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Johan Farkas

This Is Not Real News

Discursive Struggles over Fake News, Journalism, and Democracy

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This Is Not Real News: Discursive Struggles over Fake News, Journalism, and Democracy

Thesis for Doctoral Degree (PhD)
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School of Arts and Communication Dissertation Series, no. 8.

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THESIS SUMMARY
'KAPPA'

1 ABSTRACT

Fake news has attracted significant global attention and contestation in recent years. This PhD thesis explores the explosive and oftentimes contradictory rise of fake news and dives into the discursive struggles around journalism, politics, digital media, and liberal democracy that have emerged in its wake. Through a series of interrelated publications – spanning more than five years of research – the thesis examines how and with what consequences journalistic and political actors articulate and dispute the very meaning of fake news. Through a careful and critical mapping of the discursive signification of fake news, the thesis does not only situate the issue in wider political and historical contexts; it also draws out and reflects upon its implications for the future of liberal democracies.

Deploying detailed empirical investigations based on news content, textual analysis, and qualitative interviews, the thesis sheds light on discursive struggles around fake news within a number of distinct socio-political contexts. It dives into cases from the US and UK, where fake news first rose to prominence in 2016, as well as from Denmark, where fake news has increasingly become a topic of journalistic and political concern.

Drawing on the ontological and conceptual framework of discourse theory, the thesis demonstrates how fake news has come to function as a floating signifier; it is a deeply political concept mobilised within conflicting hegemonic projects with fundamentally different forms of meaning. Having done so, the thesis goes on to show that fake news has not only become central in debates around lies and falsehoods but also for conflicting visions about what 'politics,' 'journalism,' and 'liberal democracy' fundamentally are and ought to be. Indeed, the core argument levelled in this thesis is that fake news has come to function as a prism through which wider struggles over liberal democracy and human co-habitation have become visible at a time of growing political instability.

Taken together, the findings offered by the thesis contribute to the field of media and communication studies by addressing a pertinent gap regarding the discursive signification of fake news. Connecting the rise of fake news to structural transformations at the heart of both contemporary media landscapes and liberal democracy, the thesis moves beyond formalistic conceptions of fake news and into the highly conflictual terrain surrounding the concept.

2 LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Paper I

Farkas, J. (2020). A case against the post-truth era: Revisiting Mouffe's critique of consensus-based democracy. In M. Zimdars & K. McLeod (Eds.), *Fake news: Understanding media and misinformation in the digital age* (pp. 45–53). MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11807.003.0006

Paper II

Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2018). Fake news as a floating signifier: Hegemony, antagonism and the politics of falsehood. *Javnost – The Public*, *25*(3), 298–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463047

Paper III

Farkas, J. (2023). News on fake news: Logics of media discourses on disinformation, *Journal of Language and Politics*, *22*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.22020.far

Paper IV

Farkas, J. (2023). Fake news in metajournalistic discourse. *Journalism Studies.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2167106

Paper V

Farkas, J., & Neumayer, C. (2020). Mimicking news: How the credibility of an established tabloid is used when disseminating racism. *Nordicom Review*, *41*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2020-0001

These publications are referred to throughout the thesis by their Roman numerals.

3   AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Paper II

The authors – Farkas and Schou – contributed equally to the research process and writing of the manuscript.

Paper V

The authors – Farkas and Neumayer – contributed 60% and 40%, respectively, to the research process and writing of the manuscript.

The data collection, analysis, and writing of Papers I, III, and IV were conducted solely by the author.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have always liked acknowledgement sections in books and liner notes on album covers. I appreciate how they transform the monolith in your hand – often with only a single name on the front – into an entangled web of people, places, and times, reminding us of the illusion of individuality.

Creative work – whether it be painting, sculpting, singing, or writing – is never a solo performance. It rests on a foundation of collaboration, support, mentorship, care, and inspiration. For me, the hardest part of the PhD process has been accepting academia's idealisation of the myth of the lone genius.

The fact that my name stands alone on this doctoral thesis rests, in my mind, more on a compromise than a desire. During my PhD studies, I have worked with some of the most inspiring people I have ever met. Most of this work is not included in this thesis, as the academic system requires me to hand in mostly single-authored works. Nonetheless, these collaborations stand out as the best things that happened to me during these years. For this reason, I would like to take the time to thank the people who made this thesis possible.

First off, I would like to send my deepest gratitude to my PhD supervisors, Tina Askanius and Bo Reimer. Thank you, Tina, for your relentless optimism and for believing in my ideas, even when they take me far off the planned course. Thank you, Bo, for supporting me with your tranquil clarity, which I rarely have myself and often need.

Thanks to Christina Neumayer, not only for supporting me during my PhD as External Advisor but also for cultivating my interest in research back at the IT University of Copenhagen.

5 PREFACE

Before diving into the depths of fake news and post-truth, I would like to say a few words about the title and artwork of this PhD thesis. I hope this will provide some opening insights into the aims of the research you are about to read.

The main title of the thesis – 'This Is Not Real News' – came to me when thinking about the messiness and contested meaning of fake news in contemporary media and politics. Ever since fake news exploded into popular discourse in 2016 with the Brexit referendum and election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, I have tried to make sense of this rapidly evolving phenomenon, concept, idea, and perceived threat. I have done so by researching how digital media platforms enable new forms of manipulation as well as how political actors mobilise fake news to (de-)legitimise different discursive positions around the state and future of politics, journalism, technology, and liberal democracy. The title seeks to capture this journey in (at least) three different ways.

First, the title alludes to the fact that 'fake' and 'real' news have become contested concepts in public debate – what Jannick Schou and I call the *politics of falsehood* (see Paper II and Farkas & Schou, 2019). Fake news has come to function as a *floating signifier* in political struggles, mobilised with opposing meaning ascriptions as part of conflicting hegemonic projects (see Papers II and IV). Different people in different socio-political contexts accuse their perceived opponents of spreading or embodying fake news. When we hear the phrase, 'This Is Not Real News,' then, we can imagine that this accusation might derive from a range of different actors with conflicting meanings. This might be in the form of a politician attacking another politician, a government official attacking a foreign media outlet, a social media user attacking another user, or a journalist seeking to defend their profession in the face of new content producers that claim authority as news creators. All of these are part of what this thesis seeks to explore.

Second, the title alludes to the fact that there is no way to study fake news without being embroiled in struggles over its meaning. We must accept as our starting point that any attempt to demarcate and classify fake news and its role in politics and media automatically becomes part of political contestation. This argument rests, on the one hand, on post-foundational grounds (which I will expand upon later in this thesis) and, on the other hand, on personal experience, which I will briefly exemplify here.

In 2019, I was invited to give an expert testimony on social media regulation before the Council of Europe. In my speech, I outlined different suggestions for how and why European countries could regulate social media platforms, drawing on my research on disinformation. After my testimony, a member of the Russian delegation took the floor and informed the room that what "Mr. Farkas" had just told them constituted "fake news," since Russian disinformation, which I had studied (see Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Farkas & Bastos, 2018a, 2018b), did not exist. This accusation, I immediately knew, was not about any specific piece of evidence I had presented but rather about relations of power. It was about laying claim to whom gets to act as a knowledge gatekeeper. Thinking back on it, this was probably the moment my PhD project came full circle: from studying contestation around fake news to being the target of said contestation. As such, 'This Is Not Real News' acknowledges the inherent political dimension of this thesis and its potential designation as both real and fake.

The third and final meaning of the title comes from its homage to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* and its iconic phrase, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Just like Magritte's painting musingly prompts the viewer to question whether the canvas actually 'contains' a pipe or not, the title of this thesis seeks to prompt the reader to question whether *the news* (that thing most of us check on our phones, TV, or newspaper) actually 'contains' the news. Of course, the news is a construct, created and curated every day in newsrooms across the world. What constitutes 'newsworthiness' at any given time is not pre-determined but based on human sense-making and relations of power.

The news rests on processes of complexity-reduction in which actors in and around 'journalism' – a contested construct in and of itself – decide what to highlight and neglect from a world of infinite complexity. Over time, shifting norms, rituals, technologies, and power relations have governed these processes. Different political, economic, and religious interests have dominated at different historical conjectures. The title of this thesis reminds us that contemporary boundaries around 'real news' and 'fake news' are not naturally given. They rest on discursive struggle, negotiation, and sedimentation. These processes deserve careful and critical scrutiny, not only because they provide insights into the boundaries between real and fake news, but also because they tell us something deeper about the relationship between politics, technology, journalism, and liberal democracy in times of rapid digitalisation, far-right resurgence, economic instability, and growing pressure on traditional knowledge gatekeepers. In this way, 'This Is Not Real News' functions as an indirect way of asking: What even *is* real and fake news? And why has this distinction become so important for contemporary political struggles? These questions are what this thesis is all about.

6 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I explore the discursive signification of fake news in struggles over politics, journalism, digital media, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy. While fake news has received much political and scholarly attention in recent years – alongside related concepts and phenomena – notable empirical gaps still exist. Few researchers have analysed the intricacies of how fake news has become one of the most contested concepts of our time, mobilised to legitimise conflicting political solutions: from increased state censorship and attacks on journalists to tech regulation and state support for factchecking initiatives (Fischer, 2021; Neo, 2020, 2021; Tambini, 2017). There remains a lack of situated research into how politicians in different geo-political contexts articulate and address fake news as a threat (Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020; Wright, 2021), how journalists negotiate its importance in newsrooms (Mayerhöffer et al., 2022; Tandoc et al., 2019), and how debates around fake news play into wider struggles over the future of liberal democracy (Farkas & Schou, 2019; Monsees, 2020, 2023). These gaps remain pertinent, as fake news continues to occupy a central role in policies, institutional restructurings, and shifting power relations around politics, media, and journalism across the world, most recently in connection to pandemic responses and warmongering (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Oremus, 2022).

The thesis contributes to our understanding of fake news as a signifier, phenomenon, and perceived threat through five interconnected publications. The first two papers examine discourses in the US and UK in the wake of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This research shows how the notion of a post-truth era neglects key dimensions of the democratic tradition (Paper I) and how fake news can meaningfully be conceived of as a *floating signifier* in contemporary political discourses (Paper II). The latter three publications present empirical studies situated in a Danish political and media landscape.

These studies explore, respectively, journalistic discourses around fake news and their underlying logics (Paper III), the discursive signification of fake news in conflicting views on what journalism 'is' and ought to be (Paper IV), and manipulation through the mimicking of news in online tabloid media (Paper V).

The five publications document a research journey spanning five years of critical engagement that tracked the rise of fake news in political and journalistic discourses. This journey has not been carefully planned or premeditated but has rather developed organically in response to shifting and oftentimes messy debates, policies, and cases. As a result, the five papers in the thesis are, on the one hand, intimately connected by being the results of the same scholarly project. On the other hand, the publications are distinct in exploring cases that do not always translate directly in time, place, or scale. To me, this organic approach has been the most meaningful way of embracing the fast-developing and contested nature of fake news. As such, I encourage the reader to approach the publications in this thesis not as five puzzle pieces that neatly fit together but as five letters from an extended voyage.

The papers share an overarching commitment to critically exploring tensions between fake news as a phenomenon and as a contested concept across politics and journalism. They also share a post-foundational ontology and theoretical framework from the Essex School of Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), which rejects reified ideas about any shared essence of notions such as fake news, journalism, or democracy (see 'Theoretical Framework'). From this perspective, all five papers approach fake news not as a pre-defined or universal entity but as a discursive construct, the meaning of which arises from the interplay between different actors, discourses, hegemonic projects, and relations of power, all of which deserve critical attention. As such, I do not attempt to present an authoritative definition of fake news in this thesis but rather explore how different actors adopt conflicting definitions of fake news and mobilise the concept to legitimise opposing visions for journalism, politics, digital media, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy. Finally, the papers share a qualitative methodology that emphasises the production of 'thick' data to critically analyse and question the intricacies of fake news and its implications.

Taken together, this PhD thesis aims to critically explore the meaning of fake news in wider discursive struggles in and around liberal democracy. In doing so, the thesis addresses the following overall research question (RQ) and five sub-questions (SQs), each of which connects to one of the five papers:

Research question:

How and with what consequences has fake news become integral – as phenomenon, signifier, and perceived threat – to discursive struggles over politics, journalism, digital media, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy?

Sub-questions:

SQ1: How are notions of 'fake news' and 'post-truth' mobilised in journalistic and political discourses, and what implicit normative ideas about liberal democracy do these discourses contain?

SQ2: How do political and journalistic actors articulate and mobilise fake news in discursive struggles over politics, journalism, digital media, and knowledge gatekeeping?

SQ3: How do journalists report on fake news, and which discursive logics undergird this coverage?

SQ4: How do actors in and around legacy news media articulate the relationship between fake news and journalism?

SQ5: How do legacy news institutions contribute to the blurring of boundaries between 'fake' and 'real' news?

Figure 1 presents a visual overview of the five publications of the thesis, including their countries of study, empirical foci, empirical timeframes, years of publication, and related sub-questions. As the figure shows, the studies exhibit varying degrees of empirical overlap. Papers I and II, which both focus on the US and UK, differ geo-politically from Papers III, IV, and V, which focus on Denmark. Similarly, Papers III and IV, which focus on the 2019 Danish elections, differ from Paper V, which examines a case of manipulation through a digital platform called The People's Voice operated by the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* (see 'Empirical Cases'). Together, these papers contribute to addressing the overarching research question.

Country of study	US and UK		Denmark		
Publication	I	II	III	IV	V
Empirical context	Trump and Brexit		Danish Elections		The People's Voice
Related sub-question	SQ1	SQ2	SQ3	SQ4	SQ5
Empirical timeframe	2016–17	2016–17	2019	2019	2015–16
Year of publication	2020	2018	2023	2023	2020

Figure 1 – Overview of the five publications of the thesis

The following sections situate the thesis in relation to existing scholarship, outlining the research context, motivation for the thesis, and research gaps it seeks to address.

7 LITERATURE REVIEW

False information and political manipulation have in recent years attracted significant attention across journalism, politics, and academia. Discussed under a range of headings – most notably fake news – a new form of threat to democracy has captured the public imagination, sparking analysis, debate, fear, political action, and calls for radical change. The devil is known by many names, as the saying goes, and this has certainly been the case with this still-developing and world-encompassing topic. Whether labelled as 'fake news,' 'disinformation,' 'misinformation,' 'junk news,' 'information warfare,' 'the post-truth era,' 'post-factual society,' 'the infodemic,' 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour,' or 'propaganda,' various discourses have lamented the state and potential downfall of liberal democracy, journalism, and knowledge gatekeeping.

While the concept of fake news is in and of itself not new (McNair, 2017), its connection to digital media and present-day politics has been articulated as sparking "an insidious trend that's fast becoming a global problem" (Connolly et al., 2016). Our democratic moment – and democracy's potential downfall – has increasingly been linked to the spread of subversive online practices and content (Fischer, 2021; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021; Rommetveit, 2021). According to commentators, we have entered a new and threatening "age of post-truth politics" (Davies, 2016) in which lies and emotion-driven masses threaten to "destroy our political system" (Tsipursky, 2017). Fake news is portrayed as a leading cause of democratic decline, though discourses diverge on who is to blame and what is to be done about it (Farkas & Schou, 2019).

Within academia, there has been a veritable explosion of scholarly work on disinformation and related topics. As noted by Freelon and Wells (2020), disinformation has rapidly become "*the* defining political communication topic of our time" (p. 145, original emphasis). Between 2010 and 2019, "over 70% of the

Google Scholar results containing 'disinformation' in their titles were published after 2016" (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 149). This pattern is even more pronounced when probing for interest in fake news. When performing a similar heuristic exercise as Freelon and Wells (2020) – using Google Scholar to assess scholarly interest – results show that 97.2% of publications about 'fake news' between 2010 and 2022 came out in 2016 or later (Google Scholar, 2022a, 2022b). Thousands of works that examine disinformation, fake news, post-truth, and related phenomena have been published over a relatively short period (Righetti, 2021).

This upsurge in academic interest in fake news aligns with a general increase in attention from journalists, politicians, tech companies, and citizens since 2016. As argued by Matthew d'Ancona – British journalist and author of one of many popular books on fake news – "2016 was the year that definitively launched the era of 'Post-Truth'" (d'Ancona, 2017, p. 7). To phrase this more modestly, we can at least say that 2016 was the year that launched a global interest in fake news and political struggles over its signification.

2016 was marked by two key events that drove popular interest in fake news: the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States. Both results baffled commentators and kickstarted widespread debate and controversy that was often centred on the potential role of misinformed publics in determining the outcomes (Flood, 2016; Norman, 2016). Oxford Dictionaries captured the ubiquity of these debates by naming post-truth the 'Word of the Year' in 2016 (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

Since then, scholars have sought to contribute new insights about fake news and post-truth from a range of different perspectives and academic disciplines. This includes psychology (Pennycook & Rand, 2021), philosophy (Habgood-Coote, 2020), linguistics (Lugea, 2021), mathematics (Brody & Meier, 2018), information science (Agarwal & Alsaeedi, 2020), computer science (Schuster et al., 2020), political science (Golovchenko et al., 2018) and, not least, media and communication studies (Zimdars & McLeod, 2020). Primary issues tackled in this literature concern tactics and strategies in disinformation campaigns (Arif et al., 2018; Jones, 2019; King et al., 2017), how to define key concepts (Gelfert, 2018;

Tandoc et al., 2018), and how to automatically detect and remove 'bad content' (Bauskar et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2017).

With so much research coming out, it might seem that this thesis faces a daunting task or, at least, some challenging questions: How do you delineate an original object of analysis and academic contribution in a global, fast-paced, and still-evolving field? How do you decide, both theoretically and empirically, which concepts and definitions to use and which to ignore from a plethora of competing terms? How do you compile a comprehensive overview when the existing literature includes thousands of published studies? How do you ensure novel insights when confronted by this still-growing mountain of research? And how do you overcome the challenge of presenting outdated findings when your research finally comes out?

Of course, many of these questions and challenges are always present in research. The fear of overlooking related works or failing to contribute new insights, for example, are issues that every scholar must navigate. That said, when engaging with the topic of fake news, it can feel as if these questions and challenges have been strapped to a jet engine. For this reason, I think the best way to tackle them is to engage with them head-on.

In the following sections, I will first showcase how – despite extensive research – there still exist notable gaps in empirical and theoretical research on fake news pertaining to its discursive signification in both journalism and politics (see 'Scholarship on Fake News'). This section also delineates how I build on existing research into political and journalistic discourses around fake news to advance a constructionist approach that critically embraces its contested meaning. Second, I outline how researchers have thus far tried to address the identified research gaps, analysing the discursive signification of fake news across the world (see 'Research on the Discursive Signification of Fake News'). Third, and finally, I draw on research from journalism studies to argue that fake news acts as a prism through which we can explore not only struggles over the signification of falsehoods in contemporary liberal democracies but also struggles over the future of journalism as a democratic institution in times of economic, political, and technological turmoil (see 'Scholarship on Journalism and Democracy'). Taken together, these sections situate the thesis within media and communication studies and outline the scholarly gaps to which it contributes.

7.1 Scholarship on Fake News

Political manipulation has been studied since the early days of media and communication research, most prominently under the umbrella of 'propaganda studies' (Becker, 1949; Lasswell, 1927, 1938). In 1927, Lasswell defined propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (p. 627), expressing concern about its "ever-present function… in modern life" due to "the rapid advent of technological changes" (p. 631). In the 1960s, Ellul echoed this sentiment, arguing that "the structure of present-day society places the individual where he is most easily reached by propaganda" due to society's "technical evolution" (1965, p. 9). Technologies were rapidly changing, early propaganda scholars warned, and they posed new threats to democratic societies.

Fast-forward 90+ years from Lasswell's concerns about technology-driven propaganda, and scholars are raising very similar arguments, only with the term fake news replacing propaganda: "Technology allows fake news to have the power to manipulate elections, discredit a brand and influence the economic market" (Baptista & Gradim, 2021, p. 436). The "modern age of social media" (Speed & Mannion, 2017, p. 250), in which "fear, rumour, and gossip can spread alarmingly fast" (ibid.), is ushering in nothing less than a new 'post-truth era' (Higgins, 2016; Levy, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Suiter, 2016; Vernon, 2017). Liberal democracies have entered an "emerging new epistemic regime, where emotional response prevails over factual evidence and reasoned analysis" (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 25).

Despite clear connections between concerns about propaganda in the 20th century and fake news in the 21st century, references to propaganda studies literature have often been remarkably absent in contemporary scholarship on fake news (for notable exceptions, see Andrejevic, 2020; Chernobrov & Briant, 2022; Farkas & Neumayer, 2020; Vamanu, 2019). While new research has provided important insights into digital forms of manipulation, scholars have tended to approach fake news as a distinctly novel phenomenon, applying overly universalist, reified, and ahistorical perspectives (Bratich, 2020; Farkas & Schou, 2019; Harjuniemi, 2022; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). As Hedrick, Kleiss, and Karpf (2018) summarise: "So many analyses of fake news, Russian fake accounts on Facebook, and bots after the 2016 election have occurred in a vacuum, often ignoring the deeper political, social, and cultural contexts from which they have emerged" (p. 1059).

A large proportion of the scholarship on fake news has been concerned with studying the topic as either more or less decontextualised forms of digital content with underlying rules to be detected, mapped, and potentially removed (see, e.g., Bauskar et al., 2019; Brody & Meier, 2018; Howard et al., 2017; Liu & Wu, 2018; Rubin et al., 2015) or as a novel concept in need of a clear definition (see, e.g., E. Brown, 2019; Gelfert, 2018; Pepp et al., 2022). The latter has led scholars to define fake news as "a *distortion bias* on information manipulated by the publisher" (Shu et al., 2017, p. 25, original emphasis) or as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organisational process or intent" (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). While these definitions – alongside attempts to detect and classify fake news – offer useful reflections on false information in digital media, they are nevertheless limited in their ability to explain the connection between contemporary and historical forms of manipulation and the societal anxieties that surround them. Additionally, they cannot fully explain how and why the meaning of fake news has become central to political struggles across the globe (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Wright, 2021). As Monsees (2023, p. 163) concludes: "Rather than more quantitative research into the ways in which fake news spreads we need more sociological and political research into the context in which disinformation occurs… to understand the phenomenon as a *political* one" (added emphasis).

Fake news has become a deeply political and paradoxical term that simultaneously captures a zeitgeist of fear around digital technologies, democratic demise, and the fall of traditional knowledge gatekeepers as well as the political dissatisfaction with said gatekeepers. The thesis does not approach this contested nature of fake news as something to be solved or overcome but as the very object of analysis to be intricately and critically studied. It engages with fake news as a historical construct and intermeshed patchwork of signifiers, phenomena, struggles, debates, and imaginaries diverging across political contexts with real-world effects and material consequences. The aim is to qualitatively investigate the multiple and often contradictory ways in which fake news is mobilised, fought over, and used to legitimise political practices, institutional restructurings, technological developments, and new relations of power between journalists, tech companies, politicians, and citizens.

As Jannick Schou and I write in Paper II, studies of fake news have tended "to be locked in a very specific framework. They all seek to address the question of *what* can be labelled as valid, proper, or 'true information' online, and what should be counted as 'fake news' or disinformation" (Paper II, p. 105, original emphasis). This thesis turns this question on its head, asking not how researchers can best define fake news, but how fake news is articulated, contested, and mobilised across different socio-political contexts. Such an endeavour aligns with recent works that take discursive mobilisations of fake news seriously, analysing their performative implications (see Bratich, 2020; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Monsees, 2020; Wright, 2021). This research breaks away from a universalist register, arguing instead that "the phenomenon of 'fake news,' the discourses that surround it and responses by audiences and the journalistic community have to be understood within particular social, cultural, and political contexts" (Wasserman, 2020, p. 5).

One approach to studying the political signification of fake news, proposed by Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), rests on a distinction between fake news as a genre and fake news as a label:

> We… argue that there is a fundamental difference between what constitutes fake news and what the term is used for: There is the *fake news genre*, describing the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation, and the *fake news label*, namely, the instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media.
>
> (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 97, original emphasis)

Fake news, Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) argue, has been studied predominantly as a form of pseudo-journalism (i.e., as a genre) yet remains "severely understudied" (p. 98) as a signifier in political struggles (i.e., as a label). This thesis builds on Egelhofer and Lecheler's (2019) call to study fake news as a label in political discourses, contributing new knowledge on how the term is used across politics and journalism. Departing from Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), however, this thesis approaches fake news as an interconnected knot of discursive phenomena and struggles over politics, journalism, digital technology, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy. Studying fake news as a genre, this thesis posits, also means studying it as a label, and vice versa.

A limitation of maintaining an analytical division between fake news as a genre and as a label is that it risks neglecting the interconnectedness between them. Following Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), attacks on traditional media using the fake news signifier – a rhetorical strategy made (in)famous by Donald Trump (2018a, 2018b) – revolve around the use of fake news as a label. In contrast, journalistic coverage of fabricated stories disguised as news revolves around fake news as a genre. In practice, however, these two planes are often deeply interwoven, such as when journalists or governments abstain from using fake news as a concept due to its increasingly politicised nature (see Reals, 2018) or when legacy news institutions allow manipulation on their websites as long as it does not fall under their definition of fake news (see Paper V).

Defining exactly what fake news is or is not, let alone how to handle it, involves clear relations of power. This goes for tech companies, governments, news outlets, academics, intelligence agencies, and civil society organisations, all of which have responded differently across geo-political contexts: from laws against fake news in Russia, Malaysia, and Honduras (Lim, 2020; McAuley, 2018; Mchangama & Fiss, 2019; Neo, 2020), governmental task forces in Denmark and the Czech Republic (Dengsøe & Festersen, 2019; Eberle & Daniel, 2019), and persecution of journalists in China, Egypt, and Turkey (Beiser, 2017, 2019) to new cross-national corporate alliances between tech companies and news organisations (Facebook, 2022). All these diverse responses to fake news deserve situated scrutiny and cannot easily be defined *a priori* as revolving around either a political label or a genre of disinformation.

Fake news has political implications beyond either direct attacks on news media, on the one hand, or false information in news-like packaging, on the other. It has become integral to struggles over the very future of politics, journalism, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy and has had material consequences in the form of new interventions, policies, restructurings, and power relations. As lucidly noted by Monsees (2020), fake news and disinformation are not "only important because of their direct impact on elections but in the way controversies around fake news rekindle related debates about social media, regulation of free-speech, and threats to democracy" (p. 118). Studying fake news, in other words, not only provides insights into false information but also into the relationship between politics, journalism, digital media, and liberal democracy at a historical conjecture characterised by a profound dislocation of previously sedimented discursive boundaries and relations.

So far, scholars in the emergent field of fake news research have tended to neglect situated, historical, and constructionist perspectives, instead focusing mainly on fake news as a universal genre of false information (Farkas & Schou, 2019; Monsees, 2023; Rosenfeld, 2019; Wright, 2021). By approaching fake news as a problem of 'bad content,' studies often ignore "the deeper challenges to democracy emerging from the structural transformations of the public arena" (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021, p. 10). Critics have lamented the state of the field, arguing that scholars should "stop talking about fake news" (Habgood-Coote, 2018, p. 1033). Others, in response, have argued that researchers should "keep talking about fake news… sorting out what is 'essential' to this phenomenon" (Pepp et al., 2022, p. 472).

A key goal of this thesis is to 'keep talking about fake news' while avoiding any attempt to capture a decontextualised 'essence' of it. It abandons universalist approaches and critically explores fake news's contextual implications, embracing the ontological position that "truth and its opposites are always implicated in questions of power – and thus truth is never fully divorced from politics and social conflict" (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 20). In practical terms, this means examining – empirically and theoretically – the relationship between fake news, politics, journalism, digital media, and liberal democracy, unpacking how fake news is articulated, negotiated, and contested as both a genre and a label in journalistic and political discourses.

To some, the notion of a constructionist approach to fake news might invoke fears of moral relativism, approaching all definitions as equally valid. After all, if we abstain from first engaging with the question of what properly counts as fake news, how can we critically engage with questions of what counts as an instrumentation or wrongful use of the term to, for example, discredit journalists or political opposition? Are we not potentially contributing to the very indifference to truth that fake news thrives on? To those who see "post-modern thinkers" as "the inadvertent prophets of Post-Truth" (d'Ancona, 2017, p. 107), these questions might cause alarm bells.

In my view, such criticism misses the mark, as there are plenty of ways to conduct critical scholarship beyond universalism. Most importantly, the abandonment of *a priory* distinctions between correct and incorrect uses of fake news gives us the opportunity to critically examine power relations in *all* mobilisations of the

signifier and phenomenon. For example, it allows us to question how journalistic and political actors might reproduce "the myth that we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth [that] intersects with a neoconservative nostalgia for a post-racial past that never existed" (Mejia et al., 2018, p. 11). Instead of assuming that all existing truth regimes are smoothly functioning for the good of all humankind, we can use the fake news debate as a prism through which to interrogate their inner operations. This includes a critical view of the historical White, male dominance of traditional knowledge gatekeepers that have often failed to represent and support women and minorities (Chambers et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2020; Ekman & Krzyzanowski, 2021; Forde & Bedingfield, 2021; Washington, 2006). It also includes a critical view on structural transformations in liberal democracies over the past decades that have gradually "hollowed out, reined in, commodified, trivialised, and generally contaminated those spaces with which democracy has been traditionally associated" (Fenton & Freedman, 2018, p. 131; see also Jessop, 2017; Mouffe, 2005; Streeck, 2014, 2016). If we want to understand fake news, in other words, we need to put this phenomenon and signifier into a broader, politically situated perspective.

Following these arguments, we can begin to significantly narrow down those studies – out of the thousands of works on fake news published in recent years – that are relevant for the present empirical investigation. First, we can put the myriad of studies trying to properly define fake news to the side. This is not because such scholarly efforts are wrong or unproductive but simply because they fail to provide situated insights into how this phenomenon and concept is mobilised outside the realm of academia. Instead, we must seek out studies that advance situated knowledge of the political signification of fake news in specific geo-political contexts. As noted, such research is currently underrepresented, as we generally "lack empirical evidence on how the debate around fake news manifests itself in social reality" (Egelhofer et al., 2020, p. 1324). Some studies, however, do exist that can help us sketch out the contours of this complex and rapidly changing landscape, as I will unfold in the following.

Research on the Discursive Signification of Fake News

Within and around politics, digital media, and journalism, fake news has sparked a range of institutional reorganisations with wide-ranging implications across the world. This includes new governmental and inter-governmental media screening task forces, factchecking outlets, social media regulations, and intelligence agency operations (Fischer, 2021; Tenove, 2020). It also includes laws against

fake news that limit freedom of expression (Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020, 2021) and direct attacks on journalists, both rhetorically and materially, in the form of accusations of spreading fake news, bans from press events, and imprisonments (Associated Press, 2018; Beiser, 2018, 2019). These political restructurings have played out differently across various socio-political contexts, with different material consequences.

It is close to impossible to discuss fake news without mentioning the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump, who made the term a staple rhetorical tool to discredit journalistic institutions and political opponents (Lischka, 2019, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). He even claimed to have invented the term 'fake' (Salmon, 2017) and created a 'Fake News Award,' which he 'awarded' to media outlets such as CNN and *The New York Times* (Trump, 2018a). Trump's adoption of the signifier was a response to its use by journalists in the US to both criticise Trump's presidential campaign and "indicate that *something* was amiss in the digital public sphere" (Creech, 2020, p. 953, original emphasis). Due to Trump's near-ubiquitous usage of fake news and clear attempt to hegemonise its meaning to fit his own political agenda, he has often been at the centre of debates about the discursive signification of the term (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Lischka, 2019, 2021; Rossini et al., 2021). Yet, limiting our attention to Trump would be a mistake, since fake news continues to have significant ramifications across the globe.

In journalistic coverage, fake news has often been used as an "empty buzzword" (Egelhofer et al., 2020, p. 1036) that conflates diverse phenomena, such as "strategic misinformation, hyper-partisan media, false clickbait, [and] viral propaganda" with "more ineffable social forces and relations" (Creech, 2020, p. 954; see also Wasserman, 2020). Multiple authors have argued that journalists thus contribute to *moral panics* around fake news by inflating its novelty, danger, and signification (Bratich, 2020; Carlson, 2020; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). In news media, fake news is often compared to a 'virus' that is spreading through society with alarming speed (Anderson, 2021; Creech, 2020; Farkas & Schou, 2019). This metaphor was already prominent before the Covid-19 pandemic but grew in importance when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared in 2020 that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake

news spreads faster and more easily than this virus" (Ghebreyesus, 2020; see also Simon & Camargo, 2021).

As noted by Creech (2020), journalists have tended to portray fake news in technical rather than political terms, "framing fake news as an unforeseen consequence of a technical system" (p. 958) and calling for solutions "understood as primarily technical tweaks" (p. 959). Journalistic and political calls for action have centred on getting "social media companies to clean up their sites, monitor content with the public interest in mind, and tweak algorithms" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868). In other words, they have primarily called for corporate and technical fixes.

Another central framing of fake news in both politics and journalism has been connected to national security and warfare. As noted by Bratich (2020), "professional journalism has drawn from the language of war to understand its position… liberally employing terms like *weaponization* and *infowar* to understand fake news" (p. 314, original emphasis). Lim (2020) describes this as a "securitization of 'fake news'" (p. 7), a trend found in numerous countries where fake news has rhetorically been placed on par with terrorism, wars, and pandemics (Bratich, 2020; Ghebreyesus, 2020; Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020). Political leaders have actively used the securitisation of fake news to legitimise proposed and implemented laws in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Venezuela, Honduras, France, Hungary, and Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Lim, 2020; Monsees, 2020; Neo, 2020; Tenove, 2020; Tully, 2022).

In a detailed study of Malaysia's 'Anti-Fake News Act,' Lim (2020) shows that the Malaysian government discursively mobilised fake news as a matter of national security, relying "heavily on images and rhetoric from abroad – much of which has been developed in English-language media from the US and Europe since 2016" (p. 8). The Anti-Fake News Act made it illegal to spread false or partly false information and imposed penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment of up to six years. Despite the government's stated aim of protecting the safety of the nation, human rights advocates argued that the bill was "100% intended to muffle dissent… the punishment is extremely high and what amounts to fake news has been loosely defined" (Paulsen, 2018 as cited in Lim, 2020, p. 5).

The Malaysian Anti-Fake News Act was repealed in 2019 after public pressure and a change of government (Lim, 2020), only to be reinstated in revised form in

2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to criticism over the reinstatement of the legislation, Malaysia's Communications Minister, Saifuddin Abdulla, argued: "Our interest is in fighting COVID-19 and we will do whatever it takes" (Zsombor, 2021). This development fulfilled an ominous prediction made by Lim in 2020:

> The securitization of "fake news" will likely continue in the near future as states attempt to justify censorship-enabling information controls… Wherever it occurs, the securitization of "fake news" can put populations at risk of censorship and harassment.

<div align="right">(Lim, 2020, p. 41)</div>

Securitisation of fake news has also been present in Europe. During Covid-19, Hungary implemented emergency measures to ban 'fake news' about the government's handling of the pandemic – a move criticised by human rights groups (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In defence of the decision, Hungarian Minister of Justice Judit Varga stated that "exceptional measures… are necessary and proportionate in the context of the coronavirus pandemic to protect citizens' life, health, and security" (Varga, 2020). As in the Malaysian case, Hungarian politicians legitimised free speech restrictions by articulating fake news as a matter of national security.

As noted by Tenove (2020), European governments have generally "turned to their national security sectors to address online disinformation by foreign or domestic actors" (p. 523). In a study of German news coverage of fake news, Monsees (2020) finds that "whereas fake news started as a very specific concern regarding the spread of information via social media, nowadays it is considered to be a security concern" (p. 116). While the topic was initially framed as "a problem of the US and to a lesser degree the UK," it later became discussed "as a distinct problem for German society" (Monsees, 2020, p. 120).

The development towards a national security discourse in Germany coincided with the so-called NetzDG law, which passed in 2017. This law made it mandatory for social media companies to remove illegal content, primarily hate speech, within 24 hours (Monsees, 2020; Tenove, 2020). As with the Malaysian case, the law sparked significant debate, as opponents feared that it would effectively privatise key legal decisions in the country (Olterman, 2018). Despite controversy, NetzDG passed and was later referenced by policymakers in other countries,

including Russia and Venezuela, to legitimise legislation against fake news (Mchangama & Fiss, 2019). This was noted with dismay by the German executive director of Reporters Without Borders: "Our worst fears have been realized. The German law on online hate speech is now serving as a model for non-democratic states to limit Internet debate" (Mihr, 2017 as cited in Reporters Without Borders, 2017b). This shows how discourses and policy responses to fake news often have cross-national implications.

As noted by Monsees (2020), the German "fake news controversy did not emerge in a vacuum but can only be understood properly when understanding its global dimension as well as the specific (German) context in which a particular problem definition emerged and created public attention" (p. 119). Building on journalistic and political discourses in the US and UK, German debates around fake news gradually moved from focusing on somewhere else – the US and UK – to emphasising German national security and the fate of German democracy. This resonates with findings from Denmark (see Papers III and IV).

In sum, the articulation of fake news as a national security threat has been intimately connected to the rise of new forms of state censorship across the world (Farkas & Schou, 2019; Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020). This connection is supported by a recent study by Jungherr and Rauchfleisch (2022),which found "negative downstream effects of indiscriminate warnings against the threat of disinformation" (p. 4). Public concern about fake news, they find, is linked to lower satisfaction with the overall state of democracy and increased support for state-imposed free speech restrictions (Jungherr & Rauchfleisch, 2022). This highlights how the political and journalistic discourses around fake news not only have implications for public sentiment towards false information but also towards free speech and liberal democracy in general.

Facebook

In parallel with the securitisation of fake news, an equally significant development has been the *politicisation* of the term. As noted earlier, Trump has become the prima facie example of this due to his consistent use of fake news to attack the "main stream [sic] (fake news) media" (Trump, 2017a). Trump, however, has not been alone in using the concept to delegitimise perceived political opponents. Leaders from across the globe – in both liberal democratic and non-democratic countries – have taken up the trend (Farhall et al., 2019; Reporters Without

Borders, 2017a). In the European Union, the French far-right party Front National set up a "fake news alert team" to post updates "whenever members of the team believed that France 2 journalists put out fake news" (Reporters Without Borders, 2017a). Similarly, members of the Austrian far-right party FPÖ have frequently accused news media of spreading disinformation (Egelhofer et al., 2022). Dutch politician Gert Wilders has also accused the government of promoting a "fake reality" (Wilders, 2017 as cited in Hameleers, 2020, p. 1145). Despite the increased prominence of such political mobilisations, there has so far only been "limited research on the delegitimizing efforts visible in many Western democracies today" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 97). Emerging scholarship in this area indicates that political attacks on journalism can decrease public trust in news without negatively affecting trust in the accusing politicians (Egelhofer et al., 2022).

In the US, Li and Min-Hsin (2020) have shown how fake news is highly politicised on social media, with both left- and right-leaning Twitter users deploying the term as a means of attacking political opponents. The authors conclude that while opposing sides might "share the same concern over 'fake news,' they may not be thinking and talking about the same problem" (Li & Min-Hsin, 2020, p. 11). This conclusion is supported by a survey from the Pew Research Center, which shows that Republican voters are more likely to tie the notion of 'made-up news' with traditional news media, while Democratic voters associate it with the Trump administration (Stocking et al., 2019).

In Europe, little research has explored partisan divides in uses and understandings of fake news, whether in journalism, politics, or mundane debate (Monsees, 2023). One study of Austrian news coverage found that while journalists initially used the term fake news to capture "a problem of an increase in disinformation" (Egelhofer et al., 2020, p. 1338), it has increasingly been used by politicians for "attacks on the news media and has been normalized as a catchy buzzword" (ibid.). The authors warn that this development might trivialise fake news as a concept, and they encourage journalists to rethink their use of the term.

Journalistic institutions have not only played a central role in framing the issue of fake news in popular discourse but also in framing their own profession in connection to it. As noted by Waisbord (2018), the news industry in the US has

"tried to reassert its authority as truth keeper in response to the fake news phenomenon" (p. 1873). Wasserman (2020) finds the same in a South African context, showcasing how the fake news debate has "provided an opportunity for the mainstream journalistic community to re-assert their dominance and re-affirm the professional paradigm of news" (p. 13). These attempts to reclaim journalistic authority must be viewed in relation to a growing economic crisis for news industries in all parts of the world, the result of shifting advertisement models due to the rise of tech giants in tandem with rapidly declining print readership (Pickard, 2020).

As existing research shows, the relationship between journalism and the rise of fake news is both complex and multi-directional. News outlets have, on the one hand, been central in bringing fake news to the forefront of public debate, articulating it as a national security threat to liberal democracies against which their profession stands as a bulwark (Carlson, 2020). On the other hand, news institutions have had to endure continuous accusation of being "FAKE NEWS" themselves: "ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!" (Trump, 2020). All of this has implicated new power struggles and economic restructurings that are playing out differently across geo-political boundaries. To combat fake news, new factchecking units and outlets have seen the light of day alongside increased government subsidies and partnerships with social media companies (AFP, 2022; Facebook, 2022). At the same time, the fake news debate has been used to legitimise attacks on journalists and new forms of state censorship (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020). All these developments deserve careful, situated scrutiny, as they provide key insights not only into the state of false information but also into the state and future of journalism, politics, digital media, and liberal democracy.

To summarise, the rise of fake news since 2016 has had wide-ranging consequences, affecting politics, digital media, and journalism as well as the power relations within and between these realms. So far, a multitude of studies have sought to define and detect fake news, yet few have investigated the discursive signification of fake news and its consequences, whether in the form of task forces, laws, partnerships, alliances, tech solutions, or conflicts. Journalists play a key role in shaping public discourse on fake news, which has material consequences across politics (e.g., how different governments respond to fake news), journalism (e.g., how media institutions brand themselves and re-structure their organisations), and public perceptions (e.g., how citizens view the general state of liberal democracy and free speech). So far, these important issues have received scant scholarly attention, especially outside the US (Tandoc et al., 2019).

This thesis contributes both novel theoretical and empirical examinations of these issues and critical discussions of their implications in the US, UK, Denmark, and beyond.

7.2 Scholarship on Journalism and Democracy

In addition to contributing to scholarship on fake news, the thesis seeks to contribute to scholarship on journalism's democratic role in times of declining print revenue, political instability, far-right resurgence, and ubiquitous digital platforms. This section outlines how fake news acts as a prism through which we can examine not only the role of falsehoods in contemporary media landscapes but also struggles around journalism's future as a liberal democratic institution and knowledge gatekeeper.

The idea that journalism acts as a democratic gatekeeper of information and knowledge has been prominent since at least the mid-20th century (Pearson & Kosicki, 2017), and this function is often described as core to journalists' "public and moral responsibility" (Vos, 2015, p. 9). Within journalism's "occupational ideology" (Deuze, 2005, p. 443) – i.e., discourses that shape how journalists perceive their function in society – news institutions are often defined as a "fourth estate, making democratic governance possible through the mass circulation of information and holding public institutions accountable" (Carlson, 2017, p. 35). From this position, journalists enable informed democratic debate through professional practices of finding, verifying, sorting, analysing, and delivering relevant information to the masses (Fenton, 2010; Wiik, 2010). This idealised image of journalism – also called "journalism's theory of democracy" (Gans, 2003, p. 55) – has been key to the profession's modes of operation throughout the 20th century and up until today (Fenton, 2010; Krzyzanowski, 2014; Waisbord, 2018). Increasingly, however, this democratic gatekeeping ideal and function has begun to deteriorate due to what Vos and Thomas (2019) designate as a "perfect storm of intersecting transformations" (p. 396).

Journalistic authority has been challenged across the world due to decades of commercialisation, austerity, concentration of ownership, decline of public trust, and the rise of digital tech giants (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Fenton, 2011; Fenton & Freedman, 2018; Vos & Thomas, 2019). This has reopened previously sedimented boundaries around what journalism 'is' and how it functions in liberal democracies. As Carlson (2016) notes, "journalism's status as an authoritative form of knowledge creation is not guaranteed or static, but the product of

discourses that both delimit and legitimate its cultural forms" (p. 361). Fundamentally, journalism is not a stable entity but a discursive construct shaped through shifting power relations, negotiation, and contestation (Carlson, 2016; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Krzyzanowski, 2014; Vos, 2015). Increasingly, this discursive construct faces both external and internal pressure (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Carlson, 2017; Fenton, 2009; McNair, 2017).

The rise of digital media has had complex ramifications for journalism's societal function (both real and idealised), dislocating "the availability of news, its economic structures, and the relationship between journalists and their audience" (Carlson, 2017, p. 2). In recent years, the journalistic profession has faced severe job losses as print readership continues to decline, while big tech companies like Alphabet (Google) and Meta (Facebook) take the lion's share of digital advertisement revenue (Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Mayerhöffer et al., 2022; Pickard, 2020). The result is growing precarisation among news workers across the globe (Örnebring, 2018; Pickard, 2020), as well as a decline of local and specialised news (Carson, 2019; Krzyzanowski, 2014). These deep-seated economic developments have raised concerns about the future of journalism among both scholars and media professionals (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). Some have speculated that we are witnessing the "slow death of top-down models of journalistic news coverage and information dissemination, and even of the gatekeeping model itself" (Bruns, 2011, p. 118). As social media enables ubiquitous many-to-many communication, gatekeeping gradually becomes a thing of the past. Others, in contrast, have argued that while gatekeeping is in transition, "transition is not termination" (Vos, 2015, p. 11). Although journalists face economic and technological instability, "instead of dying out, journalism is reshaping, reconceptualizing its role, and moving away from a simple gatekeeper to harvesters, managers, and curators of information" (Pearson & Kosicki, 2017, p. 1089). Such a transformation, however, raises the question of how journalists, in this potential new iteration of the job, maintain authority among millions of competing voices.

The growing technological and economic pressure on journalism has caused previously demarcated boundaries around what journalism 'is' to be reopened for negotiation and contestation (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Fenton, 2009). Journalistic autonomy is under pressure, as proprietary tech platforms and algorithms

increasingly shape how and why information becomes 'newsworthy' (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Eg & Krumsvik, 2019; Ferrer Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). As summarised by Deuze and Witschge (2020), "the digital environment has blurred the once clear distinction between the various phases of the news production process – including the gathering, verifying, reporting, editing, designing, distributing, publicising, and promotion of information" (p. 11). Among other developments, this has sparked the rise of so-called clickbait journalism – news stories optimised to prompt digital user engagement (Chakraborty et al., 2017). These changes accelerate existing processes whereby "the autonomy of journalists is dramatically challenged by external forces" (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 479).

Pressure on journalism's gatekeeping function also derives from inside the profession (Fenton & Freedman, 2018; Ferrer Conill, 2017). To become financially successful in the digital age, journalists seek out new revenue streams that rely on deliberately blurring the boundaries between news, advertisement, entertainment, and opinion. This includes hyperpartisan news that blurs boundaries between journalism and advocacy (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Heft et al., 2019), as well as native advertisement that blurs boundaries between commercial and journalistic content (Ferrer Conill, 2017). These developments raise concerns about journalism's capacity to deliver trusted information and critically scrutinise those in power (Pickard, 2020).

Hyperpartisan right-wing news outlets have been shown to play a significant role in the media landscape in the US, where they act as key disseminators of falsehoods (Benkler et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). In Europe, hyperpartisan news is less prominent, although the number of outlets has been steadily growing (Heft et al., 2019, 2021; Mayerhöffer, 2021). Two key factors behind this growth are the resurgence of far-right movements and decreasing financial barriers to creating and disseminating news through digital media (Ekman & Krzyzanowski, 2021; Faris et al., 2017; Larsson, 2019; Rae, 2021; Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). Hyperpartisan outlets often rely heavily on social media to disseminate content (Larsson, 2019), attracting clicks and engagement by deliberately challenging the boundaries around what constitutes 'news.' Some outlets, for example, allow readers to anonymously act as 'reporters' (Holt et al., 2019) and persistently present one-sided takes on current affairs (Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2022). As Paper V shows, such practices are intertwined with legacy news institutions' search for new user-based revenue streams in times of declining print sales.

As a counter-development to the blurring of boundaries between facts, ads, and opinion, journalism has also seen a growth in factchecking outlets across the globe (Cheruiyot & Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Graves, 2016; Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Since 2010, a larger number of factchecking sites have begun to emerge, often describing themselves as part of a journalistic reform movement to reinvigourate truth in journalism in times of increasing fragmentation and polarisation (Graves, 2016; Mayerhöffer et al., 2022). These outlets often seek to (re-)claim "how objectivity should be practiced" (Graves, 2016, p. 52) and directly mitigate fake news and the post-truth era (Boffey, 2019). Of particular relevance to this thesis, the Danish factchecking outlet *TjekDet* launched in 2016 with the explicit goal of fighting "against the post-factual society" (Knudsen, 2016 as cited in Skadhede, 2016). In 2018, the outlet partnered with Facebook, receiving an undisclosed annual amount to mitigate disinformation on the social media platform as part of its certified factchecking network (Knudsen, 2018). The Danish state also provided economic support for its mission (Hansen, 2022; Hedegaard, 2017). This exemplifies how debates around fake news are often intimately connected to both private and public structural transformations in and around contemporary journalism.

The rise of fake news has become intertwined with wider concerns about the state and future of journalism, politics, digital media, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracies. Some voices argue that fake news is the direct result of a decline in journalistic standards and an increase in hyperpartisan media (Amrita, 2017; Benkler et al., 2018; McNair, 2017). As the co-founder of the factchecking website Snopes, David Mikkelson, concluded in 2016: "We have a bad news problem, not a fake news problem" (Mikkelson, 2016). Journalism is no longer capable of maintaining its democratic function, this position holds, which has caused false information to flourish. In an ironic twist, Mikkelson later admitted to systematic plagiarism as part of his own factchecking practice (Murphy, 2021). Trump famously latched on to media criticism around fake news by arguing, among other things, that "somebody with aptitude and conviction should buy the FAKE NEWS and failing @nytimes [*The New York Times*] and either run it correctly or let it fold with dignity!" (Trump, 2017b). Journalism no longer functions as a trusted gatekeeper, Trump proclaimed, and so it needs to be uprooted.

In contrast to discourses that blame journalism for the rise of fake news, others argue that journalism is the only profession that could save democracy from the post-truth era. Legacy news outlets have positioned themselves as the antithesis to fake news through slogans such as "No more fake news! Only read trusted

stories" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1873) and "Truth. It's More Important Than Ever" (Johnson, 2017). Established journalistic institutions use fake news to attempt "to reassert their authority and re-legitimize their beleaguered profession by reaffirming and bolstering its institutional myth" (Koliska et al., 2020, p. 1497). As Carlson (2020) argues, this has led to fake news becoming an "ultimate other" (2020, p. 386) for established media, i.e., a signifier that condenses and amplifies anxieties around the decline of legacy journalism and rise of social media.

Fake news acts as a *critical incident* for journalism that forces media professionals to "reflect on their values and norms by reasserting the normative boundaries of their profession" (Tandoc et al., 2019, p. 677; see also Zelizer, 1992). Studying fake news, then, not only provides insights into the spread of false information but also into the deep-seated struggles over what journalism 'is' and how it develops in times of transition or in the face of the potential collapse of its gatekeeping function. So far, these connections between fake news and journalism have remained underexplored in scholarship, especially outside the US (Tandoc et al., 2019). Further research is needed on "how news media adapt their routines and redefine their role in response to misinformation… to fully grasp the role of news media in the digital age" (Mayerhöffer et al., 2022, p. 36).

As noted by Zelizer (2017), discourses around journalism and democracy often idealise the profession in ways that are ahistorical, unrepresentative, and elitist. Echoing this, Deuze and Witschge (2020) argue that too many scholars draw "conclusions about what journalism is and who journalists are" based on overly "narrow definitions of the news industry" (p. 14). They propose that researchers explore the intricacies of "journalism from the ground up – focusing on where, how, by whom, and why" reporting is done (Deuze & Witschge, 2020, p. 25). This resonates with Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), who argue scholars should investigate "what journalists think they *ought to do*, what journalists *want to do*, what journalists *really do in practice*, and what journalists *say they do*" (p. 130, original emphasis). This is especially pertinent in times when previously sedimented boundaries around journalism are reactivated and contested (Carlson & Lewis, 2015).

Following these calls for situated scholarship, this thesis applies a bottom-up perspective to journalistic boundaries and journalism's role in contemporary liberal democracies. By qualitatively analysing how fake news is mobilised to support opposing discursive positions on the state and future of journalism, the thesis – particularly through Papers III, IV, and V – shows that fake news acts as a prism

through which we can critically examine both internal and external struggles over the journalistic profession and its democratic function, a perspective that deserves more attention.

8 CASES, METHODS, THEORY, AND ETHICS

8.1 Empirical Cases

The five publications of the thesis track the rise of fake news in political and journalistic discourses. The first two papers focus on the US and UK, while the latter three focus on Denmark. This mirrors the development of fake news from a heavily debated phenomenon in the US and UK to a world-encompassing topic that is increasingly being articulated as a major threat to democracies and national security across the globe (Egelhofer et al., 2020; Kalsnes et al., 2021; Lim, 2020; Monsees, 2020, 2023; Neo, 2020).

The first two publications analyse political and journalistic debates around fake news in the US and UK following the Brexit referendum and election of President Donald Trump in 2016. In the aftermath of these events, journalists, politicians, and academics widely debated the role of fake news in determining the outcomes of these elections as well as the future of democracy (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Many claimed that the elections signified the beginning of a 'post-truth era' in which emotions would rule over facts (Ball, 2017; Norman, 2016; Rose, 2017). At the time, few voices discussed the limitations of these dystopian narratives or brought up critical and discourse theoretical perspectives. With Papers I and II, I aimed to intervene in these debates (alongside Jannick Schou, in the case of Paper II) and discuss the analytical strengths of Mouffe's concept of *agnonistic pluralism* and Laclau's concept of the *floating signifier* in the context of fake news. Drawing on widely publicised examples from the US and UK, these papers highlight the limitations of prevalent arguments around fake

news and post-truth as well as the importance of discourse theoretical perspectives.

As fake news grew in prominence across the world after 2016, researchers urged colleagues to move beyond the US and study "discourses around fake news in other media contexts" (Tandoc et al., 2019, p. 686). To contribute to this pertinent gap, I decided to undertake studies of fake news in Denmark, which remained underexplored (Kalsnes et al., 2021). This resulted in three qualitative studies situated in a Danish political and media landscape (see Papers III, IV, and V). As in other countries (Lim, 2020; Monsees, 2020), debates around fake news in Denmark have often directly referenced those in the US and UK. Accordingly, Papers III and IV connect both directly and indirectly to Papers I and II by examining Danish political and journalistic discourses that often explicitly refer to those in the US and UK. Paper V, meanwhile, differs from the others by focusing on a case of manipulation in which Danish far-right activists created their own tabloid 'news' through a digital platform called The People's Voice. Still, this study links to the other publications by exploring how journalistic authority is undermined from within the profession by new types of user-driven 'mimicked news.'

Denmark represents an interesting socio-political context for the study of fake news, as the country is generally considered to have a robust democracy due to a high level of education, strong voter turnouts, and publicly supported legacy news institutions (Kalsnes et al., 2021). The country is also considered to be resilient against disinformation campaigns (Humprecht et al., 2020). Danish citizens report a high degree of trust in traditional news media, as compared to the global average, only surpassed within the Nordic countries by Finland (Newman et al., 2021). Notwithstanding, Danish authorities have in recent years expressed grave concern about fake news undermining democratic debate and elections (Ahrens, 2018; Karkov, 2019). Leading up to the 2019 Danish national elections, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service warned of "up to a 75% likelihood of Russia actually trying to interfere" (Svendsen, 2018).

Concurrent with growing fears of fake news, the Danish news industry has experienced increasing economic hardship due to declining print sales and a lack of new digital revenue streams. This follows a global trend of decline for traditional journalistic business models, affecting all types of commercial news media, as

tech giants, such as Alphabet and Meta, dominate the advertisement market (Pickard, 2020). Print sales have declined severely in recent years, and Danish media outlets have struggled to replace lost print revenue (Kulturministeriet, 2021). While state support for legacy media institutions has kept most major news providers afloat, journalists increasingly work under precarious working conditions and express concern about the future and quality of their profession (Jørgensen, 2019). Despite negative trends, only 16% of Danes express willingness to increase public spending on journalism, and only 19% express concern about the financial state of news organisations (Newman et al., 2021).

The tension between the Danish (self-)image of democratic resilience, on the one hand, and concerns about fake news, on the other, raises important questions for empirical investigation: What role does fake news play in the Danish media landscape? How do journalists report on fake news? How and why is fake news portrayed as a threat to Danish democracy? How do Danish authorities and media institutions seek to assess and mitigate the threat of fake news? And how do journalists reflect on their own professional role in potentially preventing or contributing to fake news? Paper III addresses these questions by examining news coverage of fake news and its underlying discursive logics. Paper IV examines tensions in and around the journalistic profession in Denmark regarding how different actors articulate the relationship between fake news and journalism. Finally, Paper V critically explores user-generated content in tabloid news that destabilises previously sedimented boundaries between 'real' and 'fake' news.

In terms of their empirical timeframes, Papers III and IV focus on the 2019 Danish elections for both the European parliament and Danish national parliament. These elections represented a significant moment for Danish democracy, being the first of their kind after 2016, as fake news became a contested signifier and major topic of political and journalistic concern. Prior to the elections, analysts warned that fake news posed an imminent threat to European democracies (Boffey, 2018, 2019; Brattberg, 2019; Cerulus, 2019; Foy et al., 2019). In a national survey, 47% of Danes stated they were 'worried' or 'very worried' about fake news (KMD, 2019).

In response to the perceived threat of fake news, Danish news media created specialised editorial teams and produced hundreds of articles on the topic (see Papers III and IV). As summarised by the editor in chief at the national newspaper *Politiken*: "We see it as our task to do everything in our power to make sure the election is not decided by false profiles and fake news" (Jensen, 2019, p. 2). By

analysing both news content and qualitative interviews with journalists, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives, Papers III and IV provide insights into the discursive signification of fake news in Denmark during these important democratic events. This examination connects back to the findings from Papers I and II by showcasing how fake news – while initially a topic of domestic concern in the US and UK in 2016 – came to dominate political and journalistic agendas in Denmark.

Paper V focuses on the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*, which operates one of the most visited news websites in Denmark (Alexa, 2018). The study examines The People's Voice [Folkets Røst], which was run by *Ekstra Bladet* from 2010 to 2018. This platform enabled users to create their own letters to the editor that were close to indistinguishable from news articles by *Ekstra Bladet*'s editorial team, especially when shared on social media. Alongside so-called native advertisement, the platform represented an attempt to increase revenue by deliberately blurring established boundaries between news, ads, and opinion – a trend similarly found in other countries (Ferrer Conill, 2017). This development sparked criticism and concern about the integrity of *Ekstra Bladet* and its ability to maintain its role as a democratic watchdog (Larsen, 2019; Olsen, 2018; Pedersen, 2016).

In sum, this thesis first examines the explosive rise of fake news in public discourse in connection to the UK Brexit referendum and US national elections in 2016 (through Papers I and II). It then explores the discursive signification of fake news in the European parliament elections and Danish national elections in 2019 (through Papers III and IV). Third, and finally, the thesis explores a case of destabilisation of journalistic authority through the mimicking of 'news' in Danish tabloid media (Paper V). Taken together, the five publications offer an in-depth examination – both theoretical and empirical – of the discursive signification of fake news in contemporary struggles over the state and future of journalism, politics, technology, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy. By focusing on the geo-political contexts of the US, UK, and Denmark, the thesis contributes to critical scholarship on the global rise of fake news as a signifier, idea, and phenomenon. Following a qualitative research paradigm, it seeks to provide *transferable findings* rather than *generalisable results* (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). This entails providing context-specific insights and conclusions that contribute to a broader understanding of fake news across geo-political boundaries.

8.2 Theoretical Framework

The five publications of the thesis all draw on the Essex School of Discourse Theory, also known as post-Marxist discourse theory (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2014), post-foundational discourse theory (Marttila, 2016; Sundell, 2021), or simply discourse theory (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014; Torfing, 2005). Building on this foundation, the studies provide critical findings on discursive struggles over fake news and their democratic implications.

Originally developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2014), discourse theory approaches language not as a referential system denoting the world 'as it is' but as structured results of collective world-making efforts. They define *discourse* as "any practice establishing a relation among elements" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 91). This encompasses processes through which meaning is organised in a relational order. From a post-structuralist perspective, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) argue that signification arises from *antagonism* and *radical negativity*. Meaning arises not from a positive anchoring of what something 'is' but from a negative relation to what it 'is not' (see also Marchart, 2018). It follows that each discourse is fundamentally "a system of differences" (Laclau, 1996, p. 37) that contains traces of what has previously been excluded.

Each discourse is structured around nodal points, "privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 99). These play a central role in ascribing signification to other signifiers as well as their relational totality. Through continual processes of *sedimentation* and *reactivation*, some aspects of the world gradually come to be perceived as natural and objective, while others become subject to political contestation (Laclau, 2014). During periods of *organic crisis*, previously hegemonic discourses lose their signifying power and potentially become replaced by a new symbolic order (Laclau, 1990, 2014). While all discourses attempt to stabilise meaning and stand the test of time, no discourse can ever achieve complete stability or closure due to its fundamentally negative constitution. Since all signifiers obtain meaning through their relational positionality towards what they are not, signification can never be truly fixed. What might seem natural or unchanging at any given historical conjuncture would have been subject to antagonism in the past that could become reactivated in the future. This also means that no truth or fact can ever be universal, since "there are no facts without signification, and there is no signification without practical engagements that require norms governing our behaviour" (Laclau, 2014, p. 127).

A key aim of discourse theoretical analysis is to critically unpack how political struggles shape meaning, practices, and institutions (and vice versa) as well as "how and why particular discursive formations were constructed, stabilised, and transformed" (Torfing, 2005, p. 19). By studying processes of sedimentation and reactivation, discourse analysts seek to unravel how specific material circumstances and power relations are structured and have come to be. At the same time, discourse theory is also "genuinely critical in the sense of being simultaneously explanatory, practical, and normative" (Schou, 2016, p. 294). This means that researchers not only seek to describe and analyse social phenomena but also to critically engage with social problems and challenge hegemonic relations.

While discourse theory is generally associated with macro-level analyses (Glynos et al., 2021), it rejects "law-like models of explanation and prediction" (Howarth, 2005, p. 319). Rather than providing top-down generalisations, it offers an ontological foundation for analysing the interrelation between shifting material circumstances and wider historical relations (Laclau, 1990, 2005, 2014). Put differently, it supports critical research into the mutual constitution of micro-level practices and macro-level structures through processes of discursive contestation, negotiation, reactivation, and sedimentation.

In this thesis, I draw on discourse theory to analyse how competing discourses try to establish *hegemony* – or discursive dominance – over what counts as fake news and how this connects to wider political struggles. Based on a discourse theoretical ontology, I approach the meaning and societal role of fake news not as deriving from any universal source of signification but as the result of collective signifying practices and discursive articulations that deserve careful and critical examination. In doing so, I explore how different actors in the US, UK, and Denmark mobilise fake news to present conflicting visions for the state and future of politics, journalism, technology, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy.

I unpack how policymakers, tech companies, activists, scholars, and journalists variously define fake news, often with conflicting solutions on how to address it. This includes calls to both strengthen and dismantle legacy news institutions, to both increase and decrease collaboration between governments and tech companies, and to both return to and abandon traditional journalistic values. By

unravelling these conflicting discursive positions, I argue that fake news acts as a prism that illuminates a reactivation of previously sedimented boundaries at the core of liberal democracy. This, I argue, indicates a growing organic crisis in which previously hegemonic discourses are in decline, yet no new symbolic order has emerged to take their place (see 'Contouring an Organic Crisis').

In sum, the thesis builds on discourse theory to provide in-depth critical analyses and discussions of the following:
- How political and journalistic actors define the 'post-truth era' and why this societal diagnosis contains key democratic problems (see Paper I)
- How fake news has come to function as a *floating signifier* in contemporary political and journalistic discourses (see Papers II and IV)
- How news media construct fake news as a threat to democracy and the role of journalism in mitigating this threat (see Papers III and IV)
- How actors in and around journalism reflect on fake news in relation to the news media's function in liberal democracies (see Paper IV)
- How legacy news institutions enable new forms of manipulation by relinquishing their gatekeeping authority (see Paper V)
- How the rise of fake news in journalistic and political discourses contours an organic crisis of liberal democracies (see Papers II and V and 'Contouring an Organic Crisis').

In each of the five papers, I outline how I operationalised discourse theory within the specific context of the study. These overlapping operationalisations have been inspired by existing media and communication research. This includes discourse analytical scholarship on mediated political participation (Carpentier, 2017; Valtysson, 2014), activism (Svensson et al., 2015), racism (Askanius & Mylonas, 2015), neoliberalism (Phelan, 2014), and far-right populism (De Cleen, 2015; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017).

Methodologically, discourse theory does not provide step-by-step guidelines on how to conduct empirical analysis. Some scholars have seen this as a key point of criticism, arguing that it needs clearer "rules for how empirical discourse analysis should or should not be carried out" (Marttila, 2016, p. 8). Others, however, insist that rigid guidelines would be counterproductive to the aims of discourse theory, which are not to provide hands-on means of textual analysis but to provide ontological and political foundations for critical analysis of the production of meaning across numerous types of cases and data (Howarth, 2005; Marchart, 2018). Still, as Torfing (2005, p. 25) argues, "discourse theory must prove its

ability to produce new insights through problem-driven studies of specific discourses that permit the analytical categories and the empirical analysis of texts (in a wide sense of the term) to hegemonise each other." It is important, in other words, to be both well-situated empirically and transparent about research designs and data collection processes. Following this call, I describe in the next section how I sampled and analysed the studied news content and qualitative interviews.

8.3 Data and Methods

Empirically, the thesis draws on news content as well as semi-structured, qualitative interviews. Papers I and II discuss empirical examples from journalistic and political discourses around fake news in the US and UK, which were collected during 2016 and 2017 in an open-ended fashion by closely following public debates in the two countries. Papers III, IV, and V revolve around data from a Danish context that were collected systematically through three different research designs.

Paper III examines 288 news articles from 10 national Danish news outlets, systematically sampled from an archive of 857 articles collected through InfoMedia, a database of all major news publications in the Nordic countries. The archive was compiled using four overlapping search terms: 'fake news,' 'falske nyheder' [fake news in Danish], 'misinformation,' and 'desinformation' [disinformation in Danish]. The final sample of 288 articles was selected based on four criteria, of which at least one should be fulfilled:

> articles had to be about the Danish elections; (2) articles had to be about the
> threat of fake news towards Denmark and/or the EU; (3) articles had to be
> about specific cases of fake news (incl. mis- and disinformation) related to
> Danish politics; and (4) articles had to be about someone in Denmark accusing
> someone else in Denmark of spreading/being fake news. Of the excluded news
> pieces, a majority revolved around foreign politics (especially the US).
>
> (Paper III, p. 130)

The qualitative analysis of the 288 articles, which revolved around three overlapping phases, drew on discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014) and the concept of (discursive) *logics* (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, see Paper III).

Paper IV analyses 42 editorials from 10 national Danish news outlets as well as 34 qualitative interviews with journalists, government officials, social media company representatives, and professionals cited as experts on fake news in Danish media. The 42 editorials overlap with the 288 articles from Paper III, though the inclusion of qualitative interviews enables a critical analysis of tensions between the public positions of news institutions, on the one hand, and reflections based on personal experience from actors in and around journalism, on the other. Drawing on discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), this analysis also involved three overlapping phases (see Paper IV).

Paper V analyses 50 letters to the editor from The People's Voice run by the Danish tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*. These 50 letters to the editor represent the most 'viral' content from the platform, i.e., the letters that received the most likes, comments, and shares on social media. Through a qualitative research design informed by discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), the article finds that far-right activists used The People's Voice to create their own manipulative 'news' about immigration. It examines the rhetorical and visual tactics used by these activists to mimic professionally produced content from *Ekstra Bladet*, making it difficult to distinguish tabloid news from 'mimicked news.'

Overall, the five publications of the thesis share both a qualitative methodology and a discourse theoretical foundation that informs their connected yet distinct explorations of fake news, politics, journalism, digital media, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy in the US, UK, and Denmark. As they are the results of an organic journey rather than a pre-meditated research plan, their strength lies in providing multiple critical entry points into the discursive signification of fake news and its wider implications.

8.4 Researcher Positionality

Conducting qualitative research and discourse theoretical analysis involves continuous reflection on the relationship between oneself and the topic at hand. As noted, discourse theory embraces a normative research foundation that not only seeks to describe the world but also promote social change. Instead of laying claim to any singular or universal account of reality, the aim of the research is to provide a transparent basis for its conclusions and critical suggestions for transformation as well as the researcher's role in shaping the results (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2005).

The five publications in the thesis represent the outcome of a journey that has not only involved studying fake news and its role in contemporary discourses but also engaging with journalists, government officials, academics, and news audiences in Denmark, Sweden, the US, the UK, and beyond. Fundamentally, the thesis would not have been possible without this public engagement, since it enabled both access to research participants and continuous input for the iterative development of research aims and questions about the relationship between fake news, politics, journalism, and liberal democracy.

During my time as a PhD student, I have contributed as an 'expert news source' to more than 50 journalistic publications on fake news as well as to radio and TV broadcasts in Denmark and Sweden. These contributions have put me in contact with numerous journalists, especially in my home country of Denmark, and have given me insight into the ways in which news institutions approach the topic of fake news. This allowed me to continually refine my research questions and ideas in response to both research-based and practice-based knowledge. Some of the journalists later participated in my PhD project as interviewees (see Paper IV), something they might not have prioritised if I had not previously helped them. Other interviewees agreed to participate in my research after meeting me at The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Network on Disinformation, of which I became a member in 2018. As anchor points for our conversations during interviews, participants would often mention previous interactions they had had with me as well as previous news pieces to which I had contributed. This underlines how findings in qualitative interviews are always shaped through interviewer-interviewee relations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and how this thesis has been moulded and transformed through overlapping engagements with scholarship, media, and politics.

In addition to contributing to news coverage of fake news, I have also been continuously involved in debates and discussions about how (or whether) to politically 'solve' fake news. Among other engagements, I have given invited talks at the Swedish Ministry of Culture and presented to the Council of Europe and the Danish Minister of Defence. This policy-oriented engagement led me to gradually develop an increasingly critical stance towards prominent policy solutions, such as anti-fake news laws and intelligence agency task forces. In my view, these do not significantly mitigate the problems of disinformation while

problematically limiting freedom of expression and democratic accountability. My position on these issues has been guided by my research findings, many of which are part of this thesis (however, see also Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Farkas et al., 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2019, 2020). At the same time, my research aims have also been influenced by this public engagement, as it has sparked new ideas and critical questions.

Another layer of positionality that has influenced this PhD thesis is the fact that I am a White, cis-male Danish citizen. As Mejia et al. (2018) succinctly point out in their article 'White Lies: A Racial History of (Post)Truth,' scholarship and journalism around fake news have tended to presume "a universal (White) subject as the victim of disinformation" (Mejia et al., 2018, p. 113). Solutions to fake news have also tended to revolve around the strengthening of (White, male) rational experts (Mejia et al., 2018). Being a White cis male in this context has likely contributed to both journalists and policy makers perceiving me as worthy of being invited to policy debates. It has, in other words, likely made them see me as 'part of the solution.' Throughout the research process, I have sought to critically reflect on this issue and to draw attention to marginalised voices in my scholarship (see Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

Overall, it is impossible to separate my overlapping roles as a researcher, news source, opinion maker, policy advisor, Danish citizen, and White cis male from the results of this thesis, as these intertwined positionalities have shaped the underlying research aims as well as their reception by research subjects. This, of course, does not imply that the thesis is 'tainted,' 'biased,' or 'subjective.' Rather, it means that the thesis does not seek to provide universal results detached from local contexts or from me as a researcher, which is simply impossible. Instead, the aim is to provide transparent, empirically substantiated, context-specific, qualitative, and theoretical findings that enable critical insights and discussions about the relationship between fake news, politics, digital media, journalism, and liberal democracy, with relevance beyond the immediate context(s) of the thesis.

8.5 Ethical Considerations

The five publications of the PhD thesis have involved little potential harm to research subjects and have not required ethical pre-approval in accordance with Swedish regulations. Nonetheless, the research has involved ethical considerations regarding informed consent, privacy, transparency, and data handling, which I will outline in the following.

According to the Swedish Act (2003: 460) concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans, social scientific research needs ethical pre-approval if it seeks to affect research subjects physically or psychologically and/or draw on sensitive personal data. The latter is defined under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as "data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs; trade-union membership," as well as "health-related data" and "data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation" (European Commission, 2022). This PhD project, which studies news content and interviews with professionals in and around journalism, has not sought to affect research subjects physically or mentally and does not rely on produce sensitive personal data. Accordingly, pre-approval was neither needed nor applicable.

To conduct qualitative interviews, I obtained informed consent from all research participants, ensuring that they knew about the aims of my research, their role in the project, potential harms, data handling, and their right to withdraw (see Paper IV). In doing so, I followed prevailing guidelines for interview research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Shamoo & Resnik, 2015).

A key ethical dilemma in social scientific scholarship revolves around the need to balance confidentiality with transparency. As Shamoo and Resnik (2015) write, "The principle of openness… instructs investigators to share data and samples as widely as possible to promote the progress of science. However, sharing data and samples may threaten confidentiality if not done properly" (p. 266). In research based on qualitative interviews, the norm is to anonymise interviewees' identities to protect their privacy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Some scholars, however, are critical of this practice, maintaining that "anonymity may serve as

an excuse for the researcher in retaining the privilege of controlling and disseminating the information about the study" (Ibid., p. 33).

Originally, I wanted to include the personal identities of interviewees in research publications when possible (see Paper IV). This would make the research more transparent and accountable by enabling readers to know who participated in the study and which news outlets, government branches, and social media companies they represented. It would also enable a discussion of the findings in relation to the specific positions and institutions of the interviewees. For these reasons, I included two options in the informed consent form given to interviewees, enabling them to choose freely whether they wanted to participate anonymously or with their identity publicly known in research publications. 32 out of 34 interviewees agreed to have their identity publicly known. During the data analysis phase, however, I decided to anonymise all personal identities to follow the prevailing norm in interview research and avoid potential challenges for publication. As a result, I only provide general descriptions of interviewees' professional positions (e.g., 'Respondent 8, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper').

9 CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

The overall knowledge contribution of this PhD thesis lies in its critical examination of the relationship between fake news, politics, journalism, digital media, and liberal democracy in a time of profound economic instability, political upheaval, far-right resurgence, and increasingly powerful tech giants. Fake news, as this thesis highlights, acts as a prism through which we can critically examine contemporary struggles over what journalism, politics, and liberal democracy fundamentally 'are' and ought to be at a moment where previously sedimented boundaries are once again opened for radical questioning and contestation. As a key signifier in contemporary discursive struggles, different actors mobilise fake news to attack perceived enemies and (re-)claim authority over truth. Fake news functions as an "ultimate other" (Carlson, 2020, p. 386) against which various discursive projects try to legitimise new hegemonic relations. Studying fake news, then, allows us not only to obtain a better understanding of what counts as 'fake' in journalism and politics but also a deeper understanding of what even counts as 'politics' and 'journalism' at a historical conjecture in which these signifiers face immense pressure.

The five publications in this thesis engage with a series of interrelated empirical cases, aims, and gaps. The following sections discuss their shared contribution to our understanding of fake news and its implications for research, journalism, and politics. The first section addresses the overarching research question and sub-questions of the thesis, arguing that the rise of fake news signifies the escalation of an organic crisis of liberal democracies (see 'Contouring an Organic Crisis'). The second section reflects on the implications of the findings, not only academically but also in relation to politics and journalism (see 'Implications for Research, Journalism, and Policy'). Finally, the third section outlines scholarly gaps that deserve further critical attention going forward (see 'Avenues of Future Research').

9.1 Contouring an Organic Crisis

Through its theoretical and empirical investigations, the thesis addresses the over-arching research question of how and with what consequences fake news has become central – as phenomenon, signifier, and perceived threat – to discursive struggles over politics, journalism, digital media, knowledge gatekeeping, and liberal democracy.

The thesis does so by first examining the discursive signification of the 'post-truth era,' which has become central to discourses around both fake news and the future of liberal democracies (SQ1, Paper I). Based on a discourse theoretical analysis, I argue that the notion of a post-truth era not only contains a description of the current state of liberal democracy but also a glorification of a specific ideal of how society ought to be structured. By lamenting the post-truth era, politicians, journalists, and scholars implicitly idealise a 'truth era' in which policymaking first and foremost revolved around Truth with capital 'T.' This, I argue, neglects the fundamental role of popular dispute and agonism in democratic processes, potentially undermining key aspects of the democratic tradition.

Second, I show (alongside Jannick Schou) how fake news has come to function as a floating signifier in contemporary political discourses that is used by opposing political actors to try to (re-)hegemonise notions of truth and knowledge gatekeeping (SQ2, Paper II). We argue that the rise of fake news as a floating signifier indicates a reactivation of previously sedimented boundaries within liberal democracies – a sign of the waning hegemonic power of the liberal democratic symbolic order. Different political projects struggle to control who gets to act as a truth-sayer in times of growing uncertainty about the future of liberal democracy as a system of governance.

Third, I turn to news coverage of fake news, examining the discursive logics that undergird news reporting on the topic (SQ3, Paper III). Here, I find five discursive logics that undergird how journalists articulate fake news as a threat to liberal democracy: (1) a logic of anticipation, (2) a logic of exteriorisation, (3) a logic of technologisation, (4) a logic of securitisation, and (5) a logic of pre-legitimation. In news media, fake news is often described as an existential threat to liberal democracy that is intimately connected to wider fears related to foreigners, technological change, and the decline of legacy news institutions. As such, fake news acts as a placeholder for broader anxieties about the end of liberal democratic hegemony.

Fourth, I examine how actors in and around established news outlets – including editors, reporters, government officials, researchers, and social media company representatives – articulate the relationship between fake news and journalism (SQ4, Paper IV). Drawing on both editorials and qualitative interviews, I find a series of tensions in terms of how different actors articulate fake news and its connection to journalism. While some argue that fake news de facto derives from outside journalism, others view the rise of fake news as intertwined with growing problems within the news industry that are related to a decline of specialised knowledge, the growing speed with which work must be completed, and a lack of willingness to admit mistakes. Similarly, while some argue that fake news calls for the strengthening of traditional journalistic values and institutions, others view the phenomenon as a catalyst for journalistic reform.

Fifth, and finally, I highlight – alongside Christina Neumayer – how boundaries between 'real' and 'fake' news are challenged from within the news industry (SQ5, Paper V). In times of drastically declining print sales and economic crisis for legacy news institutions across the world (Pickard, 2020; Waisbord, 2018), Neumayer and I show how a Danish tabloid newspaper supported online manipulation through user-generated 'news' promoting racist worldviews. The study highlights how, by allowing users to create their own 'news' that is visually indistinguishable from that created by professional journalists, pressure on journalistic authority not only derives from the realm of politics – as in the case of Trump accusing news outlets of being 'fake news' (Lischka, 2019) – but also from within journalistic institutions.

Taken together, I argue that the thesis contours the discursive signification of fake news for an *organic crisis* in liberal democracies: a crisis characterised by deep-seated struggles over previously sedimented boundaries around politics, truth, news, and knowledge. As a response to decades of globalisation, commercialisation, digitalisation, neoliberal stagnation, declining trust, and far-right resurgence (Crouch, 2011; Fenton, 2018; Mouffe, 2000; Rancière, 2014; Streeck, 2014, 2016), the established symbolic orders of liberal democratic politics and knowledge gatekeeping have begun to deteriorate, leading to a struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects for dominance. While some rally behind attacks on legacy news institutions and the dismantling of liberal democratic politics, others call for the restoration and strengthening of traditional knowledge

gatekeepers and liberal order. At the same time, profound economic troubles for the news industry are causing growing internal pressure on journalistic authority and the boundaries between 'real' and 'fake' news.

Fake news, this thesis shows, has become integral to discursive struggles over who has the power to define and control knowledge gatekeeping in liberal democracies. As part of these struggles, the very meaning of fake news is twisted and pulled in multiple directions as opposing discourses present conflicting visions for the future of truth, news, and human co-habitation. Despite differences, however, opposing discourses often share a nostalgic longing for a 'simpler' time when authority over truth was more centralised and consolidated. We see this exemplified in Trump's slogan to 'make America great again' – a nostalgic longing for a utopian state of White male authority. We also see this nostalgia in calls for a return to a 'truth era' where facts really 'meant something' – often synonymous with a time in which (White, male) journalists and intellectuals had more political influence. Opposing discourses, in other words, often clash on the meaning of fake news yet deploy similar sanitised versions of history to try to pave a new hegemonic path into the future.

As conceptualised by Gramsci (1992), an organic crisis represents a time when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (p. 276). It is a period "of deep social dissolution" (Laclau, 2014, p. 136) during which one hegemonic order is in decline, and no new symbolic order has taken its place. Such periods are characterised by profound uncertainty and instability as conflicting political projects attempt to fill the void left by a previously dominant system. As Laclau writes, this gives rise to floating signifiers: "the 'floating' dimension [of signifiers] becomes most visible in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast" (Laclau, 2005, p. 132). In tandem with a decaying hegemonic order, sedimented systems of meaning are reopened for negotiation and struggle. During such times, "key signifiers, such as 'democracy,' 'freedom,' and 'equality,'" often become "unusually available for multiple alternative articulations" (Smith, 1998, p. 164). Different discourses, in other words, present opposing meaning ascriptions to previously hegemonised signifiers due to their growing discursive instability.

Numerous scholars have argued that liberal democracies are undergoing a prolonged organic crisis (Ang, 2021; Babic, 2020; Gill, 2016; Jessop, 2017;

Robinson, 2019). This crisis is not characterised by sudden upheaval but by a slow and gradual decline: "a multidimensional, transformative process of unravelling that originates in intrinsic contradictions and tensions within the prevailing social order" (Ang, 2021, p. 601). For decades, economic growth rates in highly industrialised capitalist societies have been declining, alongside voter participation and trust in authorities (Dahlgren, 2018; Fenton, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2021; Streeck, 2016). At the same time, global income inequality and environmental destruction have been on the rise, with political leaders offering few solutions to reverse these trends (W. Brown, 2015; Gill, 2016). Trust in legacy news institutions has similarly been declining in many counties, as "mainstream media are seen to be ever more closely entangled with elite power" (Fenton & Freedman, 2018, p. 1).

Several scholars argue that the organic crisis of liberal democracies is gradually escalating (Ang, 2021; Jessop, 2017; Robinson, 2019). Diverse events, such as the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the election of Trump, the Brexit referendum, heat waves, forest fires, the Covid-19 pandemic, and increasingly powerful far-right movements across the word have all been highlighted as mounting 'morbid symptoms' – to use the words of Gramsci (1992, p. 276) – of a dying hegemonic order (Ang, 2021; Jessop, 2017; Robinson, 2019; Streeck, 2014).

The rise of fake news as a floating signifier, I argue, represents another escalation of an organic crisis across liberal democracies. Due to the growing pressure on traditional knowledge gatekeepers caused by a mixture of decades of commodification of news environments, monopolisation of both digital and traditional media, far-right resurgence, political instability, economic inequality, and decreasing public trust in news and politics in many parts of the world (Carlson, 2017; Fisher et al., 2020; Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Pickard, 2020), different hegemonic projects are trying to (re-)claim the fundamental meaning and function of news, truth, and knowledge gatekeeping. Politicians accuse journalists and opponents of spreading fake news to assert dominance over who should have authority as truth speakers. Journalistic institutions mobilise fake news to attempt to reaffirm and regain their foundational myth of being essential for democratic stability. Political activists try to claim authority as news producers by latching onto established news media's search for new revenue models based on user-generated content. At the same time, different actors within and around the journalistic profession mobilise fake news to present conflicting visions of what journalism is and ought to be in times of growing pressure on journalistic boundaries and authority. In my view, this shows that struggles over fake news not only revolve

around false information but also around the very future of liberal democracy as a form of human co-habitation. This, I argue, explains why fake news has become one of the most contested concepts of our time. In a sense, its role has become that of the canary in the coalmine of liberal democratic order.

It is impossible to estimate how the organic crisis of liberal democracies will culminate. As Ang (2021) argues, "we have no way of knowing what is going to happen next even as crisis events may accumulate in rapid succession" (p. 610). Some scholars argue that despite the weakening grip of (neo-)liberal hegemony, it could take decades before a new, dominant symbolic order might be established (Crouch, 2011; Streeck, 2016). Climate destruction and global wars could potentially damage the conditions for human habitation irreparably before that occurs (W. Brown, 2019; Servigne & Stevens, 2020; Tsing, 2015). On the flipside, the organic crisis could also spark change for the better (Ang, 2021).

While the slow decline of (neo-)liberal hegemony could usher in a new era of authoritarian rule, state censorship, continued climate destruction, and devastating world wars, it could also spark new democratic alternatives to the status quo that are rooted in inclusivity, participation, and egalitarianism. The rise of fake news as a floating signifier indicates that traditional knowledge gatekeepers, such as legacy news institutions, are in a state of profound dislocation and that no discursive project currently has the power to hegemonise the meaning of either fake or real news. Who will win the raging discursive struggles over these domains will depend, among other things, on how historic centres of power cope with waning authority as well as how people across the world organise and demand social change.

This thesis contributes new insights to the discursive signification of fake news by connecting this concept, phenomenon, idea, and perceived threat to wider developments at the present historical conjecture. By showcasing how different actors in the US, UK, and Denmark try to (re-)hegemonise the meaning of fake news, it adds to our understanding of an organic crisis of liberal democracies, which has been recognised by numerous scholars. As the following section highlights, these findings have implications not only for researchers but also for journalists and policymakers.

9.2 Implications for Research, Journalism, and Policy

The five publications of this PhD thesis highlight several limitations and problems with existing approaches to fake news across scholarship, journalism, and politics. In this section, I will briefly reflect on the implications of these findings for each of these respective domains.

In the context of scholarship on fake news, the thesis shows that researchers have tended to neglect critical and discourse theoretical perspectives, leaving notable gaps in the literature. While extensive research engages with fake news as a new form of digital content to be mapped, measured, defined, detected, and potentially removed, only a few scholars critically examine the role of fake news as a contested concept in journalism and politics and its connection to a wider organic crisis of liberal democracy (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Wright, 2021). This calls for further scholarship into fake news as a *floating signifier* across digital media, journalism, and politics in different geo-political contexts.

While further research is still needed, it is important to highlight that emergent scholarship is exploring these pertinent topics in such far-flung locales as Germany (Monsees, 2020), Austria (Egelhofer et al., 2022), South Africa (Wasserman, 2020), Kenya (Tully, 2022), Australia (Carson et al., 2021), Malaysia (Lim, 2020), Cambodia (Neo, 2020), Taiwan (Rauchfleisch et al., 2022), and the US (Bratich, 2020; Carlson, 2020; Creech, 2020; Rossini et al., 2021). This line of work shows that fake news is often mobilised with opposing meaning ascriptions as part of political struggles, in addition to being a "negatively charged buzzword" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 105). Legacy news institutions use the fake news debate to try to retain "their authoritative status as gatekeeper of truth-telling" (Bratich, 2020, p. 316) and to promote "a general wariness toward digital media that props up traditional news sources as reliable" (Carlson, 2020, p. 386; see also Papers III and IV). At the same time, fake news is used by lawmakers in many parts of the world to "justify the passing of broad-reaching legislation and curbs on free speech that are construed as aligned with global democratic norms" (Neo, 2020, p. 1919). To expand this developing line of critical research, more work is needed from both historical and policy-oriented perspectives (as I will elaborate upon in the next section).

In the context of political theory, this thesis adds to the existing scholarship on the growing organic crisis of liberal democracies (see Gill, 2016; Jessop, 2016, 2017; Stewart, 2022; Streeck, 2014, 2016). It does so by showing how the rise of

fake news as a floating signifier plays into wider struggles over the future of liberal democracy at a time when previously hegemonic institutions and signifiers are facing growing pressure and contestation. Rather than simply revolving around falsehoods in contemporary media landscapes, fake news has become central – as a phenomenon, signifier, and perceived threat – for opposing hegemonic projects that present conflicting visions for human co-habitation. This includes far-right authoritarian visions of 'making society great again' through the dismantling of liberal democratic knowledge gatekeepers and elections (W. Brown, 2019; Lentin & Titley, 2011; Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017) as well as liberal-centric visions of returning to a 'truth era' (see Paper I). By analysing the discursive signification of fake news, the thesis thus contributes to critical political research into the waning (neo-)liberal hegemony in the 21st century.

In terms of policy responses to fake news, the thesis highlights the core limitations of prominent solutions that revolve around banning or removing falsehoods. As a floating signifier in contemporary discourses, fake news represents one of the most contested concepts of our time. This implies that policy solutions seeking to ban or restrict fake news can easily be (mis-)appropriated to serve the interests of those in power. Political bans on fake news can, in other words, easily be used to target and silence perceived opponents and critical journalists. Such solutions have become increasingly prominent in recent years; political leaders from across the world have limited freedom of speech under the pretext of stopping fake news in countries such as Kenya, the Philippines, Venezuela, Malaysia, Singapore, Hungary, and Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Lim, 2020; Monsees, 2020; Neo, 2021; Tenove, 2020; Tully, 2022). Human rights groups have called this a disaster for critical journalism and democratic development (Henley, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Lourdes, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2017a). This thesis fervently opposes anti-fake news laws and supports both scholarly and activist contestation and interventions to reverse such anti-democratic tendencies. Banning fake news will not put an end to falsehoods but will simply increase already existing inequalities, as those in power are able to silence political dissent and critical scrutiny. To mitigate fake news and disinformation, policy solutions must be firmly rooted in the democratic tradition, placing political participation and egalitarianism before any singular vision of Truth (with a capital 'T'). This means strengthening citizens' ability to freely access reliable

information, critically scrutinise political and corporate centres of power, and participate in real democratic deliberation.

Finally, in relation to the realm of journalism, the thesis showcases how legacy news institutions often one-sidedly designate fake news as a threat derived from outside established journalism and politics. In doing so, journalists risk neglecting manipulation from within both their own institutions and domestic politics. To support democratic participation and debate, journalistic institutions must uphold high standards of error correction and oppose new formats that deliberately blur the boundaries between news, ads, and opinion. The findings of this thesis point towards a deficit in the news industry in this regard, as news editors are reluctant to critically look inwards and question the notion that fake news exclusively derives from foreign 'Others' (see Papers III, IV, and V). This calls for critical reflection and public service reforms within the journalistic profession.

In sum, the findings of this thesis have implications not only for researchers but also for journalists and policymakers, as fake news continues to dominate policy agendas and news headlines across the world. This, of course, does not suggest that the thesis contains final answers to questions about how to mitigate the threats of political manipulation or how journalists should ideally approach fake news. Rather, I hope that the thesis will contribute to a broader democratic conversation about how to support and strengthen political participation and democratic debate in times of journalistic decline, growing anti-democratic tendencies, and an organic crisis at the heart of liberal democracies. I think the most important thing to remember going forward is that democracy is not a stable or secure entity that we can ever take for granted. To protect and strengthen this system of cohabitation, we must continuously fight to ensure that democratic institutions – including journalism – support political participation, marginalised voices, critical scrutiny of centres of power, egalitarian access to information, and popular sovereignty. Doing so will require both continuous political engagement as well as further critical research into the state and future of journalism, media, and liberal democracy, as I will unfold in the following.

9.3 Avenues of Future Research

Presenting findings is only one part of scholarship. It is equally important to point ahead and identify novel avenues of research. With a fast-paced and world-spanning topic like fake news, there are certainly still issues and problems that require further critical attention. Accordingly, I would like to briefly touch upon four important directions for future research.

First, I argue that more critical scholarship is needed on the relationship between fake news and journalism, which remains underexplored in numerous geo-political contexts. As shown in this thesis, news outlets in Denmark mobilise fake news to legitimise a longing for 'the good old days' when journalism had more authority over what counted as news and knowledge (see Papers III and IV). At the same time, some journalists use fake news to call for change and reform within the journalistic profession (see Paper IV). Exploring these tensions in further geographical contexts could provide new insights into the contingency of journalistic authority and contemporary struggles to (re-)hegemonise knowledge gatekeeping. This could contribute to emergent research in this area (Carlson, 2020; Lim, 2020; Monsees, 2023; Rauchfleisch et al., 2022).

Second, the political consequences of discourses around fake news and post-truth deserve further critical examination. On all inhabited continents, political leaders have implemented measures – most notably so-called anti-fake news laws – to try to 'solve' the post-truth era (Farkas & Schou, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Often, these solutions have (unintentionally or intentionally) exacerbated anti-democratic tendencies by limiting the ability of journalists and activists to scrutinise those in power, effectively quelling political dissent (Mchangama & Fiss, 2019). So far, the implications of these developments have largely been overlooked by researchers, except for a few cases (Lim, 2020; Neo, 2020). More research is needed on how fake news is mobilised to legitimise political solutions across the world and how such solutions affect the state of democratic participation.

Third, more scholarship is needed that engages head-on with questions of how to tackle fake news and disinformation in ways that are rooted in the democratic tradition, with an emphasis on popular sovereignty, egalitarianism, and political

participation (Mouffe, 2000). Instead of focusing solely on the removal of 'bad' content, which has become the norm across academia, journalism, and politics, we need to experiment with solutions that revolve around further involvement of local communities in democratic processes. For this, action research or participatory design research might be useful starting points, as these traditions emphasise the importance of inclusion and participation in developing socio-material solutions to collective problems. This stands in contrast to most current proposed and implemented solutions to fake news and post-truth, which often build on top-down imaginaries about how to protect 'misinformed masses' who do not know what is best for them (Farkas & Schou, 2019).

Fourth, and finally, there is a need for historical explorations of the relationship between falsehoods, manipulation, politics, and journalism. In existing research, fake news is often articulated as a distinctly novel phenomenon, neglecting how, for example, state and corporate propaganda have had a strong presence in public discourse throughout the 20th century (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Rosenfeld, 2019). By situating our present democratic moment in a historical perspective, researchers, journalists and, not least, policymakers could obtain a better understanding of both contemporary problems and potential solutions as well as their relation to the wider organic crisis of liberal democracies.

Overall, there are multiple avenues of research around fake news, politics, journalism, and knowledge gatekeeping that deserve further careful and critical attention. I look forward to further contributing to addressing these pertinent knowledge gaps in the future.

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PUBLICATIONS

11 PAPER I – A CASE AGAINST THE POST-TRUTH ERA: REVISITING MOUFFE'S CRITIQUE OF CONSENSUS-BASED DEMOCRACY

11.1 Introduction

The rapid rise of *fake news* as a ubiquitous term in global politics has caused widespread debate in democratic societies concerning the distinction between true and false. A number of scholars and journalists have argued that we might be entering a *post-truth* or *post-factual* era.[1] In 2016, post-truth was even named *word of the year* by Oxford Dictionaries, defining the concept as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Based on this societal diagnosis, analysts have concluded that facts are moving to the background of contemporary politics. Politicians no longer concern themselves with the distinction between fake and real, making democracy shift from a rational to an emotional political system.[2]

If we consider this characterization of the post-truth era, one aspect of contemporary politics appears paradoxical: rather than neglecting facts, it seems that democracy is increasingly saturated with disputes over what counts as "true," "real," "false," and "fake." Political actors routinely label their opponents as frauds, while claiming to be the bearers of truth themselves. As U.S. President, Donald Trump, exemplifies, terms such as *fake news* have become a means of bolstering authority and attacking perceived enemies. It has become a way of obtaining and enforcing dominance in the political landscape. Facts are not simply dismissed. As part of a much more complex development, the very

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[1] Willian Davies, "The Age of Post-Truth Politics," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html; Jonathan Freedland, "Post-Truth Politicians Such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are No Joke," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2016/may/13/boris-johnson-donald-trump-post-truth-politician; Fabio Giglietto, Laura Iannelli, Luca Rossi, and Augusto Valeriani, "Fakes, News and the Election: A New Taxonomy for the Study of Misleading Information within the Hybrid Media System," *Convegno AssoComPol* December (2016):1–41, http://doi.org/10.3386/w19846; Kathleen Higgins, "Post-Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Nature* 540 (2016): 9, http://doi.org/10.1038/540009a; Brian McNair, "After Objectivity?: Schudson's Sociology of Journalism in the Era of Post-Factuality," *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 10 (2017): 1–16, http://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1347893; Matthew Norman, "Whoever Wins the US Presidential Election, We've Entered a Post-truth World– There's No Going Back Now," *The Independent*, November 8, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/us-election-2016-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-who-wins-post-truth-world-no-going-back-a7404826.html.

[2] "Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie," *The Economist*, September 10, 2016, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/09/10/art-of-the-lie; Luciano Floridi, "Fake News and a 400-Year-Old Problem: We Need to Resolve the 'Post-Truth' Crisis," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/fake-news-echo-chamber-ethics-infosphere-internet-digital.

meaning or interpretation of the term *facts* seems to have become the epicenter of political struggles. If this is the case, we might consider whether the notions of the "post-truth" or "post-factual" era truly encapsulate the current state of democratic politics.

This chapter argues that there is more to the story than what is often told: that facts are not becoming obsolete, but rather highly politicized. The term *fake news* has become a rhetorical weapon, increasingly mobilized by political actors to attack their opponents. As a consequence, the notion of "fake" shifts from a question of information validity to a question of political control: who gets to draw the line between "fake" and "real"? And who gets to establish themselves as authorities and dismiss others as "fakes"? Opposing political actors propose incompatible answers to these questions.[3] The ubiquity of terms such as *fake news* thus becomes detached from the actual amount of false information in circulation. *Fake* becomes a placeholder for power and dominance—a means of delegitimizing conflicting ideas. This has fundamental implications for the way in which we can assess the current state of democratic politics. More importantly, it changes the way in which we can prescribe a viable future trajectory for democracy as a political system. To understand why this is the case, we need to delve into democracy's innermost logics of operation.

11.2 Agonistic Pluralism and the Critique of Consensus-Based Democracy

Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism builds on the fundamental premise that democracy—as a political system—should not strive towards consensus based on rational discussion. This is due to the fact that "any social objectivity is ultimately political,"[4] meaning that any seemingly "neutral" or "objective" solution to any social issue will always materialize as the result of power relations. All human norms, policies, and mechanisms of control, derive from political struggles between conflicting discourses. No procedure, decision, or consensus can arise from pure rational thought, as all "agreements in opinions" must first

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[3] Johan Farkas & J. Schou, "Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism, and the Politics of Falsehood," *Javonst - The Public*, *Javnost – The Public* 25, No. 3 (2018): 298-314. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463047

[4] Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Political Science Series* 72 (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000): 13, http://doi.org/10.2307/40971349.

rely on "agreement in forms of life."[5] There is no truly neutral, rational or objective outcome, as neutrality cannot exist independent of human consciousness. Indeed, the very notion of neutrality is fully contingent upon human existence—an argument Mouffe derives from Wittgenstein.[6] What might appear as politically objective at any given moment in time will thus always rest on the exclusion of opposing ideas and worldviews. And what might appear as unanimous agreement will always be a manifestation of one discourse dominating over others (i.e. *hegemony*). Following this line of argument, Mouffe contends that politicians, scholars, and citizens must all "give up the dream of a rational consensus, which entails the fantasy that we could escape from our human form of life."[7]

To Mouffe, consensus-based democratic ideals rely on a fundamental misconception about democracy's justification of existence. Their principal error lies in a failure to acknowledge "the impossibility of finding rational, impartial solutions to political issues but also the integrative role that conflict plays in modern democracy."[8] Democratic institutions, Mouffe argues, should acknowledge and accommodate the contingency of political decision-making and sustain the inherent struggles that shape democratic societies.[9] As in all political systems, democracies contain a multitude of conflicting voices, all constructing their collective identities around divergent agendas and perceived enemies. The core value of a democracy lies in its ability to give voice to these opposing groups and mitigate between them. What distinguishes democratic politics, then, from say a dictatorship is *not* the degree of consensus it can produce, but rather the degree of accepted disagreement it can contain. To rephrase this slightly: democracy's strength lies in its ability to accommodate crosscutting goals and conflicting worldviews, refusing to suppress opposition "by imposing an authoritarian order."[10]

Instead of idealizing objectivity and consensus, Mouffe asserts that democracy's key goal should be to foster accepted disagreement between conflicting groups. Democratic institutions should serve to soften hostilities between perceived enemies, ideally making them see each other as "somebody whose ideas we combat

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[5] Ibid., 11.

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

[7] Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy," 12.

[8] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 30-31.

[9] Ibid.; Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy."

[10] Mouffe, *On the Political, 30.*

but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question."[11] She conceptualizes this as a transformation from *antagonistic enemies* into *agonistic adversaries*. To Mouffe, consensus-based ideals fail to recognize the significance of this transformational process. This not only represents a flaw, she argues, but also a potential threat to the very foundation of democracy as a political system. By putting objectivity, rationality, and agreement at the center of democracy, consensus-based ideals reinforce what Mouffe defines as a "post-political *zeitgeist*" (original emphasis).[12] From within this worldview, conflicting groups and ideas are seen as an obstacle for democratic decision-making rather than its constitutive core. By idealizing consensus over compromise, objectivity over opposition, the post-political zeitgeist neglects how *all* societal outcomes derive from power relations. This potentially undermines democracy's functioning, as hegemonic discourses become presented as stable and unchallengeable "truths" instead of contingent results of political struggles. Agonistic conflict is relegated to the margins of society, perceived as a disturbing element instead of democracy's cornerstone.

According to Mouffe, democratic institutions should mitigate between groups and make visible how each and every "objective" outcome is always *as* political as the conflicting ideas they suppress. Accordingly, institutions should *not* claim to operate based on any kind of 'true' or 'objective' mode of organization. Political disagreement should be brought to the forefront of democratic institutions—not as destructive conflicts, but as constructive disagreement between agonistic adversaries: a democratic system based on agonistic pluralism.

11.3 The Impossibility of a "Truth Era"

From the perspective of agonistic pluralism, ideals of finding one true solution to any societal issue are inherently problematic, as they fail to acknowledge how political solutions arise as the result of discursive constellations. Instead of offering truly objective approaches to politics, they obscure the political core of all decision-making, neglecting how everything that is "accepted as the 'natural' order… is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity."[13] Truly objective or rational politics is an oxymoron.

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[11] Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy," 15.

[12] Mouffe, *On the Political,* 8.

[13] Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach," *Política Común 9* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.011.

Drawing on this theoretical foundation, let us return to the idea of a "post-truth era" and its potential remedy, the "truth era." As stated in the introduction to this chapter, numerous scholars and journalists have argued that we might be entering a "post-truth era," a dysfunctional state of democracy where political decision-making relies "on assertions that 'feel true,' but have no basis in fact."[14] According to this position, the power of facts is waning, as politicians increasingly rely on emotional engagement rather than rational argumentation.[15] Social media environments are said to play a key role in this development, as they enable politicians and disseminators of "fake news" to communicate directly to potential voters without interference from fact-checking journalists.[16] The technological architecture of these online platforms amplify these processes, as citizens become "[i]nhabitants of internet-created bubbles, where algorithms feed their prejudices and misconceptions with cosseting confirmations of whatever they have selected for their… truth."[17] People not only become misinformed, but also completely indifferent to the truth. The result is a state of "post-truth" politics torn by hyper-partisan divides: "When lies make the political system dysfunctional, its poor results can feed the alienation and lack of trust in institutions that make the post-truth play possible in the first place. To counter this, mainstream politicians need to find a language of rebuttal (being called "pro-truth" might be a start)."[18]

As numerous scholars and media professionals have argued, the key goal of contemporary democracy is to re-position facts at the center of political decision-making in order to solve the post-truth crisis. By doing so, hyper-partisan divides will dissolve and politics can once again return to a constructive state of operation. Political actors should thus actively seek to counter-weigh the post-truth era by establishing themselves as "pro-truth." If successful, these efforts will not only bring facts to the forefront, but also unify a divided and antagonistic society. Ideally, we could imagine that these efforts could mark the beginning of a "truth era" in which fake news and hyper-partisanship is replaced by fact-based politics. This might sound ideal on the surface, but is this truly the best prescription for contemporary democracy? If we accept the argument that being "pro-truth" could

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[14] "Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie."

[15] Davies, "Age of Post-Truth Politics"; Luciano Floridi, "Fake News,"

[16] Alison Flood, "'Post-Truth' Named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries; Freedland, "Post-Truth Politicians."

[17] Norman, "Whoever Wins the US Presidential Election."

[18] "Post-Truth Politics: Art of the Lie."

potentially solve the post-truth crisis, we are quickly faced with a paradoxical question: Who gets to decide who are the "pro-truth" politicians and who are the "fake" ones? Asking oppositional political actors would undoubtedly lead to conflicting answers, as we have seen subsequent to the 2016 US elections.

In early January 2017, the newly elected President, Donald Trump, defended himself and his allies against accusations of spreading fake news. On Twitter, his favorite platform of choice, he wrote: "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!."[19] Trump saw himself and his trusted media channels, such as the national-conservative Breitbart News, as victims. Yet, soon after, Trump switched the roles in this so-called witch-hunt, systematically attacking media outlets, including CNN, Buzzfeed and *The New York Times*, as the "fake news media."[20] "Fake news" thus became a potent political weapon in a struggle between himself and his perceived enemies. This struggle reached a peak in September 2017, when Trump proclaimed that he himself had come up with the very term *fake* to capture the wrongdoings of the "mainstream media."[21] If we hypothetically asked Trump, if he was "pro-truth" or "fake," there could be little doubt that he would reply that he is profoundly "pro-truth," while his perceived opponents are "fakes." If we ask these very same opponents, the answer would likely be the opposite. But who is right, then?

It could be argued that we should simply fact-check each political actor and figure out who is "pro-truth" and who is "fake." In the case where Trump claimed to have invented the term *fake*, the answer is obviously that Trump is spreading misinformation. Yet, as Mouffe reminds us, political decision-making is much more complicated than simply questions of "true" and "false." In relation to

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[19] Donald Trump, "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!" *Twitter*, January 20, 2017, https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/818990655418617856?lang=en

[20] Donald Trump, "CNN is in a total meltdown with their FAKE NEWS because their ratings are tanking since election and their credibility will soon be gone!" *Twitter*, January 12, 2017, https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/819550083742109696?lang=en; Donald Trump, "BuzzFeed Runs Unverifiable Trump-Russia Claims" #FakeNews. Twitter, January 20, 2017, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/819000924207251456; Donald Trump, "Somebody with aptitude and conviction should buy the FAKE NEWS and failing @nytimes and either run it correctly or let it fold with dignity!" Twitter, January 29, 2017, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/825690087857995776?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fthehill.com%2Fhomenews%2Fadministration%2F316723-trump-blasts-fake-news-and-failing-new-york-times.

[21] Michael Schaub, "Trump's Claim to Have Come Up With the Term 'Fake News' is Fake News, Merriam-Webster Dictionary Says," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-fake-news-20171009-story.html.

political outcomes, nothing is ever truly "objective" or "rational" as all decisions arise from different actors asserting dominance over one another. Finding the most "true" political outcome is an impossible task. Recently, Professor of Political Communication at the University of Leeds, Stephen Coleman, echoed this position, arguing that proponents of a "truth"-based democracy should "come to terms with the inevitability that political conflicts have no single "correct" conclusion, but can only ever be contested and resolved as battles of competing interest."[22] The proposed solution of supporting "pro-truth" politicians and delegitimizing "fake" ones seems to miss this point. In order for there to be widespread consensus on who is "pro-truth" and "fake," some politicians would have to assert themselves as such by hegemonizing the social, obtaining total dominance. This would most likely *not* be positive for democracy as a political system.

In the characterization of the "post-truth era," one argument put forth is that "facts… seem to be losing their ability to support consensus."[23] Yet, as Mouffe underlines, consensus always requires the suppression of opposing voices, potentially undermining the very foundation of democracy. A consensus-based "truth society," in other words, could quickly resemble an authoritarian regime more than a free democratic state characterized by agonistic pluralism. Consider China or Russia for example: in these countries, speaking against the "truths" of the government can lead to your imprisonment or even death. Within these political systems, this ensures that there is little (visible) opposition to the political consensus and very little (visible) political conflict. Yet, this consensus does not result from a well-functioning democracy. Following Mouffe, it results from the opposite—a lack of agonistic pluralism. With this in mind, a "truth society" becomes a democratic ideal hardly worth pursuing. Additionally, it raises the question of whether the "post-truth era" truly encapsulates the current state of democracy in the first place.

11.4 Conclusion

Based on the presented critique of the "post-truth" and "truth" eras, it might seem that we are left with political meaninglessness: all solutions are equally good as there is no "objective" political outcome, making politics futile. Building on Mouffe, however, I will argue that the opposite is the case. Faced with similar

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[22] Stephen Coleman, *Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 76-77.

[23] Davies, "The Age of Post-Truth Politics."

criticism, Mouffe (2005) contends: "I have no doubt that the liberals who think that rational agreement can be reached in politics... will accuse my conception of the political of being 'nihilistic'... I hope to demonstrate that acknowledging the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension in social life, far from undermining the democratic project, is the necessary condition for grasping the challenge to which democratic politics is confronted."[24]

The fact that there is no political "objectivity" does not make the world meaningless. On the contrary, it highlights the fundamental importance of political decision-making for the human condition. Democratic politics should not reflect any "objective truths" in the world, but instead reflect the wide array of perspectives of the very same people who are affected by political outcomes. This underlines the merits of democracy as a political system, including agonistic pluralism, as it enables citizens to influence the contingent discourses that shape the social world. In contrast, citizens within authoritarian regimes remain subjected to supposedly "objective" or "true" decisions of their leaders. Based on these conclusions, I will argue that if there is a crisis of contemporary democracy, the crisis cannot be described in terms of a "post-truth era," as this implies a democratic ideal not worth pursuing. This does *not*, however, infer that new forms of misinformation, deception and disguised propaganda – what we might call 'fake news'– are harmless to democracy. In fact, most of my own research explores manifestations and implications of such phenomena.[25] Rather, Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism can help us realize the dangers, not of fake news, but of trying to censor and suppress it in order to save democracy - a cure, which represents a bigger potential threat of its own. Beyond the scope of this chapter, then, lies what can best capture the present state of democracy. But looking for objective political truths is at least not the right place to start.

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[24] Mouffe, *On the Political,* 3-4.

[25] Johan Farkas, Jannick Schou, and Christina Neumayer, "Platformed Antagonism: Racist Discourses on Fake Muslim Facebook Pages," *Critical Discourse Studies* 15, no. 5 (2018): 463-480. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1450276; Johan Farkas and Marco T. Bastos, "IRA Propaganda on Twitter: Stoking Antagonism and Tweeting Local News," In *Proceedings of the 9th Annual International Conference on Social Media and Society* (New York: ACM, 2018), 281-285, https://doi.org/10.1145/3217804.3217929.

12 PAPER II – FAKE NEWS AS A FLOATING SIGNIFIER: HEGEMONY, ANTAGONISM AND THE POLITICS OF FALSEHOOD

12.1 Abstract

'Fake news' has emerged as a global buzzword. While prominent media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *Buzzfeed News*, have used the term to designate misleading information spread online, President Donald Trump has recently used the term as a negative designation of these very 'mainstream media'. In this article, we argue that the concept of 'fake news' has become an important component in contemporary political struggles. We showcase how the term is utilised by different positions within the social space as means of discrediting, attacking, and delegitimising political opponents. Excavating three central moments within the construction of 'fake news', we argue that the term has increasingly become a 'floating signifier': a signifier lodged in-between different hegemonic projects seeking to provide an image of how society is and ought to be structured. By approaching 'fake news' from the viewpoint of discourse theory, the paper reframes the current stakes of the debate and contributes with new insights into the function and consequences of 'fake news' as a novel political category.

Keywords: fake news; floating signifier; misinformation; disinformation; discourse theory; Donald Trump

12.2 Introduction

'Fake news' has become a global buzzword. A simple Google search for the term literally returns millions upon millions of hits. Though misinformation and propaganda are certainly not new phenomena (Floridi 2016; Linebarger 1955) public attention towards these topics has grown exponentially in recent times. The epicentre of current debates has been the 2016 American elections where news media across the globe reported on the potential democratic problems posed by 'fake news'. As *The Huffington Post* wrote in November 2016, "social media sites have been flooded with misinformation in the past few months" (Masur 2016).

The issue of 'fake news' has been approached and discussed in mass media from a number of perspectives, focusing on the difficulty for users to spot fake news online (Shellenbarger 2016; Silverman 2016b), its distribution through partisan social media pages (Silverman et al. 2016), the responsibility of social media companies and search engines to take action against it (Cadwalladr 2016; Stromer-Galley 2016), and the underlying economic incentives for those creating it to generate advertisement revenue (Higgins et al. 2016; Silverman and Alexander

2016). Some commentators have gone as far as speaking of the emergence or consolidation of a 'post-factual' or 'post-truth' era, in which scientific evidence and knowledge are being replaced by 'alternative facts' (Norman 2016; Woollacott 2016). This trend has even been acknowledged by the Oxford Dictionaries, designating 'post-truth' as the international word of the year in 2016 (Flood 2016).

While these perspectives on 'fake news', 'post-truth politics' and 'post-factuality' have provided rich explanations for these phenomena, they nonetheless tend to be locked in a very specific framework. They all seek to address the question of *what* can be labelled as valid, proper or 'true information' online, and what should be counted as 'fake news' or disinformation. Where should the boundary between true and false be drawn? And how can 'fake news' be stopped? This paper takes a different approach. Instead of asking how and why 'fake news' is produced, we showcase how the *concept* of 'fake news' is being mobilised as part of political struggles to hegemonise social reality. In doing so, the paper contributes with new knowledge on the consequences of 'fake news' as an increasingly ubiquitous signifier circulating within the public sphere.

12.3 Existing Research: Typologies of False Information

Within the academic literature on false information in the digital era, the large majority of research is centred around questions of how and why misleading content is produced, disseminated, and accepted as legitimate. Scholars have argued that digital media provide the basis for new types of disinformation connected to so-called *infostorms* (Hendricks and Hansen 2014), *infoglut* (Andrejevic 2013), or *information overload* (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2011). Other researchers have provided narrower and more empirical studies focusing on topics such as misleading health information (Eysenbach 2008), governmentally organised propaganda (Aro 2016), Wikipedia hoaxes (Kumar and West 2016), or disguised racist propaganda (Farkas, Schou, and Neumayer 2017, 2018; Skinner and Martin 2000).

A widely adopted and discussed terminology within the research on false information distinguishes between *disinformation* and *misinformation*. While a few scholars use these terms interchangeably (Floridi 1996; Skinner and Martin 2000), most use them to distinguish between intentional and unintentional forms of misleading information. Some scholars refer to misinformation as *all* types of

misleading information and disinformation as only the *intentional* production and circulation of such information (Karlova and Fisher 2013; Keshavarz 2014; Tudjman and Mikelic 2003). Others use misinformation in a narrower sense to encompass only *unintentional* forms of misleading content, thus being the opposite of disinformation, which encompasses only *intentional* forms (Fallis 2015; Giglietto et al. 2016; Kumar and West 2016). In both typologies, an example of *dis*information could be a political group spreading false information in order to affect public opinion, or a website creating fake news articles in order to attract clicks (and ad revenue). In contrast, false information shared unknowingly by a social media user would be a case of *mis*information. Building on this conceptual distinction, the predominant analytical questions posed within this literature concern the distinction between 'truthful' and 'false' information. This simultaneously implies an on-going focus on the *intentionality* behind the production and circulation of fake news. While these discussions are significant in their own right, they nevertheless miss part of the broader picture. In seeking to answer and describe how to properly define true and false information, scholars tacitly accept an underlying premise: namely that the question of false information or 'fake news' *is* in fact a question of 'fake' versus 'true' news. To put it in the words of Presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, they accept the premise that fake news is solely a question of misleading information and "isn't about politics or partisanship" (Clinton 2016).

In this article, we provide a different analysis of the rise of 'fake news' as a pervasive and increasingly global signifier. Instead of entering the terrain of what defines 'truthfulness' or 'falsehood', a battleground in which a multiplicity of agents struggle to define what counts as valid or deceitful, we seek to understand 'fake news' as a discursive signifier that is part of political struggles. We take a step back and look at how different conceptions of 'fake news' serve to produce and articulate political battlegrounds over social reality. In this regard, our goal is not to define the correct definition of fake news, but to analyse the different, opposing, and conflicting understandings of the concept. We move beyond a preoccupation with the misinformation threats posed by fake news and instead ask: what does the proliferation of 'fake news'-signifiers *signify*? What kinds of ethico-normative struggles do they bring to the foreground?

By excavating three key contemporary moments of 'fake news', we argue that the term has increasingly evolved to become what the post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau (2005) defines as a *floating signifie*r. That is to say a signifier used by fundamentally different and in many ways deeply opposing political

projects as a means of constructing political identities, conflicts and antagonisms. Instilled with different meaning, 'fake news' becomes part of a much larger hegemonic struggle to define the shape, purpose, and modalities of contemporary politics. It becomes a key moment in a political power struggle between hegemonic projects. In this way, we argue that 'fake news' has become a deeply political concept used to delegitimise political opponents and construct hegemony.

We develop this argument in three stages. Starting out, we account for Laclau's discourse theoretical conception of floating signifiers and its link to hegemonic struggles. Using this conceptual framework as our underlying theoretical lens, we proceed to analyse three competing moments in the recent production of 'fake news'. We showcase how the term has been articulated in three different ways: (1) as a critique of digital capitalism, (2) a critique of right-wing politics and media, and (3) a critique of liberal and mainstream journalism. Through this analysis, we highlight how 'fake news' has gradually become a key component within hegemonic struggles to reproduce or challenge existing power struggles in civil society. Based on this small excavation, we proceed to discuss the political implications of 'fake news' as a floating signifier. How can viewing 'fake news' in this light help illuminate current discussions of post-factuality and post-truth?

12.4 Floating Signifiers and Hegemony

This paper takes its point of departure in post-Marxist discourse theory, particularly as it has been developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as part of the so-called Essex School of Discourse Analysis (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000; Laclau 1990, 1996, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985]). Since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985, a work sparking both controversy and breaking new theoretical ground (Sim 2000), a rich body of literature has emerged around *discourse theory* as an intellectual and philosophical project (Torfing 1999; Smith 1998). While Mouffe has particularly focused on democratic theory and radical democracy, Laclau has engaged in on-going theoretical reflections on concepts useful for understanding the construction and sedimentation of political projects. In this paper, we mainly draw on Laclau's work as it provides a central resource for understanding the construction and fixation of meaning. Before turning to the notion of the *floating signifier*, central to the argumentation laid out in this paper, we will briefly describe some of the main theoretical arguments provided by Laclau.

Anchored in insights from post-structuralism, deconstruction, and Marxist theory, Laclau's work stresses the political and contingent dimensions of meaning, arguing that social reality is the product of continuous hegemonic struggles rather than innate essences or immanent laws. According to Laclau (1990, 1996), social reality acquires its meaning through the practice of *articulation* in which *moments* are positioned relationally and differentially within a systematised totality called a *discourse*. The meaning of any particular moment is always relational insofar as it arises from its connection to other moments (whether textual or material). Discourse theory stresses that discourses are contingent and historical constructs, emerging through struggles and contestation over time. In privileging *difference* and *contingency*, discourse theory builds on Derrida's (2016 [1967]) argument that the closure of meaning always relies on *exclusion* and the production of a *constitutive outside*. Meaning, in other words, depends upon the creation of limits and the drawing of boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In this way, all discourses are based on a fundamental lack: a radical negativity that hinders their ability to fully fixate meaning (Laclau 1996, 2005). What appears as objective, neutral, or natural structures must be considered as the result of particular fixations of meaning resulting from political struggles that have repressed alternative pathways over time.

By identifying the original moment of repression as 'the political', discourse theory emphasises "the political not as a superstructure, but as having the status of an *ontology of the social*" (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, p. xiv, original emphasis). This means that Laclau (and Mouffe) awards a primary position to 'the political' as the *instituting moment* in which a contingent *decision* is made between what is included and excluded from particular discourses. For discourse theory, the political is thereby not limited to particular expressions of the institutionalised political system but the name for the precarious and always lacking ground instituting any given discourse through acts of inclusion-exclusion. The political is not a regional category but applies to social reality in its entirety (Marchart 2007).

The adherence to contingency and undecidability means that Laclau eschews any attempt to approach discourses as 'natural', 'normal', or 'neutral'. Indeed, the core of Laclau's political practice consists in providing a radical critique of the closure of meaning, the ideologisation of contingency, and the naturalisation of domination (Schou 2016). Laclau's understanding of normativity takes its point of departure in a deconstruction of the classic distinction between the descriptive and the normative, between *the being and the ought* (Laclau 2014, 127). This is a division that traces back to Kant's separation between theoretical and practical

reason, norms and facts. For Laclau, however, this distinction implodes, as meaning always relies on exclusion, and the 'one' always relies on the 'other':

> There are no facts without signification, and there is no signification without practical engagements that require norms governing our behaviour. So there are not two orders – the normative and the descriptive – but normative/descriptive complexes in which facts and values interpenetrate each other in an inextricable way.
>
> (Laclau 2014, 128)

For Laclau, as is evident in this quote, *the factual* can never be separated from *the normative*, as it is only on the basis of the normative that the factual can emerge *as fact*. If this is the case, and the factual is always given in relation to the normative, then this must simultaneously mean that social reality is at its core always normative. Normativity is not a regional category but applies to the totality of meaning. Laclau (2014) is not invoking normativity as a universal or transcendental category given from nowhere. Norms are instead *sedimented practices*, *signifying systems* and *a practical relationship to the world*. To put it in Laclau's terms, norms are always given within and through *discourses* that have come into being over time through practices, struggles, and institutionalised conflicts (Laclau 1990). This is also why, according to Laclau, it is impossible to simply move or deduce certain normative orders directly from the ethical. Indeed, there cannot be established any direct relation between the ethical – as the grasping of the radical contingency of social reality – and the normative.

It is within this theoretical framework that Laclau introduces the notion of the *floating signifier*. This concept denotes situations in which "the *same* democratic demands receive the structural pressure of *rival* hegemonic projects" (Laclau 2005, 131, original emphasis). In being simultaneously articulated within two (or more) opposing discourses, a floating signifier is positioned within different signifying systems of conflicting political project. If the signifier's meaning later appears stable or fixed, this will be the result of one particular discourse's ability to successfully hegemonise the social, in other words winning the struggle against other discourses and repressing other forms of meaning (Laclau 2005). Thus, a floating signifier is not simply a case of polysemy, i.e. a particular signifier that is attached several independent meanings at the same time. Nor does it equate with what Laclau (1996) terms as an *empty signifier*, designating the antagonistic positioning of a universalised particular signifier within a chain of equivalence.

Instead, the concept is used to describe a precise historical conjuncture in which a particular signifier (lodged in-between several opposing, antagonistic, hegemonic projects) is used as part of a battle to impose the "right" viewpoint onto the world. According to Laclau (2005, 132), floating signifiers first and foremost emerge in times of *organic crises*; historical periods in which the underlying symbolic systems are radically challenged and eventually recast. Whether the current epoch qualifies as such an organic crisis in the Laclauian sense is perhaps best left up to historians of the future to decide. However, as right-wing nationalism and protectionism sweeps over most of Europe and the United States, a certain structural and symbolic *dislocation* (Laclau 1990) does indeed seem to be present (see Jessop 2016 for further reflections on this issue).

12.5 Fake News – Three Contemporary Moments

Having outlined our theoretical basis, the following sections proceeds to excavate three concurrent discourses in which 'fake news' has been mobilised as a signifier supporting particular political agendas. The discourses have been identified based on data material published between November 2016 and March 2017. The data material consists of social media content from President Donald Trump as well as journalistic articles and scholarly commentaries published in the following American and British newspapers and magazines: *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Conversation*, *CNN*, *Monday Note*, *Business Insider*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Buzzfeed News*, *Mashable*, *Slate*, *Gizmodo*, and *Time Magazine*. Data sources were selected exploratorily by closely following media debates around 'fake news' throughout the five-month research period and locating central actors within these debates. Subsequently, we searched through the selected sources in order to find additional content that might have been missed while following the debates.

The collected data was analysed using discourse theoretical concepts in order to to uncover and map emergent discourses found throughout the data. As all sources are either American or British, the identified discourses are all located within an American (and more broadly Western) political context. By showing how different and in many ways deeply opposing political actors have articulated the same signifier within diverging discourses, we are able to showcase how 'fake news' has gradually become a floating signifier used within different discourses to critique, delegitimise and exclude opposing political projects.

The three moments focus on 'fake news' as (1) a critique of digital capitalism, (2) a critique of right-wing politics and media, and (3) a critique of liberal and mainstream journalism. A fourth moment, which is not included in the analysis, includes mobilisations of the 'fake news'-signifier as part of techno-deterministic critiques of digital media technologies (e.g. Facebook is bad for democracy). As our analysis specifically focuses on fake news as part of political discourses and antagonisms, the scope has deliberately been limited to the three moments presented above. These moments are approached horizontally as three simultaneous fragments of present-day political struggles to achieve hegemony. The article does thereby not seek to locate the genesis or historical origins of each of these moments or evaluate their relative dominance. Rather, we seek to examine and nuance how fundamentally opposing discourses simultaneously mobilise the 'fake news'-signifier as part of political struggles.

Moment 1: Fake News as a Critique of Digital Capitalism

Misinformation in digital media is certainly not a new phenomenon (Floridi 1996). Nevertheless, the issue has recently gained traction in public discourse where opposing political actors has fought over its meaning and, most importantly, the explanation for its cause. Within one particular discursive construction of 'fake news', the term has been articulated as intrinsically connected to *digital capitalism*. Thus, a widespread explanation raised by scholars, journalists, and commentators alike points to the economic structure of the Internet as the primary reason for the circulation of fake news (Filloux 2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016; Zimdars 2016b).

Within this discourse, it is argued that in the context of digital media, as in all commercial media, content providers generate advertisement revenue based on the amount of readers, listeners, or viewers they have. Crudely put, if a website can attract a lot of visitors, the owner can potentially make money on advertisement. This economic incentive for digital content production has been highlighted as the key reason for the proliferation of 'fake news'. As Professor of Communication, Zizi Papacharissi (2016), for example argues, "controversy generates ratings, and unfortunately controversy is generated around facts vs. propaganda battles." According to this discourse, false information feeds controversy and controversy feeds capital. This argumentative chain has for example been put forth in the work conducted by *Buzzfeed News*, showing that 'fake' news-stories generated more engagement on social media during the American elections than 'real' news stories did (Silverman 2016a).

A related economic explanation for the cause of 'fake news' concerns the lower production costs of false information in comparison to 'real news': "Fake news is cheap to produce – far cheaper than real news, for obvious reasons – and profitable" (Zimdars 2016b). 'Fake news' is, in other words, difficult to stop because it is linked to low production costs and potential high revenue, continuously motivating new outlets. This position is supported by articles in both *The New York Times* and *Buzzfeed News* (Higgins et al. 2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016), portraying Eastern European website owners as deliberately producing 'fake news' for capital gains. These fake news producers designate profit as their primary motivation and argue that high levels of user activity are the only reason why they create fake news articles concerning the American election and political system. According to this discourse, widely shared false claims about e.g. Pope Francis' endorsement of Donald Trump or the surfacing of Barack Obama's 'real' Kenyan birth certificate were *not* primarily the results of partisanship but of digital capitalism. From this position, articulated by both scholars and media professionals, 'fake news' is thus constructed as deeply connected and interwoven with the capitalist media economy. If 'fake news' is to be eradicated, capitalist incentives and economic structures need to be reshaped too. The critique of 'fake news' simultaneously becomes a critique of digital capitalism as a structure that promotes the circulation of the lowest common denominator of news content.

This discursive construction of 'fake news' – as an unavoidable, negative outcome of the capitalist media economy – resembles previous media criticism of low standard in news content for the "common people." For example, it resembles the critique of tabloid journalism, which has also been widely attacked for lowering the standards of public discourse and even posing a "threat to democracy" (Örnebring and Jönsson 2004, 283). The connection between 'bad news content' and the capitalist media economy is in other words not new. The principal signifier used to name this connection does, however, seem to have increasingly shifted towards 'fake news'. As such, 'fake news' becomes the particular signifier mobilised by political actors wishing to criticise the capitalist media economy and promote publicly funded media platforms. A vivid example of this discourse can be found in a recent article in *The New Yorker*, arguing that the only long-term solution to 'fake news' is increased funds to public service media, i.e. the removal of capitalist incentives (Lemann 2016). What we can see, then, is how the 'fake news'-signifier not solely becomes a way of labelling particular outlets. It also becomes implicated in a much broader political project concerned with intervening in capitalist modes of production, promoting funding for public

institutions, and critiquing the cultural implications of the capitalist system. In this sense, 'fake news' becomes part of a systemic critique of (digital) capitalism. Capitalism is rotten, this line of reasoning goes, and 'fake news' is yet another example of its detrimental consequences.

Moment 2: Fake News as Critique of Right-Wing Politics and Media

During the 2016 American elections, the term 'fake news' went from being marginal to near ubiquitous. As a Google trend search reveals (Figure 1), the circulation of the concept took off just before the Election Day and reached a peak around Donald Trump's inauguration as the 45th President of the United States (Google 2017a).

Figure 1 – Global user search interest in 'fake news' on Google

This pattern is no coincidence, as the term was mobilised to critique and delegitimise political opponents from the outset, acting as a key component in a political power struggle between the American left and right. In Google's search history, this is evident from the fact that both Americans and users worldwide predominantly coupled their searches for 'fake news' with searches for 'Trump CNN fake news' (i.e. a mainstream media platform) and 'Breitbart News' (i.e. a right-wing media platform) (Google 2017a, 2017b).

In this context, one prevalent discourse has sought to mobilise 'fake news' by connecting it to the right-wing of the American political spectrum. This position, establishing right-wing partisanship as the primary cause of 'fake news', has been articulated by a number of different scholarly and journalistic actors. A prominent example dating back before the recent proliferation of the 'fake news'-signifier is found in an opinion letter in *The New York Times* written by Professor and Nobel Prize Winner in Economy, Paul Krugman:

> … in practice liberals don't engage in the kind of mass rejections of evidence
> that conservatives do. Yes, you can find examples where 'some' liberals got
> off on a hobbyhorse of one kind or another, or where the liberal conventional
> wisdom turned out wrong. But you don't see the kind of lockstep rejection of
> evidence that we see over and over again on the right.

<div align="right">(Krugman 2014)</div>

"Liberals," Krugman argues, are less prone to false information, as they are more critical and rational. Krugman thereby attacks and seeks to delegitimise the American right by discursively connecting fake information and irrationality with right-wing voters. Surrounding the 2016 American elections, this discourse was strengthened and amplified considerably. It was for example reinforced when *Buzzfeed News* found that 38% of posts on three right-wing partisan Facebook pages were 'fake news', while this "only" applied to 20% of posts on left-wing partisan pages (Silverman et al. 2016). More importantly, various actors designated not only specific news stories but also entire right-wing media corporations as 'fake news'. For example, a widely shared 'fake news'-list compiled by Assistant Professor, Melissa Zimdars, included the popular, partisan right-wing media platform, Breitbart News, as an unreliable source (Zimdars 2016a, 2016b). Brian Feldman, journalist at *New York Magazine*, turned Zimdars' list into a browser plug-in named 'Fake News Alert' that warns users every time they visit "a URL known for producing non-news in news-like packages" (Feldman 2016). In a similar vein, another browser plug-in named 'B.S. Detector' also contains Breitbart News on its 'fake news'-list (Hinchlife 2016). The inclusion of an entire right-wing media platform that openly supports Donald Trump's presidency (Delgado, 2016) on various 'fake news'-lists became an amplification of an already existing political project to delegitimise and antagonise the American right by connecting it to false information, irrationality, and (ultimately) stupidity.

At the same time as these 'fake news'-lists started to circulate, *Gizmodo* magazine ran a widely shared article claiming that Facebook *did* in fact have various solutions to the 'fake news'-problem but avoided to instil them during the American elections due to "fear of conservative backlash" (Nunez 2016). This article played directly into the discursive connection between 'fake news' and the American right. The claims put forth in the article were based on anonymous sources from Facebook that were quickly denounced by officials from the company (Heath 2016). As *Slate* journalist, Will Oremus, duly noticed, the story thereby became "an epistemologically fascinating case in which Facebook is claiming that a news

story about its efforts to crack down on false news stories is, in itself, a false news story" (Oremus 2016a).

By unpacking this second discursive position, we can see how media corporations, scholars and liberal figures all (re)produce a significantly different conception of 'fake news' than that provided by critiques of digital capitalism. Instead of linking 'fake news' to economic incentives and structures of the capitalist system, this second political project seeks to couple 'fake news' with the American right-wing, particularly Donald Trump and his supporters. 'Fake news', within this discourse, becomes intrinsically linked to right-wing politics, implicating that the solution to the 'fake news'-problem has to be found in the battle against right-wing media corporations and politicians. In December 2016, Oremus addressed this issue head on in another *Slate* article. As he critically wrote, "some in the liberal and mainstream media" have begun to "blur the lines between fabricated news, conspiracy theories, and right-wing opinion by lumping them all under the fake news banner" (Oremus 2016b). This, Oremus argued, had sparked a counter-reaction where Trump supporters attacked the very same liberal and mainstream media by designating *them* as 'fake news'. As became clear, this discursive counter-attack was not limited to Trump supporters but went all the way to the newly elected President himself and his White House chief strategist, Steve Bannon, the former executive chair of the designated 'fake news' platform, Breitbart News.

Moment 3: Fake News as Critique of Liberal and Mainstream Media

Trump had not even been in office for a single full day before he declared that he had "a running war with the media" (Rucker et al. 2017). Prior to this, Trump had insinuated that the term 'fake news' was a political construct created in order to attack and delegitimise his presidency. On 11 January, Trump wrote on Twitter: "FAKE NEWS - A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!" (Trump 2017a). Soon after, he began what would become a continuous and highly systematic use of the 'fake news'-signifier in reverse. He used it to attack and delegitimise what he saw as his direct opponents: mainstream media. Trump started using the term to lash out at media companies such as CNN (Trump 2017b), *The New York Times* (Trump 2017c), *Buzzfeed News* (Trump 2017d), all of whom had previously brought stories linking 'fake news' to the American right and Donald Trump. Trump, in other words, attempted to rearticulate and re-hegemonise the term by situating it in a fundamentally opposing discourse, linking 'fake news' intimately to mainstream media platforms:

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

(Trump 2017f)

Within this discourse, fake news is constructed as a symptom of a fundamental, democratic problem, namely that mainstream media companies are biased and deliberately attempting to promote liberal agendas instead of representing 'The People.' This discourse is not new, as right-wing media platforms have long claimed that 'mainstream media' is corrupt, liberally biased, systematic liars, and in need of replacement (Berry and Sobieraj 2014). Two platforms long promoting this discourse are Breitbart News and InfoWars, both of which hosted exclusive interviews with Donald Trump during the American elections. Within this discourse, mainstream media and their "endless propaganda" will soon be replaced due to digital media, allowing Americans to communicate and become "aware that we don't need the mainstream media to define what reality is for us after all" (Snyder 2014). 'Fake news' thus became a key signifier in an already existing discourse promoted by right-wing media platforms and President Donald Trump: "Don't believe the main stream (fake news) media. The White House is running VERY WELL. I inherited a MESS and am in the process of fixing it" (Trump 2017e). Within this discourse, the signifier represents the exact opposite of what it did within the previous one. 'Fake news' is made equal to mainstream media. In March 2017, Trump elaborated on this position:

The country's not buying it, it is fake media. And the Wall Street Journal is a part of it … I won the election, in fact I was number one the entire route, in the primaries, from the day I announced, I was number one. And the New York Times and CNN and all of them, they did these polls, which were extremely bad and they turned out to be totally wrong.

(Time Staff 2017)

What we are witnessing here is a systematic attempt to re-hegemonise the 'fake news'-signifier in order to delegitimise and dismantle critical journalism. This discursive struggle is not only articulated verbally but also materially, as when Trump refuses to take questions from CNN journalists because they are "fake news" (Jamieson 2017). The term thereby becomes much more than a question of 'true' versus 'false' information: it becomes the focal point of a major political

battleground in which the American right-wing struggles with mainstream media, liberals, and anti-capitalist to fixate meaning, obtain hegemony, and impose their worldview onto the social. 'Fake news' serves to partially organise and reshape institutional practices and relations between the state and civil society. In this struggle, 'true' and 'false' are not empirical-founded categories defining the correctness of information. Instead, they are profoundly political categories mobilised by opposing actors to hegemonise the *normative* grounds of social reality. In this way, 'fake news' becomes a *floating signifier* – a signifier epitomising a discursive struggle and perhaps even an organic crisis.

12.6 Consequences and Implications – An Organic Crisis?

Let us recall Laclau's important suggestion that "the 'floating' dimension becomes most visible in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast" (2005, 132). Are we witnessing, we should ask, the birth of an organic crisis? And if we are, is 'fake news' then the cause or outcome of this crisis? Can we use the sudden emergence of 'fake news' as a floating signifier, deployed as a part of a political struggle, as a tool for diagnosing the present time? To address this question, we should proceed cautiously in considering the implications of the exposition provided above. If, indeed, 'fake news' has gradually become a floating signifier, then what are the consequences of this? Both politically, but also for future research.

The least radical answer to this question might simply be that what we are observing is a gradual pluralisation of fake news. That while the concept *used* to signify a set of more or less confined phenomena, opposing discursive positions now use it to criticise and name a heterogeneous array of events. This can, in other words, be described as a situation in which different political projects seek to define the meaning and conditions of what should be termed as 'fake'. Within this line of reasoning, the proliferation of the 'fake news'-signifier might not signify anything radical but simply remind us that this concept – as with for all other discursive moments – has no meaning exterior or prior to discursivity. The term can, in other words, mean different things in different contexts.

While there is undoubtedly some truth in the above position, it nonetheless fails, in our view, to capture the proper significance of the transformation of 'fake news' into a floating signifier. More than simply a gradual pluralisation or growth in signifying complexity, we argue that the de-fixation of fake news has

significant implications and consequences. In this context, we should remember that while 'fake news' may be seen as multiple and contingent from the outside, within each of its particular usages this is not necessarily the case. From the viewpoint of the anti-capitalist or Trump-camp, 'fake news' does not denote a floating signifier. It is instead used very deliberately within a specific hegemonic project. And likewise, from the perspective of the established mass media, the label of fake news is not simply accepted as lodged in-between several opposing and contingent project. Each of the discourses hold their own distinct worldview, which does not translate unaltered across hegemonic projects. From each of these projects, 'fake news' does not *float*. It only starts floating when considered in its relational dynamism, as showcased in this article.

In this regard, it is important to remember how the *floating signifier* not solely encompasses a pluralisation of meaning (Laclau 2005). From a discourse theoretical perspective, it implies the articulation of fundamentally different hegemonic projects. In this way, the pluralisation of 'fake news' suggests that it has become the centre of contemporary political struggles, used as a discursive weapon within competing discourses seeking to delegitimise political opponents. In the case of President Donald Trump, this becomes vividly clear. Trump's use of the term not only serves to construct *himself* within a particular hegemonic project. In an equally radical manner, it simultaneously seeks to delegitimise critical journalists. It is precisely by labelling these as 'fake news' that he seeks to invalidate their position within the field of power, to deconstruct their public authority, and re-hegemonise their position. 'Fake news' is meant as a frontal attack on traditional core values of journalistic practice, such as critical investigations of those holding power. In this way, the gradual transformation of 'fake news' into a floating signifier comes to represent a power struggle between the journalistic field and the political field. What is ultimately at stake within this struggle is who obtains the power to define what is deemed as truthful, who can portray social reality accurately, and in what ways. In this sense, there is a partial attempt at recasting the existing symbolic systems, of overthrowing one particular hegemony in favour of another. So perhaps we are, indeed, seeing the emergence of an 'organic crises' – a period in which the pre-existing symbolic structures no longer seem to hold any validity.

Contemporary descriptions of 'post-truth' and 'post-factual' democracy partially bear witness to this potentially emerging crisis. What the 'post-factual' diagnosis attempts to describe is the overcoming or neglect of truth, scientific knowledge, and evidence in the current epoch. Notions of post-factuality and post-truth thus

seem to point to the current dislocation or representational crisis in which the existing discourses are no longer deemed as applicable or valid. Yet, in attempting to provide a description of the current state of affairs, the prophets of the post-factual enter into the very same terrain as that which they seek to describe. Rather than simply a description of the current era, the post-factual diagnosis is a deeply normative discourse concerned with how society, democracy, and truth 'should' be defined. In this way, those seeking to define and understand the 'post-factual' and 'post-truth' era become part of the hegemonic struggles instituted by the floating character of 'fake news'. Post-factual and post-truth both become a testimony of the potential organic crisis and a stake in the battle to produce new modes of representation.

The discourse theoretical approach applied in this article challenges these descriptions on multiple fronts. Instead of entering into the battle of what may be counted as valid information, we have instead foregrounded the contextual, historical, and political conditions for the emergence of such claims of validity in the first place. Rather than arguing that truth no longer matters within politics, we have applied a perspective that showcases how negotiations about what may be counted as truthful are in and of themselves part of a political struggle to hegemonise the social. In doing so, we can begin to see that the turn towards an era in which facts 'do not matter' might instead be a turn towards an era in which the concept of factuality is centre of discursive struggles. This may even be labelled as a *hyper-factual era* concerned obsessively with defining what is and counts as factual, and what counts as false. Through the circulation of labels such as 'fake news,' entangled in multiple and oftentimes opposing hegemonic projects, it is the floating character of truth that should be foregrounded, not its ultimate withdrawal or vaporisation.

This also implies that any attempt to categorise, classify, and demarcate between 'fake' and 'true' must be a deeply political practice, whether conducted from the context of journalism or academic interventions. It is part of larger political struggles to define the current shape and modality of contemporary society. Future research might begin to unpack and further develop this *politics of falsehood* by attending to how conceptions of 'fake news' and 'factuality' serve to carve out the stakes of current political crises. Accounts of the broader social, political, and journalistic consequences of 'fake news' might do well to consider the highly politicised and hence precarious character of the term. And systematic empirical investigations remain key in this respect: both in terms of exploring the historical roots of the discourses excavated in this article, but also by tracing the circulation

of different 'fake news' discourses across cultural and political boundaries. Research would do well to examine how particular discourses come to partially dominate and silence other (subaltern) voices. What kinds of power relations do these representations serve to produce and consolidate?

For scholars, journalists, and citizens alike, primacy should in all cases be given to the political dimensions of labels such as 'fake news'. Instead of simply lamenting and condemning the spread of false information, research might try to explore and understand *how* and *why* such information gains traction. Is it because it resonates and reproduces already existing fears and doubts (Farkas, Schou, and Neumayer 2017, 2018)? Or does it testify to the deep-seated organic crises facing our contemporary society? A need to recast and produce new political imaginaries that can fascinate, repulse and rebuild political collectivities? These are some of the central questions that future research on the *politics of falsehood* can hopefully uncover.

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13 PAPER III – NEWS ON FAKE NEWS: LOGICS OF MEDIA DISCOURSES ON DISINFORMATION

13.1 Abstract

This article presents a qualitative study of media discourses around fake news, examining 288 news articles from two national elections in Denmark in 2019. It explores how news media construct fake news as a national security threat and how journalists articulate their own role in relation to this threat. The study draws on discourse theory and the concept of logics to critically map how particular meaning ascriptions and subject positions come to dominate over others, finding five logics undergirding media discourses: (1) a logic of anticipation; (2) a logic of exteriorisation; (3) a logic of technologisation; (4) a logic of securitisation; and (5) a logic of pre-legitimation. The article concludes that fake news is constructed as an 'ultimate other' in Danish media discourses, potentially contributing to blind spots in both public perception and political solutions. This resonates with previous studies from other geo-political contexts, calling for further cross-national research.

Keywords: Fake news, disinformation, journalism, discourse theory, election reporting, Denmark, European Parliament.

13.2 Introduction

In early 2019, analysts and officials warned that the European Parliament (EP) elections – held across Europe in late May 2019 – could be the "next epicenter for malign election interference" (Brattberg 2019). According to European Union (EU) diplomats, Russia was "already attempting to make mischief" (Foy, Murgia, and Peel 2019), giving rise to a new "digital arms race" (Boffey 2018). These dire predictions came in the wake of existing fears of fake news and the so-called post-truth era, capturing public imaginations since 2016 (Farkas and Schou 2019).

One EU country preparing for both the EP elections and potential disinformation was Denmark. Danish politicians were additionally on the ballot for a national parliament (NP) election on 5 June 2019, only two weeks after the EP elections (held on 26 May 2019). Prior to these event, Danish intelligence agencies warned of a significant risk of Russian disinformation attacks (Svendsen, 2018). 47% of surveyed Danes stated they were 'worried' or 'very worried' about fake news influencing the electoral process (KMD 2019). In response, Danish news media – including public service broadcasters, broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers – declared that they would designate fake news as a top priority in their election coverage (Dyrby 2019; Hertz 2019; Jensen 2019b).

This article presents a qualitative study of media discourses around fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (mostly used interchangeably in news media) across 10 Danish news outlets. The study examines 288 news articles spanning a seven-month period around the 2019 elections, a period of democratic significance for both Denmark and the EU, representing the first Danish NP election and the first EP elections since fake news became a major topic of concern. It captures a moment of discursive centrality of both fake news as a political issue and news media as a societal institution. As noted by D'Angelo et al. (2014, 156), the political importance of the press is "nowhere more evident than in contemporary elections campaigns." Drawing on key concepts and theoretical perspectives of the Essex School of Discourse Theory – most notably the concept of logics (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014) – the article maps how news media construct fake news as both a topic of public significance and a threat to democracy.

13.3 Addressing a Gap in Scholarship on Fake News

False information and manipulation have attracted significant attention in recent years across journalism, politics, and academia. Discussed under a range of headings, most notably fake news and disinformation, a new form of societal threat has captured public imaginations, which has become "*the* defining political communication topic of our time" (Freelon and Wells 2020, 145, original emphasis). Despite widespread research, however, scholars have tended to approach fake news from a similar perspective, focusing on cases of deception rather than the role of fake news as a signifier in political discourses (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Wright 2021). The discursive role of fake news remains "severely understudied" (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019, 98), especially outside the US (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019).

This article addresses the gap in scholarship on fake news by providing a discourse theoretical analysis of how Danish news media construct fake news as both a journalistic topic and societal threat. In doing so, the study contributes to a small but growing line of research examining journalistic reporting on fake news in countries such as the US (Bratich 2020; Carlson 2020; Rossini, Stromer-Galley, and Korsunska 2021), Germany (Monsees, 2020), South Africa (Wasserman 2020), and Austria (Egelhofer et al. 2020). This scholarship shows that journalists often deploy fake news as an "empty buzzword" (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1036) and synonymises the term with a general "fear that digital media channels

only pollute the media environment" (Carlson 2020, 387). In doing so, imaginaries around fake news as a threat to democracy becomes part of broader discursive struggles among journalists seeking reaffirm "their authoritative status as gatekeepers of truth-telling" in times of "waning gatekeeping authority" (Bratich 2020, 316).

This study adds to existing scholarship by providing an empirical perspective from Scandinavia on news reporting on fake news, doing so from a discourse theoretical perspective that remains underexplored (Farkas and Schou 2020; 2018). The article contributes to a clearer understanding of how news media mobilise fake news as a signifier and to a critical discussion about how journalists risk creating blind spots that affect both public perception and political solutions.

13.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The study builds on an initial sample of 857 news articles (including editorials, op-eds and reviews) collected through InfoMedia, a database of all major news publications in the Nordic countries. Articles were collected from a seven-month period (1 December 2018 to 30 June 2019) using four overlapping search terms: 'fake news,' 'falske nyheder' [fake news in Danish], 'misinformation,' and 'desinformation' [disinformation in Danish]. The selected timeframe encompasses roughly six months before and one month after the Danish EP and NP elections. All articles were collected from the 10 national news outlets that wrote most extensively on the topic(s). This includes the three biggest broadsheet newspapers, *Politiken, Jyllands-Posten* and *Berlingske,* the two biggest tabloid newspapers, *B.T* and *Ekstra Bladet*, and the two biggest public service broadcasters, DR and TV2 (see Table 1).

Following the data collection, articles were sampled for further analysis based on four overlapping criteria, of which at least one had to be fulfilled: (1) articles had to be about the Danish elections; (2) articles had to be about the threat of fake news towards Denmark and/or the EU; (3) articles had to be about specific cases of fake news (incl. mis- and disinformation) related to Danish politics; and (4) articles had to be about someone in Denmark accusing someone else in Denmark of spreading/being fake news. Of the excluded news pieces, a majority revolved around foreign politics (especially the US).

Table 1 – Archive and sample of Danish news articles

Media outlet	Type of outlet	Collected articles	Final sample
Politiken	Broadsheet newspaper	197	72
Berlingske	Broadsheet newspaper	155	65
Jyllands-Posten	Broadsheet newspaper	109	27
Information	Broadsheet newspaper	86	17
DR.dk	Public service broadcaster	76	26
Kristeligt Dagblad	Broadsheet newspaper	61	21
TV2.dk	Public service broadcaster	58	23
Weekendavisen	Weekly newspaper	50	10
Ekstra Bladet	Tabloid newspaper	41	16
B.T.	Tabloid newspaper	24	11
TOTAL		<u>857</u>	<u>288</u>

The final sample of 288 articles was analysed through three overlapping phases of qualitative analysis informed by the Essex School of Discourse Theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014). The initial phase involved identifying central themes and nodal points across the material, grouping articles and quotes around dominant topics and key signifiers. The second phase involved identifying discursive logics, pinpointing underlying processes and relations through which some subject positions, meaning ascriptions, and antagonisms become dominant, while others are excluded. Finally, the third phase involved refining and validating the findings, revisiting the studied material to challenge, affirm and nuance the results.

13.5 Theoretical Framework: Discourse Theory and Logics

The analysis builds on the Essex School of Discourse Theory, drawing on the concepts of *discourse*, *subject position*, *antagonism*, *imaginary, articulation*, *nodal point*, *hegemony* and – most notably – *logics* (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2014; Laclau 2005). In this vocabulary, discourses encompass "articulatory practices," while logics represent "processes that inform and structure such practices" (Glynos et al. 2021, 67). Logics capture "the rule or grammar" of a discursive practice and "the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable" (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 136, emphasis removed). They represent relational processes through which certain worldviews and modes of understanding become hegemonic (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

Studying (discursive) logics does not involve searching for causal laws, but rather searching for underlying rules and connections. This means examining relationships between subject positions, objects, and meaning ascriptions to identify underlying processes or 'grammars' that shape said relations. According to Glynos and Howarth (2007), logics can be divided into three overall types: social, political, and fantasmatic. Social logics encompass norms that structure sedimented social relations, while political logics refer to processes of political mobilisation, contestation, and redrawing of discursive boundaries (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Finally, fantasmatic logics capture processes through which certain subject positions and objects are constructed as enemies to be defeated to achieve harmony and discursive closure. This logic "promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome… or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable" (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147). This connects to the notion of imaginaries, which capture a "metaphorical representation of fullness" (Laclau cited in Howarth 2015, 49) within specific discourses.

In this article, I use the concepts of logics to critically unpack the discursive relations that shape media discourses around fake news. This involves "the linking together of different logics, along with the empirical circumstances in which they occur, in order to construct an account that is descriptive, explanatory, and critical" (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 152). While logics should not be seen as monoliths – since all discourses are multi-facetted and contain counter-tendencies – they nonetheless highlight underlying processes through which some meaning ascriptions come to dominate over others.

The study draws on the theoretical vocabulary of discourse theory to examine how certain understandings and imaginaries around fake news become hegemonic, while others are excluded. It furthermore uses the distinction between social, political, and fantasmatic logics to critically discuss the implications of how fake news is constructed in media discourses. Doing so, the article addresses the following research questions: How is fake news constructed as a topic and societal threat in Danish media discourses? Which logics undergird media discourses? And how do logics shape how some meaning ascriptions become dominant, while others are excluded?

13.6 The Danish Media Landscape and the Threat of Fake News

Before diving into news on fake news, I will briefly contextualise the Danish media landscape and outline how fake news – and associated terms and concerns - came to notoriety prior to the 2019 Danish EP and NP elections.

As in the rest of Scandinavia, Denmark's media landscape is characterised by a high degree of trust in media institutions as compared to the global average (Newman et al. 2020) as well as a strong tradition for state funding for news and public service broadcasting. Scholars have described Denmark as fitting the so-called Democratic Corporatist model of media and politics characterised by "a high reach of the press market, relatively high degrees of political parallelism, strong professionalisation, and strong state intervention" (Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1042–43). This system – associated with Northern Europe - stands in contrast to, for example, that of the US, which fits the Liberal model with little to no state funding for media institutions and lower degrees of trust in news (Newman et al. 2020).

Despite having markedly different media systems, concerns about fake news in Denmark came quite directly from the US (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021). As Google Trends show, the term was rarely used in Danish search queries before the 2016 US Presidential election (Google Trends 2022). As Donald Trump took office, scholars, journalists, and politicians raised concerns about the potential role of social media in influencing elections through manipulation and false information (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021). A central question in Denmark, as in the rest of the EU, became: Could this happen here?

In late 2018, The Danish Defence Intelligence Service warned that disinformation from Russia represented a substantial threat: "Denmark could be targeted with little to no warning … for example during an election campaign" (Danish Defence Intelligence Service 2018, 19–20). This bleak assessment came only six months before the Danish EP and NP elections, echoing concerns across Europe (Monsees 2020; 2021).

In tandem with worries about foreign interference, fake news also became associated with rhetorical attacks on established news, most (in-)famously through Donald Trump's persistent use of the term to delegitimise news media (Lischka 2021). In Denmark, fake news was similarly used to discredit established journalists in specific cases (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021). No elected

politician, however, adopted the word in a similar manner as seen in the US. To the contrary, Danish members of parliament reached a bipartisan agreement in early 2019, signing a so-called "gentlemen's agreement" to abstain from "fanning the flames when fake news that hurts political opponents starts circulation on the Web" (Bostrup 2019).

Despite widespread concern about election interference, no large-scale disinformation attack took place against Denmark or any other EU country in 2019. The outgoing Danish Minister of Defence declared that intelligence agencies had not found any examples of attempted foreign interference (Nielsen and Andersen 2019). The European Commission similarly concluded that "available evidence has not allowed to identify a distinct cross-border disinformation campaign" (European Commission 2019).

Although widespread disinformation remained absent from the EP and NP elections, Danish media produced hundreds of articles referencing fake news, misinformation, and disinformation during the election period. Studying this material provides critical insights into how and why news media construct fake news as a threat to democracy as well as how media institutions position themselves in relation to this threat. This addresses a notable gap in the literature on fake news and contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of fake news as a signifier in contemporary media discourses.

13.7 Five Logics of News on Fake News

Across the studied material, five interrelated logics undergird media discourses on fake news: (1) a logic of anticipation; (2) a logic of exteriorisation; (3) a logic of technologisation; (4) a logic of securitisation; and (5) a logic of pre-legitimation. These logics play a key role in shaping how fake news is constructed in news media, how it is perceived as a threat, and how journalists articulate their own role in relation to the topic.

A Logic of Anticipation

The first logic is a *logic of anticipation*. Fake news is articulated as not-yet-present, yet soon-to-be-materialised. It lingers in the close horizon as a pertinent threat towards Denmark, the EU, and democracy. If Denmark does not bolster its defences quickly, numerous articles claim, a large-scale attack would be close to inevitable: "the risk is not to be prepared for today or tomorrow's influence

operations – and that could be catastrophic" (Santos Rasmussen, 2019; see also Ahrens, 2018).

The 2019 Danish elections are presented as taking place in a brand new "digital media reality" (Fejerskov 2019) saturated with "fake news, cyber trolls" (Hertz cited in Hansen 2019), and "Russian robots" (Lauritzen cited in Olsen 2019). Democracy faces an imminent danger, not simply from an increase in lies, but also from a fundamental break with an established reality and hegemonic order:

> When Danes voted in June 2015 in the national parliament election, no one worried about fake news on Facebook. Back then, only few people could imagine that shady actors would use the world's biggest social media to spread political lies and try to manipulate voters… reality is now the complete opposite.

> (Sjöberg and Fejerskov 2019)

News media articulate the EP and NP elections as a period where fake news is likely to strike, perhaps even influencing the results: "All ingredients are there for an election period that explodes in our hands: mistrust, instability, and misinformation" (Madsen, 2019). Intelligence agencies warn that "Russia Will Attempt to Influence the Danish Election" (Ahrens 2018) and that "The Cyber Threat is Growing" (Kongstad 2019). The 2019 elections could become "infected with misinformation and propaganda so voters become isolated in two uncompromising camps. Or worse: Become so confused and paralysed that they completely turn their backs to the voting booth and debate" (Tolstrup Holm, 2019). Denmark and the rest of Europe will shortly be "swarmed with articles about fake news and voter manipulation" (Eberholst cited in Franck 2018).

Fake news could even – in the not-so-distant future - reach an industrial scale (Breinstrup 2018; Fejerskov 2019). As predicted by an "expert panel of fortune tellers" in *Berlingske*, Danes have to "prepare for attacks by artificial intelligence, freelance robots, and Danish fake news millionaires" (Breinstrup 2018). Shady actors appropriating sophisticated technologies will make fake news near-ubiquitous, with the most immediate threat coming from abroad. According to the Danish Defence Intelligence Service "there could be up to a 75% likelihood of Russia actually trying to interfere in the elections" (Svendsen, 2018). The odds of a large-scale disinformation attack are thus presented as potentially greater than the odds of an attack-free election.

A Logic of Exteriorisation

This connects to a second logic, a *logic of exteriorisation*. Fake news is predominantly constructed as deriving from nefarious and dangerous foreigners. As formulated by then Minister of Defense, Claus Hjort Frederiksen, Denmark faces a threat of election interference from "foreign powers" and "foreign states" (Cited in Larsen 2019). Across Danish media, Russia is highlighted in this regard.

According to Danish media professionals and authorities, Russia is preparing a large-scale disinformation attack on Denmark and the EU. The country is planning a "huge effort to derail the EP elections," as stated by former Danish Prime Minister and General Secretary of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Aagaard 2019). This makes it "highly likely that fake profiles will shape the debate and spread false claims before and during the elections" (Ankerhus & Elkjær, 2019).

Across the studied material, Danish journalists rarely question these assessments nor their empirical basis, which remain opaque. The underlying premise is generally accepted: Denmark faces a major foreign threat, powerful enough to undermine elections. Editors at news outlets support these assessments, highlighting their own professional importance in times "where manipulation, fake news, and troll armies could become part of political reality" (Østergaard and Jensen 2019).

The only tangible evidence presented to support the claims of imminent danger comes in the form of comparisons with other countries, most notably the US. A recurring narrative in Danish media is that, if disinformation attacks could strike the US, it could also happen in Denmark. Russia's next target after the 2016 US elections "could very well be the EP elections in May and the Danish national election" (Kretz 2019). The empirical support for such assessments remains opaque and news articles rarely engage with differences between Denmark and the US, for example in terms of electoral systems, media systems, languages, geographical sizes, and population sizes.

Through a logic of exteriorisation, fake news is associated with a foreign and malevolent 'them,' standing in contrast to a domestic and benign 'us.' Danish politics implicitly becomes associated with 'real' or 'good' news, while foreign actors become connected to 'fake' and 'bad' news. This is exemplified by the aforementioned "gentlemen's agreement" (Bostrup 2019) by which Danish members of parliament promised to abstain from sharing fake news. The subject position of Danish politicians is coupled with rationality and real news, dichotomously positioned in relation to those who spread fake news. Media professionals similarly claim to represent a "bulwark against fake news" (Mollerup, 2019),

coupling their own subject position to real news in a struggle against a foreign 'other.' In this way, fake news becomes part of a nationalistic discourse, in which Danes – particularly Danish authorities and traditional knowledge gatekeepers – are articulated as predominantly rational and well-meaning, while foreign actors are linked to malevolence. If Danish citizens are deceived or radicalised by lies, in other words, the culprit is largely assumed to be alien.

A detailed example of the logic of exteriorisation can be found in an article from the national newspaper, *Politiken*, entitled "The Ultimate Guide to Fake News: The Villains, Scandals, and Everything Else you Need to Know to Avoid being Deceived in the Election Year 2019" (Fejerskov 2019). This article tells readers to "know your enemy" as to "not become a victim" of fake news (ibid.). It then outlines three enemies, the first of which is the "professional web warrior" who is described as "extremely systematic" and "cynical" (ibid.). This villain can be found in "troll armies" in countries like Russia, the Philippines, Turkey, and Brazil, the article claims (ibid.). No EU country is mentioned as a potential base for the professional web warrior. The second enemy is the "businessman" who spreads fake news for monetary gains, being "completely indifferent to whether his fictitious stories affect political elections… And then he is Macedonian. Or at least he can be" (ibid.). No country except for Macedonia is specified as the businessman's potential residence. The third and final enemy is "the partisan," described as an "ordinary citizen fighting a persistent ideological battle on the Web and on social media. A battle where all tricks are allowed" (ibid.).

Two out of three enemy archetypes are constructed as purely foreign and non-EU based. These foreigners are presented as highly skilled and cynical, standing in contrast to the third archetype, constructed as an "ordinary citizen" driven by politics and emotions (ibid.). Through a logic of exteriorisation, fake news become inseparable from foreign actors. This extends to Danish media broadly, especially in assessments of the 2019 elections, where fake news is predominantly presented as deriving from a manipulative and alien 'them.' These findings resonate with existing research from Kalsnes et al. (2021), concluding that Scandinavian media have generally tended to portray "fake news in terms of Russian propaganda or for-profit fabrications by Macedonian teenagers" (285). It also aligns with findings from Germany (Monsees 2020), the Czech Republic (Eberle and Daniel 2019) and the US (Bratich 2020), pointing towards a cross-national discourse on fake news, undergirded by a logic of exteriorisation that antagonizes foreign 'others' and constructs domestic actors – especially politicians and journalists - as benevolent.

A Logic of Technologisation

This brings us to the third logic, a *logic of technologisation*. Fake news is constructed as inseparable from high levels of technological sophistication, deriving from "artificially intelligent robots, psychographic manipulation, and armies of Russian trolls" (Bostrup, 2019). Through imageries of 'robots,' 'algorithms,' and 'AI', fake news is not simply presented as equal to false information. Rather, it is articulated as a new type of technological danger so sophisticated that any citizen could potentially fall victim to it. It derives from false "profiles on social media that look and sound like Danish citizens" (Kretz 2019) and a "digital toolbox" that can increasingly "target more precisely, with greater effect, and lower risk of detection by the sender" (Splidsboel Hansen 2019).

Artificial intelligence will "increase societies' vulnerability to cyber-attacks" (Nordvang Jensen & Nielsen, 2019), potentially resulting in "assaults from malicious artificial intelligence, driven by rogue states" (Breinstrup, 2018). The election year – 2019 - will bring "a great breakthrough in so-called deepfakes - computer manipulated videos, for example with heads of state, that put words in their mouths with such authenticity that you cannot tell truth from falsehood" (Jarlner 2019). Deepfakes will provide "fake news on steroids" (Rasmussen 2019) that could result in "the collapse of election campaigns and perhaps even declarations of war" (Santos Rasmussen 2019). Danes must prepare for a future where "deepfakes combined with fake news heralds 'post-truth geopolitics' in international relations" (Rasmussen 2019).

Through a logic of technologisation, fake news marks a new era in which technology disturbs political reality and hegemonic relations in unforeseen and dangerous ways. It represents something broader than false information, capturing a dangerous technological development that threatens established norms and political stability. This finding also echoes previous studies (Carlson 2020; Waisbord 2018), again indicating a cross-national discourse.

A Logic of Securitisation

The fourth logic is a *logic of securitisation*. Fake news is constructed as a national security threat calling for national security solutions. Across Danish media, threat assessments predominantly derive from sources connected to the military and/or law enforcement, most notably intelligence agencies. According to these actors, fake news and disinformation from Russia represents "a real risk" (Karkov 2019) during the 2019 elections and a "growing threat towards Denmark" (Ritzau

2019). The presented solutions to this soon-to-be crisis revolve around increased military presence and surveillance. As summarised in *Jyllands-Posten*: "When the upcoming national election is announced, months of preparations will be behind it… the government has planned a cross-ministry task force together with the Danish Defence Intelligence Service and the Danish Security and Intelligence Service who will be surveilling social media" (Dengsøe and Festersen 2019). Prior to the elections, the Danish government allocated 172 million Danish kroner (approximately 23.1 million euro) to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service to combat fake news (Boier 2018). Among other initiatives, the agency announced it considered establishing "a hotline to which leading newspapers could call if they have suspicions of Russian misinformation" (Karkov 2019). They would also brief Danish members of parliament "about how to handle the threat of being a politician in Denmark during a national election" (Ahrens, 2018).

The discursive connections between fake news, foreign actors, and national security resonate with findings from other European countries and beyond (Monsees 2021; 2020; Eberle and Daniel 2019; Tenove 2020; Lim 2020). European governments have generally "turned to their national security sectors to address online disinformation" (Tenove 2020, 523), relying on "tropes such as 'hybrid warfare'" (Monsees 2020, 10). In the US, "professional journalism has drawn from the language of war… liberally employing terms like *weaponization* and *infowar* to understand fake news" (Bratich 2020, 314, original emphasis). Once again, this points towards a cross-national discourse, as I will return to in the discussion.

A Logic of Pre-Legitimation

The fifth and final logic is a logic of *pre-legitimation*. Drawing on Krzyżanowski (2014), this encompasses discursive practices where subjects legitimize their authority through "visions rather than accounts of practice yet construct those visions from experience-like aspects of discursive representation of social action" (346-47). Pre-legitimation is a form of discursive positioning where actors claim legitimacy based on *imaginaries* about "what we would potentially do" (Krzyzanowski 2014, 357), typically in response to "various real and imagined 'crises'" (Krzyżanowski 2019, 469). This discursive strategy often revolves around visions of how 'we' (as a collective identity) embody solutions to societal problems through idealised narratives of our existing practice.

In Danish media discourses, fake news is constructed as an almost-already crisis that pre-legitimises established knowledge gatekeepers, such as intelligence

agencies and journalistic institutions, by being their antithesis in an *a priori* sense. Fake news (re-)affirms the societal importance of journalism, not based on journalists' existing track record of countering fake news, but rather based on journalism's *ontological status* as a conveyor of truth. Since fake news is yet-to-be-materialised, it legitimises journalistic institutions irrespective of the current prevalence of falsehoods, since journalists simply "know the best cure against misinformation: trustworthy and transparent journalism delivered by established media" (Jensen, 2019b).

Danish citizens need journalists more than ever, news editors insist, since without traditional media, fake news from foreign robots and troll armies would likely win and overthrow established hegemonic order. According to Michael Dyrby (2019), Editor in Chief at the tabloid *B.T,* the Danish NP election is the "most important in 46 years," in part due to a "stream of information and misinformation that will pour from all media platforms." This, he argues, provides a "solid reason to follow the campaign here at *B.T*. and at other established media outlets" (Dyrby 2019). In a similar vein, Mikkel Hertz, the News Director at TV2, states that "systematic misinformation has become part of the Danish reality", making "trustworthy, transparent news reporting… more important than ever before" (cited in Kamph 2019). Luckily, Denmark has a "good press… far better than its reputation and a much better place to let yourself be enlightened than social media's opaque web of algorithmically controlled information streams", as formulated by Editor in Chief at *Kristeligt Dagblad*, Erik Bjerager (2019).

After the elections, several news editors declared victory, arguing that the lack of disinformation could largely be attributed to Danish journalists, since the "best defense against misinformation and junk media is skillful journalism" (Jensen, 2019a). In an editorial entitled "The Media Won the Election," Editor in Chief at the tabloid, *Ekstra Bladet,* Karen Bro (2019), proclaimed:

> The truth is that the established media throughout this election campaign has shown what journalism is worth and why we cannot just rely on neither emotions nor algorithms… The news landscape was not marred by fake news and attacks from Russian troll factories, as many feared…. This campaign has shown that we are ready for any challenge that may arise.
>
> (Bro 2019)

The lack of fake news, robots, deepfakes, and foreign 'others' – predicted to be close to inevitable before the elections – is presented after the fact as evidence of

the importance of journalism. Through a logic of pre-legitimation, journalism's role as the antithesis to fake news is paradoxically reinforced through a *lack* of journalistic findings around fake news.

The logic of pre-legitimation helps explain why Danish media – despite uncovering very few cases of disinformation – produced hundreds of articles mentioning fake news (and related concepts) during the 2019 EP and NP elections. In addition to perceiving fake news as an 'almost-already crisis,' fake news is seen as a dichotomous 'other' that (re-)affirms the societal importance of legacy media *a priori*. Fake news becomes part of a wider *imaginary* of how and why journalism will survive in times of challenges and dislocation. In the face of rapid technological change and financial hardship, fake news affirms the need to preserve the authority of established journalism as a societal knowledge gatekeeper.

In sum, fake news is constructed in media discourses as a soon-to-be-materialised, foreign, technologically sophisticated, national security threat. Editors at established news outlets articulate their institutions as bulwarks against this 'almost-already crisis,' pre-legitimising their professional authority through notions of deepfakes, robots, and malicious 'others.' These dominant meaning ascriptions arise through logics that produce specific imaginaries and hegemonic relations, shaping not only how fake news is understood as a threat, but also how it is addressed.

13.8 Discussion

The five logics presented in this article shape how certain worldviews and imaginaries around fake news become dominant, while others are excluded. For example, media discourses contain little discussion on how fake news might derive from within national politics or traditional media, since the threat of fake news is both implicitly and explicitly assumed to be de facto foreign and digital. Journalists rarely question or challenge threat assessments from intelligence agencies, since fake news is constructed as a soon-to-be materialised danger that is best understood through a national security lens.

The five logics identified in this study help explain why fake news receives significant media attention, even during periods with few documented cases of disinformation. By being a placeholder for general anxieties around foreigners, military threats, technology, and the societal role of traditional media, fake news is largely de-coupled from the abundance of false information. The discursive role of fake news becomes that of an antagonised 'other,' changing its meaning from

being synonymous with falsehoods to capturing broader fears of potential collapse of established hegemonic relations. News editors contribute to this discourse to (re-)affirm and protect their authority, articulating their institutions as *a priori* solutions to an 'almost-already crisis.'

As noted in the theory section, Glynos and Howarth (2007) distinguish between three different types of logics: social, political and fantasmatic. Applying this framework, Danish media discourses on fake news primarily rely on fantasmatic logics, processes through which some subject positions and objects are constructed as enemies to be defeated at all costs. Fake news is articulated as a fantasmatic 'other' that threatens the stability of both Denmark and democracy. Through the (fantasmatic) logics of anticipation, exteriorisation, technologisation, and securitisation, fake news condenses general fears about a not-so-distant future in which established hegemonic norms and hierarchies are subverted. This connects to the subject position of the 'foreigner' who is similarly presented as an enemy to be overcome. In response, media professionals rely on a logic of pre-legitimation to bolster their own discursive position as authorities of truth.

To legacy media institutions, the discursive construction of fake news as an 'almost-already crisis' provides both a dystopian fantasy of how society would disintegrate without them and a utopian imaginary of how and why they ought to maintain legitimacy and authority in times of technological change and declining traditional journalistic business models. In the face of challenges and dislocations for the journalistic profession, fake news 'proves' why legacy media institutions deserve to maintain the power to "write the next chapters of the political history of Denmark" (Jensen 2019a). In this way, fake news functions, not just an ambiguous buzzword, as shown in other studies (Egelhofer et al. 2020), but also as a *constitutive outside* for existing knowledge gatekeepers seeking to (re-)sediment a position of authority.

Existing research on journalistic coverage of fake news in countries like the US has shown that established media contribute to fearmongering around the topic with little empirical clarity (Carlson 2020; Bratich 2020). Carlson (2020) concludes that fake news has come to encapsulate "broader concerns surrounding the eroding boundaries of traditional journalistic channels" (376), making it "the ultimate other for traditional news organisations struggling to reassert control over the media environment amid declining public opinion" (386).

In Danish news media, fake news similarly functions as an 'ultimate other,' capturing wider concerns about foreigners, technology, the nation state, and – most

importantly - journalistic authority. Through the five logics identified in this study, the 'ultimate other' takes the form of a "fantasmatic object" that "resists public official disclosure" (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 148). Fake news becomes a threat so immense that its empirical basis becomes incommensurable.

The problem with fake news as an 'ultimate other' and 'almost-already crisis' undergirded by fantasmatic logics is not only that it becomes a placeholder for broad societal anxieties. It also creates potential blind spots in both public perception and political solutions. By constructing fake news as soon-to-be-materialised, journalists risk neglecting critical questions about the empirical basis of this threat. Similarly, constructing fake news as de facto foreign means journalists risk neglecting how manipulation might derive from within established political institutions. This argument was raised after the elections by Editor of Domestic Affairs at *Information*, Anton Geist (2019), questioning whether journalists had been "good enough at investigating and writing about the problem [of misinformation]," considering their extensive focus on foreign actors and negligible focus on falsehoods from the Danish government. Journalists similarly risk neglecting how false and manipulative information might derive from within their own institutions, something that has been documented in the past (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2018; Farkas and Neumayer 2020). All of this could result in a muddled understanding of both what fake news 'is' and how it can be meaningfully addressed.

Going forward, this study points to a need for further critical research on the discursive role of fake news in contemporary media discourses. More scholarship is needed on how journalists construct their own professional role in relation to the topic, including the challenges faced when trying to uncover cases of fake news, assessing it as a threat, and potentially contributing to the construction of an 'ultimate other.' Cross-national research is also needed on how media discourses and imaginaries around fake news differ and converge across geo-political contexts. Such critical enquiries remain pertinent as fake news continues to capture both headlines and imaginations of journalists across the world. Hopefully, this could enable a more nuanced understanding of fake news and disinformation in the 21st century and the specific challenges they pose for democracy.

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14 PAPER IV – FAKE NEWS IN METAJOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE

14.1 Abstract

In recent years, fake news has become central to debates about the state and future of journalism. This article examines imaginaries around fake news as a threat to democracy and the role of journalism in mitigating this threat. The study builds on 34 qualitative interviews with Danish journalists, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives as well as 42 editorials from nine national Danish news outlets. Drawing on discourse theory and the concept of metajournalistic discourse, the analysis finds that media actors mobilise fake news to support opposing discursive positions on journalism and its relationship with falsehoods. While some voices articulate established journalism and journalistic values, such as objectivity, as the antithesis to fake news, others blame contemporary journalistic practices for potentially contributing to misinformation, calling for change and reform. These contrasts are particularly notable between the public stances of editors-in-chief, expressed through editorials, and reflections based on personal experience from news reporters and media experts. The paper concludes that fake news functions as a floating signifier in Danish metajournalistic discourse, mobilised not only to attack or defend journalism, but also to present conflicting visions for what journalism is and ought to be.

Keywords: Fake news, disinformation, journalism, metajournalistic discourse, discourse theory, Denmark.

14.2 Introduction

Fake news has become a key signifier in metajournalistic discourse across the globe, i.e., "public talk that seeks to define what journalism is and how it ought to work" (Carlson 2020, 377). Declining journalistic standards have been blamed for a rise in falsehoods (Mikkelson 2016; Amrita 2017), while political leaders have appropriated the fake news concept in rhetorical and legislative attacks on established media (Lim 2020; Neo 2020; Rossini, Stromer-Galley, and Korsunska 2021). At the same time, prominent voices—both inside and outside of journalism—have argued that journalistic values, such as objectivity, represent the solution to fake news and the so-called post-truth era (Waisbord 2018; Wasserman 2020). Discourses around fake news have thus been marked by both tension and ambivalence, as different actors present conflicting definitions and opposing views on whether "journalism should be cast as a villain or victim of post-truth" (Farkas and Schou 2019, 60).

While there has been a veritable explosion in scholarship on fake news and related phenomena (Freelon and Wells 2020), "research into fake news discourse remains limited" (Wright 2021, 4). Researchers have tended to focus on new forms of online manipulation—studied under a range of overlapping headings—while neglecting the role of fake news as a signifier in socio-political struggles (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019). This has led to a lack of "empirical evidence on how the debate around fake news manifests itself in social reality" (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1324).

Emerging scholarship has begun tackling these issues, highlighting how the relationship between fake news and journalism often revolves around conflicting visions and directions for the journalistic profession (Farkas and Schou 2019; Carlson 2020; Lim 2020; Neo 2020).

Recent work shows that public debate around fake news has "negative downstream effects" on sentiments towards democracy, media, and free speech (Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2022, 14). Concerns about fake news in the US correlate with both negative views on the overall state of democracy and a willingness to impose free speech restrictions (Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2022). Other studies indicate that journalistic reporting on fake news unintentionally plays a key role in disseminating falsehoods, as audiences pick up and remember false information from news stories (Tsfati et al. 2020). This calls for a better understanding of both how and why journalists "cover fake news the way they do" (Tsfati et al. 2020, 169).

This article contributes to existing scholarship on fake news by examining metajournalistic discourse around the topic in Denmark. The study provides a qualitative discourse analysis of 42 editorials from nine national news outlets as well as 34 semi-structured interviews with journalists, government officials, social media company representatives, and professionals cited as experts on fake news in Danish media (henceforth designated as "media experts"). The dataset revolves around the 2019 Danish elections for both the European Parliament and Danish national parliament, a period marked by fear of fake news as threat to democracy as well as debate about the role of journalism in countering this threat (Jensen 2019b). By applying a discourse theoretical perspective (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), the study critically examines the relationship between fake news and journalism, thus contributing to existing research on metajournalistic discourse, which I will present in the following.

14.3 Metajournalistic Discourse

Metajournalistic discourse represents a rhetorical site where different actors "engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy" (Carlson 2016, 350). At the heart of metajournalistic discourse lie cultural and rhetorical struggles over journalism's core and periphery, questions about the ethos of journalists and the societal role of the profession. Through discursive practices, such as public debate, knowledge sharing, and codified norms, boundaries around ethics and values are continuously drawn and redrawn, not only by media professionals, but also by "such diverse actors and sites as government officials, historians, entertainment media, and educators" (Carlson 2016, 356). These processes demarcate the limits of what constitutes "the right way of doing journalism" (Hartley 1988, 81, original emphasis).

Metajournalistic discourse is central to journalism as a gatekeeping institution, since the profession lacks firm boundary markers, such as esoteric knowledge or regulated access, not least in the US and European countries like Denmark where journalism is not a protected professional title (Schudson and Anderson 2008; Vos and Thomas 2019). Discourse represents "the principal vehicle through which journalists construct their professional norms and ideals" (Vos and Thomas 2019, 397).

Scholars have found a consolidation of values over time, with specific practices, roles, and norms being considered "good journalism" across the world (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Mellado 2014; Wiik 2014). These constitute a "belief system" (Nerone 2012, 447), "ideological code" (Hartley 1988, 80), or "occupational ideology" (Deuze 2005, 443) built around shared understandings of how journalists ought to behave and contribute to society. Through metajournalistic discourse, beliefs gradually come to "crystallize as, or sediment in, institutional norms and practice" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 129), which in turn exercise an "institutionalized force" (Hartley 1988, 81) on practitioners. While values diverge across geo-political contexts (Mellado 2014), many are found throughout world, including adherence to a shared sense of objectivity (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Of interest to this study, Skovsgaard et al. (2013, 2018) have found that journalists in Denmark adhere strongly to an ideal of objectivity.

In studies of metajournalistic discourse, scholars have primarily focused on journalists as research subjects, downplaying the role of other actors in shaping journalistic values and norms (Carlson 2016; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Carlson

(2016) views this approach as limited, encouraging researchers to include governmental, academic, and corporate actors and take "seriously divisions among journalists and the blurring of boundaries between journalists and nonjournalists" (356). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, 129) similarly urge scholars to view "the public and other institutions" as "active interlocutors" in discursive practices around journalistic values.

This study takes up the call from Carlson (2016) and Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) to study metajournalistic discourse as a rhetorical interplay between diverse actors and contexts through which journalistic boundaries are drawn and redrawn. In the context of fake news, numerous actors either blame or praise journalism for its role in mitigating falsehoods (McNair 2017; Carlson 2020). While some are highly vocal about their discursive position—as in the case of prominent politicians accusing journalists of spreading fake news—others might be less noticeable, yet equally important. This includes journalism educators, government officials, and investigative reporters specialised in disinformation.

The rise of fake news in metajournalistic discourse paradoxically captures both a fear of demise of legacy media institutions and a desire to dislocate said institutions (Carlson 2018). While neither fear of journalistic decline nor antagonism towards journalism are novel phenomena (McNair 2017), fake news has increasingly become the go-to signifier for both those wishing to defend journalism in times of growing pressure on journalistic authority and those seeking to attack news outlets (Carlson 2020).

14.4 Fake News in Metajournalistic Discourse: An Ultimate Other and Floating Signifier

Emergent research has begun exploring fake news in metajournalistic discourse in countries, such as Austria (Egelhofer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2021), Germany (Monsees 2021), Russia (Dehghan and Glazunova 2021), Australia (Farhall et al. 2019), South Africa (Wasserman 2020), Malaysia (Lim 2020), Cambodia (Neo 2020), and, not least, the US (Waisbord 2018; Lischka 2019, 2021; Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020; Bratich 2020; Creech 2020). This scholarship shows that fake news often functions as an "empty buzzword" (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1036) in journalism and that political actors use the signifier with opposing meaning ascriptions (Li and Min-Hsin 2020; Dehghan and Glazunova 2021). This has led to a situation where, although citizens often "share the same concern over

'fake news,' they may not be thinking and talking about the same problem" (Li and Min-Hsin 2020, 11).

Whereas legacy media institutions mobilise fake news to promote themselves as reliable and trustworthy (Carlson 2020), some politicians use the term "to facilitate unsubstantiated 'lying press' accusations against media outlets" (Neo 2020, 1). In the name of protecting against fake news, policymakers in countries, such as Russia, Venezuela, Kenya, Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia, have implemented tighter restrictions on journalism and free speech (Farkas and Schou 2020; Lim 2020; Neo 2020, 2021). Elsewhere, for example within the European Union, politicians have used fake news to legitimise increased public spending on factchecking initiatives (Rankin 2017; AFP 2022). This shows how responses to fake news often varies significantly across geo-political boundaries, calling for context-specific research.

Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft (2019) argue that public debate around fake news constitutes a *critical incident* for journalism, i.e., a development that forces journalists to "reflect on their values and norms by reasserting the normative boundaries of their profession" (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019, 677; see also Zelizer 1992). In response to debates and imaginaries around fake news as a threat to democracy, journalists have had to try to reassert their authority and societal role through metajournalistic discourse. Carlson (2020, 386) argues that this has led to fake news becoming an "ultimate other" for traditional media; "a signifier that condenses broader concerns surrounding the eroding boundaries of traditional journalistic channels, the extension of mediated voices, and the growing role of social media in news distribution" (2020, 376). Instead of being synonymous simply with falsehoods, fake news has become intertwined with wider concerns about what journalism "is" and how it ought to develop in times of rapid technological change and challenges for journalistic business models. It has become a placeholder for external threats to legacy media against which journalists try to defend their profession (Carlson 2020).

For legacy media institutions, fake news calls for the reaffirmation of journalism as a knowledge gatekeeper (Waisbord 2018). For critics of established media, it condenses the "Dishonesty & Bad Reporting" (Trump 2018) that supposedly haunts the profession. Fake news has thus come to function as a *floating signifier* in metajournalistic discourse, receiving "the structural pressure of rival hegemonic projects" (Laclau 2005, 131; see also Farkas and Schou 2018). Opposing actors in different geo-political contexts define fake news dichotomously as part

of broader discursive struggles around media, technology, and politics (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Its meaning has become contingent on the political projects it is mobilised within, whether this be calls for strengthening factchecking journalism or dismantling established news outlets (Farkas and Schou 2019). Researchers have described this as a "politicization" (Brummette et al. 2018, 497) or "weaponization" (Egelhofer et al. 2020, 1325) of fake news, a discursive phenomenon found across the world (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Lim 2020).

Scholars have argued that the politicisation of fake news has stripped the term "of any analytical value it may have once held" (Freelon and Wells 2020, 146), urging colleagues to use "more precise language" (Freelon and Wells 2020). Others, in contrast, have proposed to sort out "what is 'essential' to this phenomenon" (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2022, 472). So far, however, no clear scholarly consensus has emerged, as researchers use fake news to describe a range of phenomena, including "satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising" (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018, 141). While some define fake news broadly as "information that is inconsistent with factual reality" (Brody and Meier 2018, 2), others define it narrowly as "a knowingly false headline and story … published on a website that is designed to look like a real news site and is spread via social media" (Rochlin 2017, 388). This ambiguity has likely contributed the term's adoption by political actors seeking to impose their own definition.

This article addresses a gap in research, not by abandoning fake news or authoritatively defining it, but by empirically examining how different actors in and around journalism discursively mobilise the signifier in a Scandinavian context that remains underexplored (Kalsnes, Falasca, and Kammer 2021; Farkas 2022). By analysing metajournalistic discourse through both the public stances of media institutions (via editorials) and individual reflections from journalists, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives, the study addresses the following research questions: How do actors inside and around journalism articulate and mobilise fake news as a signifier to demarcate boundaries of the journalistic profession? What tensions and contradictions arise in metajournalistic discourse around fake news?

14.5 The Case of the 2019 Danish Elections

This study focuses on two overlapping Danish elections that took place in 2019 for the European Parliament (on 26 May) and the Danish national parliament (on 5 June). These events represent, on the one hand, a significant moment for Danish democracy, marking a change of national government and the election of the second female prime minister in Danish history. On the other hand, the elections capture a broader climate of fear around fake news as a threat to democracy in times of rapid digitisation, growing far-right populism, and declining traditional knowledge gatekeepers. Leading up to 2019, political leaders and analysts across the globe warned of imminent dangers posed by disinformation (Brattberg 2019; Foy, Murgia, and Peel 2019). The European Parliament elections—held concurrently in all European Union (EU) member states in May 2019—were designated as "Europe's most hackable election" (Cerulus 2019) and a potential "next epicenter for malign election interference" (Brattberg 2019). Throughout the EU, surveys showed widespread concern of foreign meddling (European Commission 2018). In Denmark, intelligence agencies warned of up to a 75% risk that Russia would launch a disinformation attack (Svendsen 2018). According to a national survey, 47% of Danes were "worried" or "very worried" about fake news (KMD 2019).

As a liminal period for Danish and European democracies, the 2019 Danish elections brought existing fears of foreign interference, digital technologies, and manipulation to the forefront. Echoing the rest of Europe (Monsees 2021), fears of fake news sparked widespread debate in Denmark about the boundaries between "real" and "fake" news and the role of journalism in protecting democracy from the anticipated threat. Both journalists and other media actors contributed to this metajournalistic discourse, including news editors, academics, politicians, government officials, and social media company representatives. In the end, however, no orchestrated fake news campaign took place (Nielsen and Andersen 2019).

Studying the 2019 Danish elections, I argue, provides insights into both metajournalistic discourse in the specific context of Denmark as well as broader struggles about the state and future of journalism. Accordingly, I approach the elections as a context-specific case that enables an analytical move from the "from the specific to the abstract" (Carlson 2016, 363), i.e., from the intricacies of the Danish media landscape to wider fears and concerns around fake news and journalism in Europe and beyond.

14.6 Methods

Study Sample and Data Collection

The article draws on 34 qualitative interviews with journalists, government officials, social media representatives, and media experts as well as 42 editorials from nine Danish news outlets. The two types of data—interviews and editorials—were collected in order capture both the public stances of news organisations and individual reflections based on personal experience from key actors in coverage and debate around fake news. While qualitative interviews are not commonly used in research on metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016), these can help bring forth less visible discursive positions as well as internal tensions in the journalistic profession (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill 2018; Moon 2021). As such, including both editorials and interviews—while different in rhetorical scope—draws our attention to the relationship and tensions between official rhetoric from journalistic institutions and less visible forms of metajournalistic discourse from actors inside and around journalism.

Interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. By tracking news coverage during the elections, I invited journalists who wrote on fake news to participate as well as sources quoted as experts and/or stakeholders in news coverage. I personally conducted all interviews over a two-month period spanning roughly one month before and one month after the 2019 Danish elections (late April till late June 2019). During interviews, participants were encouraged to propose other relevant research subjects (most often colleagues within the same organisation).

Of the 34 interviewees, 16 worked as professional journalists—five in editorial positions—at 10 different national media outlets (see Table 1). 14 interviewees participated based on their contribution(s) to Danish news media as experts on fake news (and related topics). 10 of these media experts were employed at five different Danish universities, while two worked at other public research institutions and two worked as consultants specialised in social media analysis. In addition to the media experts, two interviewees participated based on their contributions to media coverage of fake news in their roles as Nordic officials at a major social media company. Finally, two participated due to their employment at a Danish government institution with expertise on disinformation. The latter two agreed to participate on the condition of not being cited directly in research

publications. Informed consent was secured from all interviewees.[26] Personal identities have been anonymised to protect participants' privacy.

Table 1 - Overview of interviewees and their roles and affiliations

Interviewees	#	Institutions	#
Journalists	16	*Journalistic institutions*	10
- Managing editor	5	- Public service broadcaster	3
- Journalist	11	- Broadsheet newspaper	3
		- News magazine	2
		- Digitally native news outlet	2
Professionals cited as experts on fake news	14	*Institutions of expert sources*	9
		- University	5
		- Other research institution	2
		- Private consultancy firm	2
Government officials	2	*Government department*	1
Social media company representatives	2	*Social media company*	1
Total:	**34**		**21**

The interviews lasted 63 minutes on average, each following a semi-structured interview guide. Four different interview guides were developed, one for each primary type of research participant: (1) journalist, (2) media expert, (3) social media company representative and (4) public official (i.e., government employee). Interview guides contained overlapping questions about the interviewee's connection to the topic of fake news, their views on the threat of fake news in Denmark, views on different terms used in media debates (e.g., fake news, misinformation, and disinformation), and their perception of the role and values of journalism in the context of fake news.

Following a qualitative approach, the interview guides did not contain any pre-formulated definitions of key terms, seeking instead to capture "descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, 16). As such, interviewees were not presented with an authoritative definition of fake news but were rather asked a series of questions about their personal understanding of the term. This enabled the study to probe into the interviewees' perspectives on the meaning of

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[26] In accordance with Swedish research regulation, ethical pre-approval was not required nor applicable for this study since it did not involve sensitive personal data nor sought to affect research subjects physically or psychologically. The author consulted with the local Advisory Board for Research Ethics at their university to confirm this.

fake news and analyse tensions as to how different actors make sense of it as both a phenomenon and contested signifier.

To include the public stances of media institutions, I systematically collected editorials through InfoMedia, a database of all major Nordic news publications, spanning a seven-month period around the 2019 Danish elections (1 December 2018 to 30 June 2019). Four different search queries were used to compile editorials from nine Danish national news outlets (see Table 2): "fake news," "falske nyheder" [fake news in Danish], "misinformation," and "desinformation" [disinformation in Danish].

Table 2 – Sample of newspaper editorials

Media outlet	Type of news outlet	Editorials
Politiken	Broadsheet newspaper	13
Ekstra Bladet	Tabloid newspaper	7
Kristeligt Dagblad	Broadsheet newspaper	5
Berlingske	Broadsheet newspaper	5
Information	Broadsheet newspaper	3
TV2.dk	Public service broadcaster	3
B.T.	Tabloid newspaper	3
Jyllands-Posten	Broadsheet newspaper	2
DR.dk	Public service broadcaster	1
Total		**42**

14.7 Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Editorials and interviews were analysed as one comprehensive dataset using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis programme for thematic coding and discourse analysis. The analysis followed three overlapping phases informed by the Essex School of Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This theoretical framework offers a valuable lens for studying metajournalistic discourse, drawing our attention to "the hegemonic formation of social relation—of discourses—that necessarily involve hierarchies of power and relations of inclusion and exclusion" (Dahlberg 2011, 41).

As highlighted by Carlson (2016), studying metajournalistic discourse involves examining rhetorical struggles to demarcate "boundaries around actors, norms, and practice" as well as who are "included or excluded within the boundaries of acceptable actors to create news" (Carlson 2016, 362). The Essex School of Discourse Theory is productive in this regard, as it approaches identity as contingent upon discursive struggles to obtain hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). i.e.,

dominance over boundaries of specific discursive formations. This directs our attention towards the role of the constitutive outside; signifiers designated as being outside or in opposition to a given identity as an "exterior to the community that makes its existence possible" (Mouffe 1993, 69). In the context of fake news, this means studying they ways in which different actors mobilise imaginaries around fake news as a constitutive outside to legitimise ideals about what constitutes "real news" and "real journalism."

The first phase of the analysis involved coding the material and identifying key themes, sub-themes, and *nodal points*—i.e., "privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 112). Nodal points serve as discursive anchors that link systems of meaning through their coupling to other signifiers. In the studied material, "journalism," "objectivity", and "fake news" all represent nodal points mobilised by different actors to support various discursive positions. The second stage revolved around identifying *logics of equivalence* across the material, signifying chains through which specific ideas, objects, and subject positions are coupled to each other in opposition to an antagonised "other" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In the studied data, this involved identifying who or what is blamed for fake news and who or what is designated as the solutions. Finally, the third phase revolved around (re-)problematising the findings, revisiting the studied material to nuance, affirm, and challenge the results. Table 3 presents an overview of key themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis.

Table 3 – Key themes and sub-themes from the analysis

Key themes	Sub-themes				
The threat of fake news against Denmark	Journalists' assessment of threat levels	Authorities' assessment of threat levels	Foreign sources of fake news	Domestic sources of fake news	Technological threats
Media institutions' response to fake news	Organizational restructurings	Self-branding	Level of priority and resources	Collaboration with tech companies	
Journalists' mitigation of fake news	The rise of journalistic interest	Cases of fake news in Denmark	Finding fake news	Challenges of journalistic reporting	The use of different concepts (fake news, disinformation etc.)
Journalists' contribution to fake news	The tempo of journalism	Partisan media	Blurring of boundaries (news, ads, and opinion)	Admitting errors	Technical abilities of journalists
Attacks on news media (Trump style)	Accusations from politicians	Accusations from citizens	Accusations from alternative media		
The future of journalism	Education	Collaboration between journalists	Journalism's gatekeeping function	Public funding	Private funding

14.8 Findings

At the heart of metajournalistic discourse around fake news, I find a series of tensions, as different actors appropriate the fake news signifier to support contrasting discursive positions on the state and future of journalism. As a nodal point in metajournalistic discourse during the 2019 Danish elections, fake news is opposingly mobilised as: (1) deriving from antagonised "others" versus from within journalism; (2) calling for a return to traditional journalistic values versus a renewal of journalism; and (3) calling for a pre-emptive versus detached role of journalists. These contrasts are particularly notable between the public stances of editors-in-chief, on the one hand, and individual reflections of news reporters and media experts, on the other. While the former group predominantly constructs journalism as the de facto antithesis to fake news—calling for a strengthening of legacy media institutions and traditional journalistic values—the latter group highlights how contemporary journalistic practices might contribute to a proliferation of falsehoods, calling for change and reform.

Fake News from Antagonized 'Others' Versus Within Journalism

The first tension in metajournalistic discourse revolves around fake news as an exterior or interior threat to journalism, i.e., questions about whether journalism solely presents solutions to fake news or whether journalistic practices potentially

contribute to falsehoods and manipulation. In editorials during the 2019 Danish elections, editors-in-chief predominantly articulate fake news as exterior and dichotomous to journalism: "We know the best cure against misinformation: trustworthy and transparent journalism delivered by established media … We are your guarantee for fair coverage you can trust and analyses you can navigate after" (Jensen 2019b).

According to editors-in-chief, fake news represents a new and alien threat that affirms the authority and legitimacy of traditional media. Danish voters need established media more than ever before since they could otherwise face a "stream of information and misinformation that will pour from all media platforms" (Dyrby 2019). Thankfully, editors proclaim, Denmark has a "good press … far better than its reputation" (Bjerager 2019). Legacy journalists protect citizens from "fake news and troll armies that could become part of political reality" (Østergaard and Jensen 2019). If only Danes keep subscribing to established media, democracy should be in safe hands, since journalism represents "your foundation for an enlightened election" (Henriksen 2019).

From this discursive position, fake news is imagined as an external danger against which journalism protects democracy. Fake news derives from antagonised "others" in the form of foreign troll armies, online robots, and rogue states (Kamph 2019; Østergaard and Jensen 2019; Jensen 2019b). Journalists stand in the way of these malicious actors, not only by performing specific professional duties, such as factchecking, but also by being antithetical to fake news in an *a priori* sense: "The best defence against misinformation and junk media is skilful journalism" (Jensen 2019a). Journalism is per definition the opposite of fake news, this view holds.

By deriving from antagonised "others," fake news affirms the need for established media in times of challenges for traditional journalistic business models. Despite the ubiquity of digital media channels—enabling many-to-many communication—fake news proves "what journalism is worth" (Bro 2019). Editors-in-chief thus mobilise imaginaries around fake news as a constitutive outside to reassert both their own professional identity and institutional authority. Fake news is an exterior threat to democracy—a foreign "other"—in the face of which journalism's importance is once again cemented.

A sense of renewed importance of journalism is not only found in the fairly polished and promotional rhetoric of editorials, but also in interviews with news reporters: "I feel we have realised we are still important—that it is important we

are here … That is really nice, actually. In a way, there is now work for us to do again" (Respondent 9, journalist at a public service broadcaster). As a novel societal threat, fake news "forces us to keep hammering the point that we are damn important for democracy" (Respondent 25, journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper). In contrast to editors-in-chief, however, news reporters and media experts often underline that journalism not only presents solutions to fake news, but also potentially contributes to problems.

In interviews, news reporters and media experts raise concern about how contemporary journalistic practices might contribute to a proliferation of falsehoods due to an increasing speed, a decline of specialised knowledge, and an unwillingness to look inwards and admit mistakes at established news outlets. Several voices argue that journalists potentially contribute to manipulation due to a fast-paced work culture with insufficient time for research: "I think journalists should be taught more about how we can be manipulated into promoting specific agendas… Things in the news stream move faster today. And we have perhaps relaxed our standards a bit" (Respondent 9, journalist at a public service broadcaster). According to media experts, journalists increasingly lack specialised knowledge and time for proper preparation, potentially contributing to errors: "I think journalists should turn down the speed of publication and do research properly. There is nothing worse than a journalist calling and asking: ¨What is fake news?' 'Well, maybe you should have found out before calling me?'" (Respondent 28, media expert).

From this alternative discursive position, fake news does not simply derive from malicious, foreign "others," but also from within journalism itself. Instead of coupling fake news solely to trolls, robots, and bad actors, this view holds that journalists need to self-reflect and reconsider their practices. Several voices raise concern about a lack of willingness to look inwards and admit mistakes in the news industry. There is "definitely a lack of self-justice in the media," as formulated by a managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper (Respondent 8): "In that way, I think it can sometimes feel phony when news media talk about themselves as bulwarks against fake news." Journalists who report on fake news similarly describe feelings of frustration when uncovering errors and cases of disinformation in competing newspapers due to a lack of willingness to take responsibility:

I did a story showing how [competing newspapers] had pretty much shared tweets from Russian operatives. It was very hard to get through to them. They were like 'Yes, we have now removed the tweet.' But hey, they have a responsibility! It is just very hard for them to admit it... I do not think there is enough of a realisation in the industry that we can easily be deceived.

(Respondent 34, journalist at a digital native news outlet)

Journalists also highlight how opinion pages in established news outlets potentially contribute to misinformation, since newspapers often have lax requirements regarding accuracy and factchecking. Opinion pages are "definitely a relevant thing to bring up when we talk about misinformation," since "readers are typically not very attentive towards labels—whether it is an opinion piece or a news article" (Respondent 8, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper). Several voices argue that there is an element of hypocrisy to the fact that media institutions present themselves as guardians against fake news while refusing to enforce stricter factchecking standards:

When they [competing newspaper] criticise Facebook for allowing all kinds of misinformation and extreme content and giving it reach, I think they should also look at inwards and say: 'Have our opinion pages been run properly?' I think it has definitely been a place where people could get away with saying things that were very far from the scientific consensus.

(Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper)

Fake News as a Call for Tradition Versus Change in Journalism

A second tension in metajournalistic discourse around fake news pertains to the need for strengthening traditional journalistic values versus moving in new directions. Some voices highlight the need to combat fake news through established journalistic virtues, such as objectivity and traditional factchecking, downplaying the need for new norms, practices, and alliances. Others see the rise of fake news as a development that calls for a departure from the journalistic status quo and towards new forms of journalism. As summarised by a media expert at a public research institution: "Some journalists keep saying: "Listen, fake news is nothing new, we do not need to invent anything, just keep doing journalism." And then others are saying: "This is new! We need to develop factchecking as a practice" (Respondent 4, media expert).

In editorials, editors-in-chief predominantly adopt the first position, underlining the importance of traditional journalistic virtues. Fake news calls for "credible and impartial coverage" (French 2019) and "facts, nuance, credibility, and transparency" (Østergaard and Jensen 2019) that can prove "why we cannot just rely on neither emotions nor algorithms" (Bro 2019). Objectivity and impartiality function as nodal points in this regard (i.e., privileged signifiers), as editors-in-chief mobilise these through logics of equivalence to position journalism as the antithesis to fake news.

Fake news is articulated as the opposite of "real news," with real news being synonymous with established news outlets that "enlighten skilfully and objectively" (Henriksen 2019). The signifiers of "journalism," "objectivity," "impartiality," "traditional journalistic values," and "established media" are all discursively coupled as interchangeable, positioned dichotomously to fake news deriving from antagonised "others." To save democracy from fake news, in other words, society needs journalism and journalism needs existing media institutions and the values of objectivity and impartiality:

> Fundamentally, I think the fake news scare we experienced since November 2016 has had a lot of positive effects on how the press perceives its own role. Because now we are suddenly forced to explain why we need to have authority. We return to the old virtues that have been forgotten… using objectivity in our methods.

<div align="center">(Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper)</div>

Voices supporting this position argue that journalists do not need "to do anything differently. We just need to keep using our methods that gets us to the truth—we do not need to do anything new" (Respondent 25, journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper). While fake news might be a novel threat to democracy, the solution to fake news is already here in the form of journalists "basically just doing our job" (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper).

In contrast to this view, other actors—particularly younger news reporters and media experts from universities and other research institutions—call for a reassessment of established journalistic norms and practices to mitigate the threat of fake news. These voices argue that fake news—especially on social media—requires "abilities that we do not currently have as journalists" (Respondent 14,

journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper). Traditional journalistic methods fall short, calling for new forms of research and writing, "new alliances," and "new tools and experts" (Respondent 5, journalist at a news magazine).

Established journalistic values and practices might even contribute to a proliferation of falsehoods, this position holds, as journalism is not well equipped to deal with disinformation. This calls for change and reform:

> You need different capabilities to mitigate this [disinformation]… I really think that needs to be a priority. Especially since we have structural problems in Denmark, which fundamentally revolve around the fact that journalism in Denmark is a quite poorly educated profession… So, I would like to see journalists getting sharper in this area.
>
> (Respondent 13, media expert)

To mitigate the threat of fake news—especially online—journalists need to re-evaluate their norms and practices, perhaps even "throwing out the objective journalist role, because it just does not really work when you describe the Web" (Respondent 34, journalist at a digitally native news outlet). Journalists need to "go back and say: 'How have we been deceived? … 'How have we been used? And with what consequences?'" (Respondent 34, journalist at a digitally native news outlet).

From this alternative discursive position, journalism and fake news are inter-twined phenomena, rather than opposites. Digital transformations have led to journalists being manipulated in new ways. Accordingly, the rise of fake news does not merit a continuation of the status quo, but rather a change in journalistic practices—a call for reform. In this way, fake news is mobilised as a nodal point in two conflicting views on the state and future of journalism; one that favours the status quo and one that seeks to move the profession in new directions.

Fake News as a Call for Pre-emptive Versus Detached Journalism

A third tension in metajournalistic discourse revolves around the role of journalists and journalism in mitigating fake news as a societal threat. Some voices underline the importance of pre-emptively protecting against fake news by educating citizens on how to avoid deception from nefarious actors. Others call for more detached and critical approaches, worrying that contemporary journalism alienates readers by overemphasising potential risks around fake news,

underestimating peoples' capabilities to separate facts from fiction, and insufficiently criticising government narratives of impending disinformation attacks.

The first discursive position, once again found primarily in editorials, emphasises the journalistic importance of educating people about the dangers of fake news and how to avoid them: "At *Politiken*, we see it as our task to do everything in our power to make sure the election is not decided by false profiles and fake news" (Jensen 2019b). Fake news represents a growing societal threat that journalists must diligently prepare citizens to withstand (French 2019). Journalists need to be on high alert *in advance* of fake news, proactively teaching people how to spot and reject falsehoods before "Russian troll armies turns the general election into a battlefield" (Jensen 2018).

One of journalism's key societal functions, this position holds, is to "strengthen peoples' critical senses" (Respondent 16, journalist at a digitally native news outlet) and "get the population to understand that there are risks we need to be aware of" (Respondent 31, media expert). Alongside other forms of preventive initiatives—such as government task forces and social media company regulation—journalism serves as a societal "insurance" or "burglary alarm" against fake news, as formulated by a Nordic official from a major social media company (Respondent 20): "Hopefully, your house doesn't burn and there is no Russian attack on us."

In contrast to this discursive position, another view holds that journalists ought to take a more detached and critical stance, providing information without over-emphasising risks that have yet to materialise, instructing people on how to behave, or accepting government claims.

Journalists should critically reflect on whether they are "good enough at investigating and writing about the problem [of misinformation]" (Geist 2019), considering that they largely adopt government narratives of impending digital attacks from foreign actors, neglecting how the government itself "peddle lies to voters" (Geist 2019). Danish authorities have tended to "cry wolf" about fake news "and then nothing has happened" (Respondent 22, managing editor at a national newspaper). Journalists have failed to sufficiently question the senders' motives when relaying threat assessments from Danish intelligence agencies and politicians (Kastrup 2018). At the same time, journalists have tended to write in a patronising tone that underestimates people's abilities to avoid manipulation:

We advertise that our media outlets are a kind of bulwark against fake news… I think it is true that we have an obligation in the media to make sure we avoid a situation where people are uninformed. But people are not stupid, you know? And that is what provokes me a bit when you blow up this misinformation thing.

(Respondent 18, Journalist at a national broadsheet newspaper)

Instead of seeing the primary role of journalists as pre-emptive educators—informing people about potential disinformation and how to avoid it—this discursive position holds that journalists ought to function as detached observers who remain critical of all claims from political actors, including assessments of fake news from government institutions. From this view, contemporary journalism has tended to overstate fake news by accepting "narratives of decay" (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper) about "Danish democracy being left in the hands of American designed algorithms and nefarious agendas from Russian troll factories" (Henriksen 2019). Journalists should ask themselves whether they have been successful in "balancing how bleak we portray things" (Respondent 1, managing editor at a national broadsheet newspaper). In this way, fake news is once again mobilised to support two opposing views on how journalists ought to behave and how journalism should develop.

14.9 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings show that metajournalistic discourse in Denmark is marked by tension, as different actors mobilise fake news to support conflicting arguments on the state and future of journalism. Although editors-in-chief, managing editors, news reporters, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives all agree that journalism is key to addressing fake news, views differ markedly on the exact relationship between fake news and journalism. Prominent voices—especially editors-in-chief at established news outlets—argue that traditional journalistic values and institutions represent the antithesis to fake news, deriving from foreign "others." In contrast, other voices—both inside and around journalism—argue that fake news calls for reflection and self-criticism in the news industry as well as changes to norms and practices.

Rather than simply being ambiguous, fake news obtains conflicting meanings as part of discursive struggles to (re-)shape what journalism is and ought to be. To those who seek to strengthen established media and traditional values, such as

objectivity, fake news serves as a constitutive outside that affirms the need for legacy institutions and existing ways of doing things. To those who are critical of the journalistic status quo, fake news proves the need for reform, particularly in the context of digital capabilities, factchecking, opinion pages, the notion of objectivity, the speed of work, and journalists' willingness to admit mistakes. Fake news thus acts, not only as a nodal point, but also as a floating signifier in metajournalistic discourse; a concept "whose meaning is 'suspended'" (Laclau 2005, 131) between different, antagonistic, hegemonic projects.

The findings of this study contribute to existing research in three important ways. First, the results shows that fake news not only functions as a contested concept in struggles between politicians and journalists, which has been a primary focus of existing research (Carlson 2018; Waisbord 2018; Lischka 2019, 2021; Neo 2020). Fake news also functions as a floating signifier within journalism itself, with different voices mobilising the term to support conflicting visions for the journalistic profession.

Second, the study contributes with new insights on how actors inside and around journalism reflect on challenges of covering fake news, for example in relation to digital capabilities, threat assessments, and the risk of overemphasizing dangers. The findings show that journalists are often aware of a potential negative role they might serve in disseminating falsehoods and creating a distorted image of democracy, something scholars have previously raised concerns about (Tsfati et al. 2020; Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2022). Still, journalists express difficulties in overcoming said challenges and frustration with media institutions' unwillingness to acknowledge them.

Third, the study shows that fake news in metajournalistic discourse is not solely tied to a prevalence of false information. During the 2019 Danish elections, no major disinformation campaigns were detected, nor did journalists uncover prominent cases of falsehoods (Nielsen and Andersen 2019). Yet, news media wrote extensively on fake news, with editors-in-chief mobilising the signifier to bolster their own legitimacy. This highlights how fake news' centrality in metajournalistic discourse is as much tied to struggles over what journalism "is" as it is tied to specific threats posed by false information.

In terms of limitations, this study has not been able to assess how journalists, in practice, find and report on fake news, nor if there are contradictions between practice and metajournalistic discourse. For example, the study has not been able to evaluate how and to what extend journalists try to address the challenges of

reporting on fake news brought up in interviews. The use of snowball sampling to identify research participants also limits the generalisability of the results. This points to a need for further research into both journalistic practices and metajournalistic discourse in further geo-political contexts.

Newsroom ethnography could provide valuable insights in future research, mapping the intricacies of how journalists; (1) negotiate fake news' importance in newsrooms, (2) evaluate threat assessments, (3) use digital tools, and (4) navigate risks of unintentionally spreading falsehoods. Ethnographic work could also contribute to a deeper understanding of internal tensions in editorial processes, for example between editors-in-chief and news reporters. Discourse theoretical perspectives might be useful for such endeavours since they emphasise the contingency and relationality of social formations and how the "creation of a 'we' … can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'" (Mouffe 2005, 15).

In sum, future research could hopefully contribute with new insights into both metajournalistic discourse and journalistic practices around fake news, thus increasing our understanding of ongoing struggles to define fake news as well as broader conflicts over the future of journalism in times of declining business models, political instability, and ubiquitous digital platforms.

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15 PAPER V – MIMICKING NEWS: HOW THE CREDIBILITY OF AN ESTABLISHED TABLOID IS USED WHEN DISSEMINATING RACISM

15.1 Abstract

This article explores the mimicking of tabloid news as a form of covert racism, relying on the credibility of an established tabloid newspaper. The qualitative case study focuses on a digital platform for letters to the editor, operated without editorial curation pre-publication from 2010 to 2018 by one of Denmark's largest newspapers, *Ekstra Bladet*. A discourse analysis of the 50 most shared letters to the editor on Facebook shows that nativist, far-right actors used the platform to disseminate fear-mongering discourses and xenophobic conspiracy theories, disguised as professional news and referred to as articles. These processes took place at the borderline of true and false as well as racist and civil discourse. At this borderline, a lack of supervision and moderation coupled with the openness and visual design of the platform facilitated new forms of covert racism between journalism and user-generated content.

Keywords: racism, letters to the editor, borderline discourse, digital journalism, fake news

15.2 Introduction

> Publish your own text on the biggest news website. The People's Voice is for people who are passionate about a cause – and want to say their piece.[27]
>
> (Ekstra Bladet, 2016)

This quote was placed on the front page of The People's Voice [Folkets Røst], an online platform operated by the Danish tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* from 2010 to 2018. While active, users were encouraged to "get involved in the debate, make your opinion known" (Ekstra Bladet, 2016) without editorial supervision or curation pre-publication. *Ekstra Bladet*'s editor-in-chief, Poul Madsen, described the platform as an open space for discussion, in which users could write anything they wanted (Andreassen, 2015). The newspaper consistently referred to content on The People's Voice as "letters to the editor" (Andreassen, 2015), insisting that it represented the digital equivalent of opinion pages in print media (Madsen, 2016). Yet, authors on The People's Voice often described their work as news articles, suggesting a hybrid format between news and opinion. Several

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[27] All quotes originally in Danish have been translated by the authors.

of the most active authors on The People's Voice were also prolific contributors to hyperpartisan right-wing news platforms. This suggests the appropriation of The People's Voice as an extension of hyperpartisan news platforms and nativist blogs.

Critical research has shown how racism is increasingly present and even amplified in digital media environments (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). The ideal of enabling as much freedom of expression as possible has led to a plethora of new outlets, giving rise to new forms of deception that blur traditional boundaries between journalism and opinion (Tandoc et al., 2018). While studies of fake news, junk news, and hyperpartisan media discuss the changing role of gatekeepers, from journalists to social media platforms (Bro & Wallberg, 2014; Heft et al., 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018), studies of digital racism focus on tactics of oppression within changing media environments (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Farkas et al., 2018). The present article combines these lines of research, analysing the discursive tactics of nativist far-right actors at the juncture of digital journalistic formats and covert racism. We explore how The People's Voice was tactically appropriated to legitimise racist discourse supported by the infrastructure of a tabloid newspaper. In the following, we introduce the conceptual foundations of the case study, drawing on scholarship about the blurring boundaries of online journalism and digital racism. We then outline the study's qualitative approach drawing on discourse theory, followed by the analysis of letters published on The People's Voice, which is structured along the technological context, sources, and stories.

15.3 Journalism, Clicks, and Social Media

In today's hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013), the boundaries between journalism and user-generated content, old and new media, media institutions and social media, and credible and dubious information, have become increasingly fluid (Tandoc et al., 2018). Multiple actors participate in the production and dissemination of both professional journalistic work and user-generated content presented in similar packaging. As noted by Carlson, "struggles over journalism are often struggles over boundaries" (2015: 2). While journalistic boundaries have never been entirely static, the digital era introduces new struggles over what counts as news (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Recent studies indicate that online users have difficulties assessing information credibility and sources (Garrett et al., 2019; Nygren & Guath, 2019). In part, this is due to social media's visual design,

making different types of content "often visually indistinguishable" (Vaidhyanathan, 2018: 5).

The rise of digital platforms challenges journalistic authority on several levels, as these spaces "alter the availability of news, its economic structures, and the relationship between journalists and their audience" (Carlson, 2017: 2). Newspapers increasingly rely on online user engagement as measures of proliferation (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). While journalists still act as gatekeepers of newsworthiness, the premises on which decisions are made have, to some extent, changed (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). As Lee and Chyi (2014) argue, online newsworthiness is defined by a greater variety of factors than in print media. This gives rise to new hybrid modalities of gatekeeping and news (Eg & Krumsvik, 2019).

One important aspect of online news proliferation is the "clickability" of headlines, or their ability to attract attention and cause users to distribute it further by clicking, liking, commenting, and sharing (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013; Kuiken et al., 2017). Clickbait articles are often simplified, speculative, negative, and provocative (Blom & Hansen, 2015), using questions and surprising statistics to attract attention (Kuiken et al., 2017). In a broader context, scholars argue that this amplifies existing "erosion of the fact/commentary distinction" (McNair, 2017: 1327). Fake news, junk news, and hyperpartisan media often rely on clickbait headlines to attract attention (Bradshaw et al., 2019). While such content can spread in social media and outside the reach of established media institutions (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Heft et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2017), professional news media can amplify and legitimise harmful digital content by increasing its visibility and reach (Phillips, 2018).

15.4 Deceptive News and Its Connection to Racism

The loss of accuracy in favour of clickability in digital media has been identified as a key factor in the rise of what has been defined as fake news, junk news, and hyperpartisan media (Carlson, 2017).[28] As argued by Tandoc and colleagues, fake news appropriates the credibility of news media, undermining journalistic credibility by mimicking "the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions" (2018: 147). They argue that fake news is in many respects co-constructed by the audience who

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[28] It should be noted that the notion of "fake news" has increasingly come to function as a rhetorical weapon in political debates (Farkas & Schou, 2018).

mistakes it for credible news and legitimises it through online engagement. Over the past decades, research has increasingly shown how deceptive tactics are mobilised to promote racism in digital media environments (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Farkas et al., 2018).

In this context, Matamoros-Fernández (2017: 930) introduces the notion of "platformed racism" to encompass the amplification of racist discourses on digital platforms at the intersection of user practices, algorithms, interfaces, policies, and business models. Digital media platforms are in many respects ambiguous spaces of expression, blurring the boundaries between what is considered inappropriate, fake, trolling, and normal (Phillips, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017: 567) present the notion of "borderline discourse" to encompass the ways in which racist ideas can become legitimised online by being packaged as civil and acceptable. This packaging occurs through the tactical appropriation of institutional authority, for example by exploiting existing platforms or mimicking established formats, such as journalistic genres. Borderline discourse can proliferate both on fringe websites and established platforms hosted by credible institutions, where uncivil ideas are promoted under the guise of civility. Here, racist actors take a "self-proclaimed role as interlocutors of the accepted sites of debating political views" (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017: 570). Borderline discourses normalise otherwise uncivil ideas and bring them from fringe positions into mainstream media and parliamentary politics. This is linked to populist rhetoric revolving around the discursive construction of "us" versus "them" and "the people" versus the "foreign Other". As noted by Engesser and colleagues, "populist communication logic and online opportunities go hand in hand" (2017: 1284).

This research departed from this intersection of racism, deception, ambivalence, and online news. Following Giglietto and colleagues (2019), we approached the case study from a processual perspective, focusing equally on the studied sources (their authority and proximity), the stories (and their alignment with the specific values), and the technological context (the platform infrastructure and visual presentation). We argue that the normalisation of digital racism takes place at the borderline of true and false as well as civil and uncivil discourse. Within this conceptual framework, we explore how The People's Voice was tactically appropriated to amplify racism through borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017) and how it blurred the boundaries of journalism and opinion (Carlson & Lewis, 2015).

15.5 The People's Voice

The Danish tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*, founded in 1904, operates the second-most visited Danish website, surpassed only by the national public service broadcaster, Danmarks Radio (Alexa, 2018). Launched in 1997 (Sahl, 2017), *Ekstra Bladet*'s website has continuously ranked as one of the most visited in Denmark (Danske Medier Research, 2018). With the emergence of social media, the newspaper increasingly relies on online distribution, especially through Facebook, with 72 per cent of the Danish population having a Facebook account (Rossi et al., 2016). *Ekstra Bladet* is known for its combination of entertainment and investigative journalism for which it has received several journalistic awards (Dansk Journalistforbund, 2018). Following international developments in news digitisation (Carlson, 2017), the newspaper has in recent years adapted to digital media by enabling native advertising (Barlag, 2016) and producing clickbait headlines to increase user attention and engagement on social media. *Ekstra Bladet* also runs one of the largest online discussion forums in Denmark, The Nation [Nationen], which has been criticised for its hostile tone and racist sentiments (Kjeldtoft, 2016).

The People's Voice was a digital platform, operated by *Ekstra Bladet* from 2010 to 2018, where users could publish their own letters to the editor. The platform received an award for "Best User Involvement" by the Association of Danish Interactive Media in 2010 (Mediearbejdsgiverne, 2010). Officially, The People's Voice never progressed beyond beta mode, being perpetually labelled as an unfinished product (Ekstra Bladet, 2016). In late March 2018, *Ekstra Bladet* decided to discontinue The People's Voice, stating that this was due to insufficient user activity and readership (correspondence with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist Thomas Harder, 22 March 2018). *Ekstra Bladet* has since deleted all content from The People's Voice.

15.6 Methodological Approach

Drawing on discourse theory, this qualitative case study analysed the most visible letters to the editor published on The People's Voice. The research examined the construction and presentation of themes, narratives, and rhetorical strategies taking place within the blurring boundaries of news and opinion, and journalism and user-generated content facilitated by *Ekstra Bladet*. The in-depth analysis of the letters focussed on the strategies and narratives that attracted most attention on the platform and discussed their implications for journalistic boundaries.

While *Ekstra Bladet* does not provide access to the most read or shared entries, each entry published on their website (during the time of data collection in February 2017) contained a share-counter indicative of the number of shares on Facebook (see Figure 1, top right corner). To collect the most shared letters on The People's Voice from 2015 and 2016, we departed from statistics on social media interactions around Danish news content (see Bro & Wallberg, 2014; De virale nyheder, 2019),[29] which showed the number of interactions (likes, comments, and shares) of each entry from Danish news outlets after their first week of publication. These data were collected via Facebook's Graph API and the API tool SharedCount. From the data, we generated a list of the 200 entries (that received most interactions after a week) and crosschecked them with the share-counters for each of these entries on *Ekstra Bladet*'s website. This way, we generated a list of letters that had received most shares on Facebook over time (excluding entries that had since been deleted).

To enable in-depth qualitative analysis focussing on discourses and rhetorical strategies, we narrowed our scope to the 50 most shared letters, which were collected through screen captures. Subsequently, we created an overview of the letters ranked from most shared to least shared on Facebook containing their headlines, authorship, and numbers of shares and interactions.[30] Throughout the analysis, each letter from The People's Voice is referenced using the author's surname, year, and ranked number (e.g. [1]), indicating its proliferation.

Following Yin (2009), we approached *Ekstra Bladet*'s The People's Voice as a context-dependent case shaped by the interaction of user actions, discourses, and digital architecture. The 50 letters in our study were analysed in four rounds. First, to get an overview, we counted and catalogued four key elements: authors; quotes and references from public figures and experts; hyperlinks to newspapers, blogs, and websites; and sources of statistics. Second, with a closer reading of the letters, we identified the main topics and themes in headlines, texts, and images across the material. Third, we identified patterns for each of the themes in the letters. Fourth, informed by discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), we conducted an in-depth discourse analysis of the letters. This discourse analysis centred on the ways in which different narratives and identities were constructed relationally within the studied material. We particularly focused on subject positions

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[29] Developed by Filip Wallberg at the University of Southern Denmark.

[30] The letters from The People's Voice can be made available by the authors as PDFs upon request.

(articulated political identities), logics of difference (ways in which signifiers gain meaning through differences from other discursive elements), and logics of equivalence (ways in which signifiers are linked to discourse, against a shared opposition) (see Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). This qualitative analysis enabled a detailed presentation of rhetorical and discursive strategies.

Upon completion of the process, we used Google search to query for the title of each letter to the editor, searching for references to them and re-publications. We also performed queries on Facebook, searching for the letters shared through public accounts, particularly by political figures. For further information about The People's Voice, we corresponded with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist (and editor of The Nation) Thomas Harder, collected newspaper articles about The People's Voice, and (where possible) followed the proliferation of letters through shares, comments, and likes on social media. While the study could not draw conclusions about representability of the letters for The People's Voice overall, following the proliferation of the most visible letters enabled a critical discussion of how this phenomenon contributes to the blurring of journalistic formats, opening up questions for similar use by other media institutions.

A Brief Note on Significance

The 50 letters from The People's Voice that received the most interactions on Facebook (likes, comments, shares) after a week of proliferation received 124,364 interactions. The 50 letters in our study, which excludes letters deleted by *Ekstra Bladet* or authors at the time of data collection, received 78,834 interactions within the first week and were shared 124,303 times on Facebook across time. These are relatively small figures as compared to *Ekstra Bladet*'s main website (where the top 50 entries from the same two years received 1,084,598 interactions within the first week), which helps explain why the newspaper chose to discontinue the platform. Still, *Ekstra Bladet*'s website is one of the most visited news sites in Denmark. While we do not have comparable numbers for fringe media and hyperpartisan blogs, The People's Voice did provide an infrastructure for promoting perspectives that would not be acceptable in mainstream media.

Studies of interactions on Facebook news pages often differentiate levels of activity such as likes, shares, and comments (see e.g., Larsson, 2018). While likes are usually classified as low-level engagement, they mean something different if the entry represents otherwise unacceptable political perspectives (see Neumayer & Svensson, 2016). The interactions on Facebook with the analysed letters include the official Facebook page of the Danish People's Party (the third largest

political party at the time), the official page of Pia Kjærsgaard (former leader of the Danish People's Party), and the official page of Martin Geertsen (member of parliament for The Liberal Party). They shared the letters leading up to the 2015 national elections in Denmark where immigration and the so-called refugee crisis were heavily disputed and politised issues. By being shared by prominent political actors and becoming part of mainstream political campaigns, the letters played a significant role in transgressing the boundaries between acceptable and uncivil discourse, as our analysis revealed.

15.7 Technological Context: An Infrastructure for Mimicking News

The infrastructure provided by The People's Voice made it possible to mimic news published by *Ekstra Bladet*. This was mainly due to the resemblance between entries published on both platforms. The overall layout, fonts, and colours were identical, making it difficult to differentiate between user-generated content (originally published on The People's Voice) and the work of professional journalists (originally published on *Ekstra Bladet*'s news website). With the layout being identical, a reader would have to identify the author's name printed in small font below the headline as not belonging to a journalist (see Figure 1). Within this infrastructure, The People's Voice enabled users to produce their own headline, subheading, body text, and hyperlinks as well as to upload an accompanying image in a visual layout closely resembling news articles by *Ekstra Bladet*'s editorial team. Moreover, *Ekstra Bladet* did not prohibit users from calling their work "news" or "articles". When shared on social media (see Figure 2), letters to the editor appeared identical to articles published by *Ekstra Bladet*'s newsroom, with identical formatting and visual layout. The letters appeared with *Ekstra Bladet*'s top-level web domain ekstrabladet.dk, identical to news articles. The only difference was a small-print disclaimer: "Publish your own text on the biggest news website. The People's Voice is for people who are passionate about a cause – and want to say their piece" (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 - Resemblance in visual layout, *Ekstra Bladet* (top) and The People's Voice (bottom)

Figure 2 - Resemblance in visual layout for articles shared on Facebook, *Ekstra Bladet* (left) and The People's Voice (right), differences highlighted

While the technical infrastructure made it possible to mimic news articles, *Ekstra Bladet* handled The People's Voice as an opinion page and encouraged anyone to voice their opinion through the platform (Andreassen, 2015). As an opinion page, The People's Voice functioned without supervision, content moderation, or curation pre-publication. *Ekstra Bladet* argued that this lack of interference was key to producing an atmosphere of free and open debate (Bendtsen, 2016). This

was supported by the ideal of a platform that "took care of itself" (correspondence with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist Thomas Harder, 19 February 2018). The editorial team referred to the content as "letters to the editor", "reader posts", or simply "posts" (Andreassen, 2015; correspondence with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist Thomas Harder, 19 February 2018).

The resemblance between the news articles on *Ekstra Bladet* and opinion pieces on The People's Voice led to criticism on several occasions, as they were clearly mistaken as articles written by professional journalists. A letter to the editor was widely circulated as news from *Ekstra Bladet* prior to the Danish parliamentary elections in 2015. The letter allegedly "revealed" that the husband of Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, had committed tax fraud (Andreassen, 2015). Editor-in-chief Poul Madsen admitted that even he was "very confused" until he realised that the story had not been published by *Ekstra Bladet*'s newsroom, but "it's just arranged so it resembles" (Andreassen, 2015). The newspaper responded by removing the content, but the visual layout of The People's Voice remained the same (Andreassen, 2015). In 2016, a letter to the editor from The People's Voice, with the headline "Trend arrived in Denmark: Immigrants kidnapping Danish girls for sex", once again sparked criticism (Hemmeth, 2016). Within a week after its publication, the letter received 20,484 interactions on Facebook. Madsen responded defensively to the criticism, arguing that all news media encompasses both journalism and opinion, and The People's Voice "is the users' own universe" (Madsen, 2016). The platform was, from his perspective, equivalent to opinion pages in print media. Despite *Ekstra Bladet*'s defence, Lars Werge, head of the Danish Union of Journalists at the time, criticised The People's Voice, arguing that "when you see this post on social media, I don't think you notice it's not a journalistic article […] which can ultimately damage journalism's credibility" (Bendtsen, 2016).

The combination of visual layout of The People's Voice's, *Ekstra Bladet*'s insistence in treating The People's Voice as an opinion page, and the ability of such to travel through social media in the guise of news articles written by professional journalists, created a hybrid news format. This format represented personal opinions of users but could be fashioned into a journalistic news genre and referred to as such. The technological infrastructure was thus not only provided by The People's Voice but also by *Ekstra Bladet* and social media platforms. Combined, they created an infrastructure where letters were shared as newspaper articles and strategically quoted and used to legitimise and normalise racism through "borderline

discourse" (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017: 567), as we will unfold in the following sections.

15.8 The Source: Tracing Authors, Media, and Hyperlinks

Within the technical infrastructure of The People's Voice, various aspects gave letters legitimacy and the appearance of news articles published by *Ekstra Bladet*'s journalists. Of the 50 most shared letters to the editor in our study, only three were written in first person, drew upon personal experience, and stylistically resembled letters to the editor found in opinion pages (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004 for such criteria). Written in third person, with consistent use of images, subheadings, statistics, and hyperlinks, the authors of a majority of letters explicitly referred to their own content as "articles" and "news".

Of the 50 letters to the editor in our sample, 17 were also posted identically elsewhere online on the same day as on The People's Voice, often referenced directly as news: in all cases, these additional postings were on nationalist-conservative or anti-Muslim blogs or both. The five most shared letters from The People's Voice in our sample all revolved around Muslims and immigrants, containing fearmongering headlines and promoting conspiracy theories (see Table 1).

Table 1 - TPV letters to the editor most frequently shared on Facebook

Headline	Facebook shares	Author, year
Research: Islam is the world's most violent religion	23,369	Sennels, 2015 [1]
Alarming paragraph: Islam might be illegal according to Danish law	14,736	Sennels, 2015 [2]
Vandalism against asylum centre led to 18 months in prison - Immigrant assault led to 2 months	8,104	Frederiksen, 2015 [3]
Asylum director: The government has made Denmark more attractive to asylum seekers	7,536	Mogensen, 2015 [4]
Four more years with Thorning [Danish prime minister] will likely result in 128,000 additional Muslim immigrants	4,239	Mogensen, 2015 [5]

The most visible letters on The People's Voice could be traced back to only a few authors. Just twelve authors were responsible for the 50 most shared letters to the editor in our sample. The most active user wrote 22 letters, accounting for 72,754 shares on Facebook (59% in our sample). This user account belongs to Nicolai Sennels, former leader of PEGIDA Denmark, the Danish branch of the German movement PEGIDA: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West [Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes]. Sennels is also

a frequent contributor to hyperpartisan online news platforms in Denmark, such as 24Nyt and NewSpeek, which have been characterised as "junk news" outlets (Arnfred & Kjeldtoft, 2019). This indicates a tactical use of The People's Voice to legitimise partisan agendas. Among the twelve authors of the 50 letters is also Daniel Carlsen, the former leader of the ethno-pluralist Party of the Danes [Danskernes Parti] and leading member of Denmark's National Socialist Movement [Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Bevægelse]. These prominent nativist, nationalist-conservative activists voiced white nationalist agendas on The People's Voice, mastering a hybrid genre of news and opinion.

Of the 50 letters to the editor in our sample, 48 contained images and 41 contained hyperlinked references. Authors used a total of 217 hyperlinks, indicating a writing style mimicking journalistic referencing of sources. The most referenced sources in the letters were, respectively, Wikipedia, a Danish blog named Cultural Radicalism Destroys Denmark [Kulturradikalisme Smadrer Danmark], two established Danish news outlets (Jyllands-Posten and Politiken), and The People's Voice itself (see Table 2).

Table 2 - Five most referenced sources (left), five most referenced types of sources (right)

Most referenced sources	#	Most referenced source types	#
Wikipedia	20	Danish news articles	69
Cultural Radicalism Destroys Denmark (CRDD, Danish anti-Islamic/ nationalist-conservative blog)	15	Danish anti-Islamic/ nationalist-conservative blogs or websites	33
Jyllands-Posten (Danish newspaper)	14	Foreign news articles	23
Politiken (Danish newspaper)	11	Encyclopaedias	20
TPV (Letters to the editor)	10	Foreign anti-Islamic/nationalist-conservative blogs or websites	12

In a letter on The People's Voice entitled "Research: Islam is the world's most violent religion", which was shared 23,369 times on Facebook, author Nicolai Sennels wrote in third person; used subheadings and a thematic (and stereotypical) image of a dark-skinned, bearded man shouting; referred to results from research, statistics, and surveys; and linked to external sources. The five hyperlinks in the letter directed the reader to one German and two Danish news outlets; a Danish book publisher; and an international anti-Muslim website (thereligionofpeace.com), which has been described as being part of an online "industry of Islamophobia" disseminating a "heavily biased worldview" (Chao, 2015: 58). Across the dataset, we find that authors indistinguishably mixed hyperlinks to partisan blogs, established news media, statistics from national agencies and

research institutions, nativist blogs, and other letters to the editor from The People's Voice.

Across the letters, experts were often quoted in decontextualised ways to convey a political message. For example, Interpol director Robert Noble was quoted as saying "Close the borders or you will be attacked" (Sennels, 2016 [30]). A hyperlink led to a 2011 article from The Independent, in which the chief of Interpol argued for a systematic screening of passports in Europe but not for closing all borders (Hastings, 2011). Along similar lines, a programme manager from the Bulgarian Red Cross was quoted in a headline stating that "the government has made Denmark more attractive to asylum seekers" (Mogensen, 2015 [4]). Tracing the source showed that a programme manager indeed made a statement about Denmark becoming a destination for refugees but made no mention of the Danish government (Borg, 2015). These examples illustrate that racist discourses take place not only at the border of civil and uncivil (as Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017 contend) but also at the border of true and false.

Despite the incorrect quote of the programme manager from the Bulgarian Red Cross, two members of Danish parliament – Martin Geertsen from the Liberal Party [Venstre] and Pia Kjærsgaard from Danish People's Party [Dansk Folkeparti] – shared this letter from The People's Voice on their public Facebook accounts (see Figure 3). Both politicians (whose parties were in opposition at the time) referenced the letter and explicitly blamed the government for an increase in immigrants. Kjærsgaard added to her post: "Yeah, not exactly news that Thorning [Prime Minister] and De Radikale [party of government] have made Denmark more attractive" (Kjærsgaard, 2015). Members of parliament thus shared these as news articles written by journalists, thereby furthering the normalising of racist discourses in the guise of legitimate news.
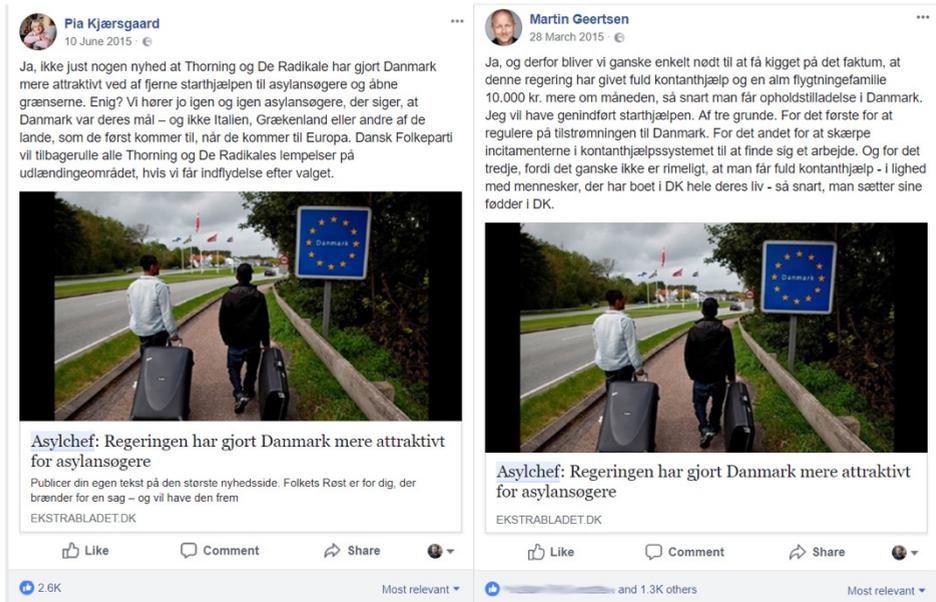
Figure 3 - Letter to the editor shared by Pia Kjærsgaard (MP, Danish People's Party) and Martin Geertsen (MP, Liberal Party)

While the sources cited are not entirely fake, they are at the borderline of true and false and rendered credible by their perception as legitimate and reliable. In another letter entitled "Professor: Muslims have killed 270 million people since Mohammad", the author referenced Bill Warner as an academic expert in support of the "fact" that "Muslims have killed a total of 270 million non-Muslims" (Sennels, 2016 [14]). While Warner is indeed a former professor, he is in the field of physics (rather than political science, history, or religion) and known for his controversial and one-sided critique of Islam (Smietana, 2010). Similarly, a "German newspaper" was referenced to present as a fact the conspiracy theory that Merkel was strategically using refugees to weaken European nation states (Frederiksen, 2015 [18]). The German magazine in question has repeatedly been criticised for sensationalist headlines and articles propagating anti-EU and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories as well as for allowing authors to write for the magazine with complete anonymity, thereby challenging principles of press ethics (Boeselager, 2015). While the newspaper indeed exists, its credibility is questionable. Through these links, The People's Voice created openings between fringe media, blogs, and websites of nativist and nationalist political actors, creating further legitimacy and acceptability of otherwise uncivil sources.

15.9 The Story: Discourses of Exclusion and Covert Racism

The story of the Muslim Other on The People's Voice built upon stereotypes pertinent across Europe, yet through the legitimate presentation of these stories as "borderline discourses" (Krzyżanowski & Ledin 2017), they were amplified, normalised, and stabilised. We found key logics of difference and equivalence (see Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011: 19) feeding into stories across the letters. Overall, the 50 letters to the editor in our sample addressed the following issues: Muslims and Islam (n=24), immigration (n=19), terrorism (n=13), the European Union (n=10), crime (n=8, not including terrorism), state benefits (n=3), cannabis legalisation (n=3), and state privatisation (n=1). Letters involving negative representations of immigrants and Muslims were shared most frequently, comprising 88 per cent of shares on Facebook in our sample (109,361 shares). The headlines of these letters contained clear characteristics of clickbait news (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Kuiken et al., 2017), including sensationalist terms such as "shock" and "destroy" as well as attention-grabbing sentences such as "See the numbers" and "Denmark is dissolving".

Across the letters, the subject position of Muslim, immigrant, migrant, and refugee (often directly overlapping) were discursively positioned as dichotomous adversaries of the Dane. Muslims and immigrants were continuously coupled through logics of equivalence to violence, crime, terrorism, hypersexuality, deceitfulness, chaos, and conspiracy, while Danes became "cattle for terrorists" (Sennels, 2016 [19]) who disguise themselves as refugees and come "pouring across the borders" (Sennels, 2015 [24]). According to the letters, "research" and "statistics" show that Muslims systematically destroy Denmark while remaining invisible to the weak Danish political elites (Sennels, 2016 [20]). If politicians remain unwilling to make harsh and targeted anti-immigration and anti-Islam policies, Denmark will ultimately cease to exist:

> And at that point, Denmark will surely be called Denmarkistan… and somewhere in Denmarkistan will be a statue of Lars Løkke [Prime Minister, Liberal Party], Søren Pind [Minister of Justice, Liberal Party] and Inger Støjberg [Minister of Immigration and Integration, Liberal Party] in passionate embrace, and in elaborate Arabic writing, it will say: "Here are those who destroyed Denmark".
>
> (Sennels, 2016 [22])

Danish politicians from both centre-left and centre-right parties were presented as wilfully enabling a Muslim conspiracy, concealing the horrific truth about Muslims and immigrants. Their subject position was that of the traitor conspiring with the invading enemy. While the Danish Social Democrats claim that crime is declining, they supposedly conceal the truth that each day "more foreign criminals come to Denmark" (Mogensen, 2015 [37]). The politicians' treachery is, according to several letters, caused by their loyalty toward the corrupt European Union, which is controlled by greedy elites that are hostile to the subject position of the Danes, represented as "the people". German Chancellor Angela Merkel plays a key role in this conspiracy narrative as she allegedly seeks to spark a series of major national crises through immigration, which she plots to use as a vehicle for creating a "United States of Europe" (Frederiksen, 2015 [23]). This fact, the letters proclaimed, is supported by both statistics and credible sources. The plan is supported by multinational corporations and the United Nations, which conspire to "import cheap labour – even though it destroys our culture" (Sennels, 2015 [6]). This discourse of an enormous conspiracy of powerful political, economic, and cultural-left elites was combined with narratives of Islamisation.

Muslims were portrayed as hypersexual, violent, criminal, and deceitful by both nature and culture, making them dichotomous adversaries of (white, Christian) Europeans, who they will eventually replace. The notion that Muslims are conspiring to overthrow European countries has been labelled by researchers as the Eurabia conspiracy theory and it is prevalent on nativist, nationalist-conservative blogs and social media channels across Scandinavia (Ekman, 2015). The authors on The People's Voice picked information and sources to construct a political narrative presenting Muslims as the enemy, for example by arguing that the Danish justice system privileges immigrants over "real Danes" (Frederiksen, 2015 [3]), building on the populist narrative of "us" versus "them" (Engesser et al., 2017).

Besides the use of questionable and cherry-picked sources and quotes, distorted statistics and figures were also used to create objectivity and legitimacy for the narratives. In a statistical projection of the number of immigrants in Denmark, an influx of "120,000 immigrants per year" was reportedly expected (Frederiksen, 2015 [9]). This projection was based on national statistics solely from two weeks of immigration in 2015, when Europe experienced a peak in incoming refugees. The statistical projection was based on official – yet extremely skewed – statistical data. Similarly, a prediction that Denmark would receive "128,000 extra Muslim immigrants if Helle Thorning-Schmidt remains prime minister" (Mogensen,

2015 [5]) was based on only one year of national statistics (2014). The causal relationship between the prime minister and Muslim immigrants was validated by a hyperlink to another letter on The People's Voice, creating a circular referencing, where distorted facts on the platform supported other distorted facts.

While deception based on inaccurate, cherry-picked or decontextualised data has been a staple of xenophobic and racist discourses in the past (Daniels, 2013), the use of a digital platform from an established news source as well as hyperlinks to both established and fringe media, national statistics, and anti-Muslim nativists makes The People's Voice a potent case of amplification of racist discourses, far-right populist rhetoric, and conspiracy theories. A majority of the references on The People's Voice could not be dismissed as mere falsehoods, although authors misled readers by cherry-picking, decontextualising, simplifying, and overgeneralising information to support racist agendas, packaged as news articles from *Ekstra Bladet*.

15.10   Conclusion

This study shows how a small group of highly active users tactically appropriated *Ekstra Bladet*'s The People's Voice to promote nativist narratives and far-right antagonism through a careful assemblage of manipulative visual cues, distorted facts, opaque references, and populist rhetoric. Several of these authors were active contributors on anti-Muslim blogs and hyperpartisan news sites, characterised by manipulative reporting (Arnfred & Kjeldtoft, 2019) and low levels of transparency (Heft et al., 2019). This indicates that far-right activists tactically took advantage of The People's Voice as an extension of hyperpartisan channels, most likely to obtain legitimacy through *Ekstra Bladet*. When public figures such as politicians shared these letters as news articles, this further enhanced the credibility, visibility, and propagation of racist ideas as part of mainstream political discourse.

In this study, racist discourse moved between the letters to the editor and their sharing as news articles in legitimate public discourse, creating a hybrid news format built around "borderline discourse" (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017: 567), legitimising racist antagonism via its presentation as legitimate news. This was enabled through The People's Voice's openness and lack of moderation coupled with the institutional authority of *Ekstra Bladet*, creating a genre with little resemblance to the opinion pages in traditional news (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). The People's Voice enabled racist discourses at the intersection of user practices,

interfaces, and (lack of) policies and business models, a form of "platformed racism" (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017: 930). The circulation of the letters on Facebook increased the blurring of journalistic boundaries, as social media contained few "of the cues that ordinarily allow us to identify and assess the source of a story" (Vaidhyanathan, 2018: 5). Thereby, the letters became difficult to identify as opinions of prominent far-right activists, rather than professional journalism.

There are limitations to this study in that it cannot assess the exact proliferation of the analysed letters among Danish Facebook users nor conclude how many users were potentially deceived. Despite these uncertainties, this research serves as an example of a tactically assembled manipulative format, challenging *Ekstra Bladet's* journalistic authority from within and contributing to existing developments in which "journalistic authority has increasingly become a topic of concern" (Carlson, 2017: 2). Rather than arriving at an answer to how exactly such tactics take place and succeed, this research opens up for further questions of how user-participation combined with the infrastructure of a respected newspaper can produce hybrid formats that are at the borders of civility and also challenge the borders of journalistic work. As a recent study by Larsson (2019) shows, actors from the political right are particularly visible on Facebook. The tactics outlined in this paper are part of the repertoire of right-wing actors who utilise emotional and aggressive language within the format of deceptive news articles to gain user engagement and visibility.

Junk news and hyperpartisan media, manipulation, and deception predominantly derive from outside established media institutions, such as fringe partisan outlets (Arnfred & Kjeldtoft, 2019; Heft et al., 2019), conspiracy theory websites (Bradshaw et al., 2019), news fabrication schemes (Tandoc et al., 2018), and automated social media accounts (Bradshaw et al., 2019). The People's Voice exemplifies an established institution's attempt to increase clicks and engagement via a digital platform that would not need much supervision. By doing so, *Ekstra Bladet* transgressed borders of journalism by creating a bridge to hyperpartisan fringe media. This new manipulative format furthered the pressure on journalistic boundaries.

The question remains as to which strategies are at media professionals' disposal besides the blunt instrument of simply shutting down such platforms (as eventually occurred with The People's Voice in 2018) as a means of coping with such hybrid forms of user-generated content and journalism. There is a need for further understanding of how new forms of professionalism can steer discussions in hybrid media systems, avoiding the spread of misleading information and racism.

The mimicking of news needs to be studied within the context of changing media systems, platforms, interfaces, policies, actors, political economies, and political cultures in order to understand the normalisation and legitimisation of racist discourses in hybrid formats between user-generated content and journalism.

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Fake news has attracted significant global attention and contestation in recent years. This PhD thesis explores the explosive and oftentimes contradictory rise of fake news and dives into the discursive struggles around journalism, politics, digital media, and liberal democracy that have emerged in its wake. Through a series of interrelated publications – spanning more than five years of research – the thesis examines how and with what consequences journalistic and political actors articulate and dispute the very meaning of fake news. Through a careful and critical mapping of the discursive signification of fake news, the thesis does not only situate the issue in wider political and historical contexts; it also draws out and reflects upon its implications for the future of liberal democracies.