intent to deceive nor a hidden motive to persuade readers and viewers to vote a certain way. In the case of fabricated stories relating to politics, however, the producers typically intend to deceive and get viewers and readers to act based on the false information presented in their fabricated news stories. In other words,

in the case of fabricated news stories, producers have no intention of reporting the news accurately, but instead their intent is to spread false information for the sake of manipulating those that read or watch their reports. It is this latter version that constitutes what we can literally call fake news.

While it is tempting to argue that whether a journalist publishes false information intentionally or not is irrelevant since either way viewers and readers end up being misled, it is important to keep this key distinction in mind. Real fake news is deliberate and goes uncorrected since the point of such news is one of two things. Fake news is designed to either get people to click on headlines for the sake of earning ad revenue, with the best example being how mostly teenagers and young adults in a small town in Macedonia reportedly hosted over a hundred fake news websites for profit,²⁴ or to disseminate false or misleading information for political purposes. In this latter case, even if there is a strong body of evidence that disproves a particular piece of fake news, and even though most people will check and discover that fake news is indeed fake, there are likely a few readers and viewers who will not verify this information. Producers of fake news therefore need not issue corrections, nor concern themselves with the prospect of readers and viewers recognizing that a particular story is misleading or fabricated since all that matters is either just getting people to click on a headline, or just convincing those few who can be convinced. Given how contentious the political climate has grown in the United States, with some state and federal elections resulting in extremely narrow victory margins, fake news has become a critical issue during elections. That is, if a piece of false information can sway even just a few voters, it can prove decisive in elections where the race is especially tight. It may become increasingly beneficial for political operatives to spread false information since those who bother to check and discover that it is erroneous will obviously not alter their vote, but those few who are deceived may end up voting in favor of the disseminator's political objectives.

What, then, should we consider real news with errors, or real news with implicit bias, or real news that presents the facts accurately whilst deliberately constructing a misleading impression? At some point what is purportedly a "real" news story may seem so misleading that the best way to describe it is fake real news, insofar as it comes from an authentic news agency, yet is not much more accurate than reports ordinarily classified as fake news. In most cases, however, it seems inappropriate to lump news articles that still involve real journalistic work and actual events with others that are pure fabrication, and so the President's use of the term fake news is clearly problematic. With regard to honest journalistic mistakes, labeling them as fake news is especially inappropriate because it implies that the journalist involved sought to deceive his or her audience. Even if journalists from reputable news agencies desire to publish fabricated stories, the rigors of the editorial process and the informal, yet unavoidable, verification by readers, other news agencies, and subjects of news stories, makes passing off fabricated information quite difficult. Purveyors of fake news that focus on those few who can be deceived, on the other hand, need not worry about such matters.

A case can be made that at least a few of the stories listed in the President's Fake News Awards may constitute something akin to fake real news, but most of them do not constitute real fake news. Either way, the mistakes have provided substance for President Trump's efforts to discredit the mainstream press. It is important to note, however, that the President may not be using the term fake news literally, but rather merely as a generic term to highlight what he perceives as biased news coverage of American politics. As noted during the 2016 presidential campaign: "the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally."²⁵ Even if he did not mean that these stories literally constitute fake news, he is clearly implying that members of the mainstream press are dishonest and that these particular examples are the product of unchecked bias. In doing so, he inappropriately conflates fake news, which is

outright fabrication, with journalistic bias, which, although undeniably problematic, exists to some degree in virtually all journalistic work, regardless of political leanings.

3.2: Potential Impact of Erroneous News Reports on Audiences

Fake news can reach millions of people when reshared on social media, with one study finding that 115 false pro-Trump stories ended up being shared 30 million times on Facebook, and 41 false pro-Clinton stories ended up being shared on Facebook 7.6 million times.²⁶ This same study estimates that, overall, there were 760 million fake news items clicked on and read, which is an average for each American adult of about three fake news stories read.²⁷ It is quite possible, however, that many people convinced by fake news from relatively unknown sources are already strongly partisan and thus inclined to believe fake news stories that fit with their existing political beliefs. Fake news in such a context will seemingly seldom change a person's political views. Moreover, people with firmly established political positions may uncritically accept fake news stories not necessarily due to a lack of critical thinking skills, but in some cases simply due to the reality that the veracity of news stories that fit with their preconceptions is irrelevant since their political views are already set.

Although fake news can reach millions of people, news agencies that are part of the mainstream press, like CNN, ABC News, The Washington Post, and The New York Times, typically have far larger audiences than any one individual fake news outlet that uses social media and small independent websites to mislead comparatively small groups of people. Even though the stories on President Trump's list do not constitute fake news in the literal sense, they all can impact audiences in ways that are similar to the effects of actual fake news. When established news agencies publish stories that are erroneous, they have the potential to spread false information to a large number of people all across the political spectrum. This means that unlike fake news that likely reaches and influences predominantly those whose political views are already firmly entrenched, erroneous news reports may influence people whose political views are less entrenched and may thus actually have a more appreciable impact politically. Such news agencies of course usually issue corrections when mistakes are discovered, but even so, corrections typically get far less attention than the original reports, with the exception of particularly egregious mistakes like that found in Case A1. Since false information in an erroneous news report typically reaches more people than the correction does, then this means that at least a small number of people likely end up operating on beliefs based on the original erroneous news report.

When an erroneous news report pertains to political or social issues, it may help persuade a small subset of the news agency's audience to hold certain views based on the false information in the original report. Such news reports thus act in the same way as does the kind of deliberately fake news put out by political operatives, since fake news typically convinces only a select few out of the many who can differentiate between authentic and fake news. Case A2 illustrates this point perfectly, for CNN featured multiple on-air segments to discuss this story, and it was "the lead story on its homepage for much of Friday morning and into the afternoon," and CBS "reported that it had matched CNN's initial reporting."²⁸ The story "unraveled" at 1 p.m. ET, and CNN corrected the story at 3:45 p.m. ET.²⁹ While it is true that CNN corrected the story, if even just a small portion of the many who viewed CNN's on-air commentary or read the headline on its homepage without finding out about the correction, then it could well be that a good number of people were left with false information about the Trump campaign. Given the seriousness of the topic and the political impact of such claims, an erroneous news report like this is quite significant.

Even in cases where erroneous news stories deal with comparatively trivial matters, such as the stories

that relate to matters that could simply embarrass the President, such errors may actually have more influence in the sense that they can go viral on social media and contribute to a negative image of the President's competence and esteem on the international stage. Cases B1, B2, and B3 involve Twitter, and Cases B2 and B3 in particular highlight the problems of news in the age of social media, for despite video evidence showing the distorted nature of these news reports, the short misleading GIFs will most certainly have a longer lasting impact than the accurate full-length video. The story in Case B2 still has the headline that appears to imply that President Trump blundered the feeding session, and it still features a tweet with the zoomed in GIF that makes it seem like he just gives a few scoops of food and then boorishly dumps the rest of the food. As for Case B3, the story was updated, but it still retains the original short video clip that was cut in a way that gives the impression that the Polish first lady slighted President Trump. Moreover, the update came nearly three hours later. This may at first glance seem like a relatively quick correction, but when it comes to content going viral, nearly three hours on a high-profile news source like *Newsweek* is actually a fairly long time. Even after the correction the story still features a tweet with the misleading GIF on the *Newsweek* story page. In both instances, then, these stories feature embarrassing visuals that surely generate strong impressions in a viewer's mind that are detrimental to the President's image. Once such imagery goes viral, far more people will see the viral GIF images than read the corrections or see the full-length videos that reveal the actual events.

If even just a relatively small number of viewers or readers are exposed to false information from erroneous reports like these, there is the potential for a contagion effect, whereby some develop beliefs or have existing beliefs reinforced by these news reports, and then they help spread those beliefs to others. That is, with Category A in general, for instance, the erroneous reports surely helped create a sense of 'there is a lot of smoke surrounding the Trump campaign and Russia, and where there's smoke, there's fire.' According to a Gallup poll released in September of 2018, approximately three out of ten Americans believed that Donald Trump acted illegally during the 2016 presidential campaign with respect to Russian contacts,³⁰ even though the investigations into this matter had at the time of the poll not yet yielded any proof of illegal acts by him. To put it simply, the more people develop a "where there's smoke there's fire" mindset, the more it will create an atmosphere conducive for such a sentiment to spread, regardless of evidence, and the more others will be inclined to view President Trump with suspicion.

Similarly, with Case B3, for example, if those who believe that the international community does not respect President Trump read this news story, they will surely become even more resolute in sharing their point of view with others. Likewise, with Case C1, by way of another example, those who viewed President Trump as racist and then learned that he had moved the bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. out of the oval office likely grew even more assured in sharing that belief with others, possibly helping grow the perception that the President harbors latent racist attitudes. News stories that contain false information, even if they are the product of honest mistakes in the course of honest journalistic work, can thus act like fake news, insofar as retractions and corrections often get far less attention than the original stories, and audiences are left with false information that is clearly damaging to the subject of the stories in question. These instances have been corrected and cannot materially be used against the President as examples when criticizing him. However, they can effectively predispose viewers and readers to a state of mind that is receptive to other examples that support the case that the President's critics want to make against him.

3.3: Erroneous News Reports and the Role of the Press in Society

According to the late United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, the First Amendment, which

guarantees, among other things, that Congress will not restrict the freedom of the press, was included in the Bill of Rights so that the press could oversee the government and expose any form of government corruption or abuses of power.³¹ Viewed this way, the press plays an indispensable role in the preservation of liberty in the United States and other modern liberal democracies. The vast majority of Americans today seemingly agree with this assessment, for a Gallup poll in 2018 found that eighty-eight percent of Americans viewed the news media as either “critical” or “very important” to democracy.³² To fulfill this role, however, the press must have credibility. Without it, some segments of the population will doubt the veracity of whatever abuses by government agencies the press allegedly uncovers.

One factor that is damaging credibility in journalism is that the lines between commentary and news reports, and between facts and opinions, are seemingly blurring, and this can partly explain why President Trump has attacked the media establishment as a whole without always distinguishing between opinion pieces and actual news reports. As such, he sometimes incorrectly attacks the press for opinion pieces, and sometimes equates bias with “fake news.” Journalists can rightly criticize the President for such attacks, and they can also understandably grow alarmed when the President tweets that the “Fake News Media” are “the true Enemy of the People,”³³ and routinely disparages the press at his rallies. However, there is a legitimate issue about objectivity in press reports, and overall bias that at the very least casts doubt about the motives of some reporters. Ted Koppel, former ABC News journalist and anchor, commented on journalism during the Trump presidency. According to Koppel, President Trump has a point when he claims that the mainstream press “is out to get him.” According to Koppel: “he’s not mistaken when so many of the liberal media, for example, described themselves as belonging to the Resistance. What does that mean? That’s not said by people who consider themselves reporters, objective reporters of facts.”³⁴ Similarly, former CBS News journalist Lara Logan states: “I know I’m not the only journalist who’s watching in horror as opinion and pejorative language is passed off as fact.”³⁵

This blurring of the boundary between fact and opinion is quite troubling given that audiences seemingly struggle to differentiate between the two. A Pew Research Center study, for example, examined how well Americans were able to distinguish between an opinion and a factual statement by presenting a group of respondents with five factual statements and five opinion statements. Only twenty-six percent of respondents correctly identified all five factual statements, and only thirty-five percent correctly identified all five opinion statements. Twenty-eight percent of respondents correctly identified only two or fewer factual statements, and twenty-two percent correctly identified two or fewer opinion statements.³⁶ Coupled with the deeply polarized news media environment where most major news agencies tend to lean politically one way or the other, news agencies are further entrenching political views in a substantial portion of their audiences by including opinions in headlines and what are supposed to be purely factual news reports.

This is not to say that audiences are passive receivers who cannot critically assess the news they consume, for there is a large segment of the population that remains skeptical of the news media. Recent studies indicate that the credibility of the press in the United States currently appears very much in question. According to a Pew Research Center report released in 2018, although seventy-five percent of Americans believe that news organizations favoring one political party in their reporting is “never acceptable,” only forty-seven percent of Americans say that when it comes to reporting on “the different positions on political issues fairly,” the news media “are doing somewhat/very well.”³⁷ Similarly, a Gallup poll conducted in September of 2018 indicates that only forty-five percent of Americans “have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the mass media to report the news ‘fully, accurately and fairly.’”³⁸ Though this number actually represents a modest increase from 2016 when this number was at an all-time low of thirty-

two percent,³⁹ it nonetheless means that less than half of the American population expresses a “great deal or fair amount of trust” in the mass media. With only less than half of the population expressing confidence in the press, repeatedly making mistakes, even if they represent a small fraction of the vast amount of accurate news coverage, and displaying obvious bias can only further erode trust in the press.

The reporting errors listed in President Trump’s Fake News Awards are thus deeply concerning because in this kind of atmosphere, where trust in the press is already strained and opinion seemingly crosses over into news reports on a regular basis, mistakes like those highlighted in President Trump’s Fake News Awards surely raise suspicion about whether or not such mistakes are intentional when they clearly match the perceived biases of most members of the mainstream press. It certainly raises questions about objectivity, and even honesty in the minds of some, that three initially bombshell stories related to allegations of the Trump campaign colluding with Russia were later found to be inaccurate, given that cable news programs, for example, devoted hundreds of hours collectively to news and commentary on allegations of Russian collusion and largely negative, sometimes intensely negative, commentary on President Trump. Further weakening the credibility of the press, Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election,” released publicly in April of 2019, concluded that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the Trump campaign coordinated with the Russian government during the 2016 presidential election.⁴⁰ Given that much the press coverage relating to the Mueller investigation appeared to indicate that the Special Counsel’s report was likely to trigger impeachment proceedings, especially on cable news where the boundaries between news reports and commentary have grown increasingly blurry, the report’s conclusion has undoubtedly cast doubt on the reliability of news reports about politics, and has surely cast greater suspicions about the press being motivated by its own political agendas.

The kind of news coverage of the Russia allegations could help explain why the first day of the impeachment hearings in November of 2019 had a relatively small viewing audience. President Trump allegedly asking the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to have an investigation into matters that could prove politically damaging to former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, a possible rival candidate for the 2020 election, certainly should draw a lot of attention. However, according to NewsBusters, part of the Media Research Center, which is an organization that describes itself as a media watchdog that exposes and neutralizes liberal bias in the media,⁴¹ there were just 13.1 million combined viewers on CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, and the Fox News Channel, in comparison with 19.5 million viewers in 2017 when the former FBI director, James Comey, gave testimony seen as critical of President Trump.⁴²

It is worth noting, however, that there are key differences between the testimony in the impeachment inquiry and the Comey testimony. First, the Comey testimony took place in the context of ongoing allegations of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. In this way, then, the Comey testimony can be seen as part of allegations that potentially had genuine national security implications. Whereas the Ukraine scandal involves allegations of abuse of power, which although serious, such allegations are likely not seen as serious as allegations that the President may be compromised by a foreign power. Second, Comey’s testimony was a one-day event, whereas an impeachment inquiry involves a lengthy series of hearings that makes any one day alone a bit less dramatic. Furthermore, James Comey also had a higher profile than those testifying on the opening day of the impeachment inquiry, in terms of his rank as the former director of the FBI, and insofar as he had direct contact with the President on several occasions that ultimately culminated in an acrimonious severing of ties when he was fired from the Bureau. There is also the fact that the public may be weary of conduct at the political level, for even though the press has

undoubtedly helped shape how these allegations are presented to the public, the impeachment inquiry is ultimately the product of political actors. As such, it may be the case that some segments of the public are skeptical of the motives animating lawmakers in pursuing this impeachment inquiry, and are thus tuning out this scandal more on account of their attitudes toward lawmakers than their attitudes toward the press.

Nevertheless, given that there appeared to be less interest at the outset of the impeachment inquiry testimony than there was in the early stages of the Russia investigation, and given that the press is ultimately largely responsible for the way that such scandals and investigations are presented to the public, the potential role of the press in the apparently lower level of interest in the Ukraine scandal warrants closer scrutiny. Regardless of how the Ukraine scandal plays out, the fact is that it was elevated to the point where a formal impeachment inquiry was launched, which makes it a particularly serious scandal by any measure. It therefore seems reasonable to at least postulate that the number of viewers for first day of the impeachment inquiry public hearings, relative to the number of viewers for the Comey testimony, may at least be in part the product of heightened skepticism toward allegations of presidential wrongdoing following the heavy coverage of Russian collusion allegations for which the Special Counsel report ultimately did not present sufficient evidence of wrongdoing by the President.

The comparatively smaller audience, if indeed the result of news coverage of the Russia allegations, likely stems primarily from conservatives, and, to a lesser extent, independents as well. For instance, a Pew Research Center study conducted in October of 2019 found that fifty-four percent of American adults surveyed approved of the decision to launch an impeachment inquiry, while forty-four percent disapproved. There was a significant difference, however, according to political views. Eighty-four percent of Republicans and those who lean conservative disapproved of the impeachment inquiry, while eighty-nine percent of Democrats and those who lean liberal approved. Similarly, eighty percent of Republicans and those who lean conservative believe that President Trump has “definitely not” or “probably not” done anything that warrants impeachment, whereas ninety-three percent of Democrats and those who lean Democrat believe that he “probably” or “definitely” has done something that does warrant impeachment. With regard to independents, an NPR/PBS/Marris poll conducted in mid-October of 2019 revealed that fifty percent of independents did not support the impeachment and removal of the President, while only forty-two percent did support such a course of action.⁴³ Seen from this perspective, it is quite possible that interest in the first day of public impeachment hearings was likely due to a higher level of skepticism among conservatives and independents.

If indeed the news coverage of the Russia investigation and the result of that investigation has led a segment of the public to take the Ukraine issue less seriously, then this phenomenon should be seen as deeply disturbing. It could very well mean that the mainstream press has given at least some segment of the American population a sense that allegations of wrongdoing by the President merely constitute a crying wolf situation. Even if this applies primarily to conservatives, it is nevertheless a disturbing development for it deepens existing divisions during a time when political tensions are especially high. That is not to say that conservatives would not be more skeptical than liberals no matter what, but the inundation of news coverage emphasizing the President’s likely guilt in much of the reporting on the Russian interference investigation by the mainstream press, which arguably should not have been presented so assuredly, most certainly has helped foster even greater skepticism. As such, the intensity that the press displayed while reporting on Russian interference could very well have to some degree damaged its ability to credibly carry out government oversight. Though the press is obviously not directly involved in actual congressional investigations, decisions like impeachment are ultimately political decisions that will undoubtedly, to at least some extent, factor in public opinion. Given that media coverage can profoundly shape how people perceive

such events, attitudes toward the press can affect whether or not audiences believe news reports about important political developments. This in turn can influence how lawmakers vote on matters like impeachment or a trial in the senate since the views of their constituents can impact decision-making more than the actual findings in investigations.

4. Conclusion

Much of the mainstream press has seemingly positioned President Trump as a serious threat to democratic values. Many have emphasized the importance of the press and its role as a check on America's executive branch with President Trump in power. For instance, with regard to Case A1, the president of ABC News, James Goldston, "excoriated" his staff following the erroneous news report and stated to them: "... in this particular moment, with the stakes as high as these stakes are now, we cannot afford to get it wrong."⁴⁴ Americans will likely disagree along partisan lines whether or not the Trump presidency truly represents a threat to America that requires extraordinary vigilance by the press. This question, however, is beside the point. The press should always serve as an effective check on government, and the executive branch in particular, regardless of who specifically serves as president. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart argued that the founding fathers included the First Amendment to ensure that the press could effectively supervise the government and expose government corruption or abuses of power.⁴⁵ To effectively carry out this function, however, the press needs credibility so that any story about abuse of power it might uncover will be believed. If the mainstream press does not have the kind of credibility needed to fully carry out this function, it then instead serves as something akin to what has been called the "fourth branch of government."⁴⁶ That is, as the fourth branch, the press serves as a vital part of the system of checks and balances of the American government, but as with the three official branches, it may be subject to partisan control and operate along the lines of ideological affiliation.

According to our previous research, it appears that the errors in the news stories that President Trump selected for his Fake News Awards were the result of a few different factors. In Category A stories, the errors were likely the result of a desire to uncover a so-called "smoking gun" story that might go down in history as a groundbreaking piece of journalism that would push allegations of collusion with Russia during the 2016 presidential election toward impeachment proceedings. In Category B stories, there does appear to have been a clear disdain for the President and seemingly deliberate efforts to use events caught on video in misleading ways in an apparent effort to embarrass him. In Category C stories, preconceptions about President Trump's views may have led to incorrect reporting about matters that seemingly should have been simple to cover accurately. In all three instances, if indeed these explanations are accurate, then the mistakes are the product of motivations that stray from a pure vision of the need to report facts accurately. Even in the case of Category A stories that were likely motivated by a desire to be first to report a particular event, it also appears that there was an underlying bias insofar as it presupposed that President Trump had indeed colluded with Russia during the 2016 presidential election and that it was just a matter of time before incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing would surface.

When journalists make major mistakes or distort stories due to motivations that appear to result from bias or ideology, audiences naturally grow skeptical of certain news agencies and certain news reports that pertain to political issues, and consequently the credibility of the press suffers. When its credibility is diminished, the press cannot as effectively serve as a check on government, particularly when dealing with a politician like President Trump, who is clearly adept at confronting negative press coverage. Even though

the examples presented in this paper likely do not constitute real fake news in the literal sense, they do indeed constitute examples of the mainstream press presenting false or highly distorted information. Mistakes invariably arise in any human endeavor, and so honest mistakes obviously arise in journalism as well. When multiple mistakes arise over a relatively short time, and seemingly fit with obviously negative views of President Trump, as evidenced by the combination of highly negative opinion pieces about the President and on-air commentators who show great disdain for the President, it becomes easier for the President to portray the mainstream media as partisan-minded purveyors of fake news whose errors are at times perhaps intentional.

As our analysis has shown, however, it is inaccurate to label most of the instances discussed here as “fake news.” First of all, the term “fake news” lacks specificity, and so a broad definition of the term “fake news” would include any news with incorrect information, while the narrowest definition would only include news articles that are pure fabrication.⁴⁷ We suggest that the term “fake news” be restricted to the kind of stories that intentionally present false information. As such, most of the stories on the President’s list do not constitute fake news in the literal sense, but they can nevertheless potentially influence audiences in ways that are similar to the effects of actual fake news. Mainstream news agencies obviously have far larger audiences than any single producer of fake news. Moreover, it is likely that those who consume fake news stories and actually believe them likely have already firmly established political views and as such may not be influenced by fake news. When large news agencies publish stories that are erroneous, on the other hand, they have the potential to spread false information to a large number of people. Moreover, as established news agencies with trusted credentials, they reach diverse audiences who are far more likely to believe their reporting, and thus amenable to modifying their political views based on published news reports. Mainstream news agencies of course issue corrections when mistakes are discovered, but corrections typically get far less attention than the original reports. As such, the false information in erroneous news reports typically reaches more people than the corrections do, and so at least a small number of people likely believe the original erroneous news reports, which influences their political views.

Ultimately, our analysis concludes that even though the President’s Fake News Awards may have flopped as some news agencies allege,⁴⁸ the very fact that he was able to put this kind of list together shows how journalistic errors can erode the ability of the press to effectively carry out oversight in terms of being able to publish reports that reveal abuses of power without having segments of the population question the veracity of such reports. Rather than being a purely hollow allegation or talking point in speeches, these errors have given substance to his claims of a dishonest press, which he has been able to spread by means of his highly effective use of social media. The result of these errors may be evident with the start of the impeachment inquiry regarding the Ukraine scandal, for there seemingly should have been greater interest. The heavy press coverage of the Russian collusion allegations that were ultimately not confirmed by the Special Counsel investigation, and the President’s efforts to highlight journalistic mistakes about him, has likely led some people to tune out reporting on this scandal in its early stages. If this is indeed the case, then it should be seen as a deeply disconcerting development, for it means that a segment of the American population views the mainstream press as crying wolf, and it could consequently prove difficult to convince that segment of the veracity of a future scandal. Making sure to keep biases in check and making sure to report the news accurately is therefore not just a matter of journalism ethics, but a pragmatic matter as well that can have a profound impact on the effectiveness of democratic institutions.

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トランプ時代の「本物のフェイクニュース」対 「偽のリアルニュース」

—マスコミに対する国民の信頼に誤報がもたらす影響の考察—

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本稿は、第55巻第1号で扱ったアメリカ合衆国のドナルド・トランプ大統領の「フェイクニュース賞」について手短かに振り返ったのち、フェイクニュース賞に取り上げられたような誤報が視聴者に与える影響を分析した。初めに、「フェイクニュース」とは何かを考察し、トランプ大統領がフェイクニュース賞に挙げた誤報は正確には「フェイクニュース」の定義に当てはまらないことを明らかにした。それにもかかわらず、このような誤報は本物のフェイクニュースと同様に、視聴者に影響を与える可能性があることを示した。次に、マスコミの誤報がもたらすより大きな影響を考察した。メディアのこのような過ちは、人々のマスコミへの信頼度を低下させるだけでなく、誤報の内容がマスコミの政治観と一致しているように見えるため、メディアが誤報を流す動機に疑念を抱く人々も出てくる。その結果、メディアは公平であるという人々のメディアへの信頼を損なうことになりかねない。事実に基づいた報道と論評の境界線がより曖昧になるにつれて、誤報は視聴者がいっそうマスコミの公平性に疑問を持つきっかけとなるだろう。

本稿の後半では、ジャーナリストが政府の不正行為を暴き、その調査結果を人々に広める監視役を務めることで、民主主義的な制度を維持するための有益な役割を果たしている点について論じている。メディアが公平であることはニュース報道の信頼性において重要である。それゆえ、マスコミが活動家の役割を担っているかのように見えると、多くの人々はジャーナリストも政治家と大して変わらないと思うようになるかもしれない。ニュース報道に頻繁に見られるあからさまなバイアスは、それと合致するように思われる誤報と相まって、マスコミによる権力監視の役割が次第に失われる状況へと導く可能性がある。米国の抑制と均衡のシステムのなかで、マスコミが付加的なチェック機関としての機能を果たす可能性がある限りにおいて、マスコミをいわゆる「第四の権力」とみなすことがますますふさわしくなるかもしれない。しかし、他の三つの権力と同様に、その権力を支配している者の価値体系の偏向に導かれているという点においては、マスコミも三権と何ら変わりはないと言える。

キーワード：ドナルド・トランプ米大統領、フェイクニュース、フェイクニュース賞、アメリカ政治、ジャーナリズム、マスコミ、バイアス

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