Research article

Iulian Vamanu*

Fake News and Propaganda: A Critical Discourse Research Perspective

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Abstract: Having been invoked as a disturbing factor in recent elections across the globe, fake news has become a frequent object of inquiry for scholars and practitioners in various fields of study and practice. My article draws intellectual resources from Library and Information Science, Communication Studies, Argumentation Theory, and Discourse Research to examine propagandistic dimensions of fake news and to suggest possible ways in which scientific research can inform practices of epistemic self-defense. Specifically, the article focuses on a cluster of fake news of potentially propagandistic import, employs a framework developed within Argumentation Theory to explore ten ways in which fake news may be used as propaganda, and suggests how Critical Discourse Research, an emerging cluster of theoretical and methodological approaches to discourses, may provide people with useful tools for identifying and debunking fake news stories. My study has potential implications for further research and for literacy practices. In particular, it encourages empirical studies of its guiding premise that people who became familiar with certain research methods are less susceptible to fake news. It also contributes to the design of effective research literacy practices.

Keywords: post-truth, literacy, scientific research, discourse studies, persuasion

“Don’t be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. You’re saying it’s a falsehood [...] Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that.” (Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to the U.S. President)

“Comment is free, but facts are sacred” (C. P. Scott, editor of *The Guardian*, 1872-1929)

1 Introduction

Fake news and post-truth are old phenomena, yet they have become objects of special scrutiny during and immediately after the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections. Since then, analysts, scholars, and journalists have become increasingly aware of the role of fake news in influencing citizens’ voting decisions and, possibly, even the final result of elections (Cooke, 2017; Jamieson, 2018). In fact, the two phenomena have been so widely discussed that “fake news” earned the “Collins Dictionary Word of the Year for 2017” distinction. Certainly, the spread of fake news is a major concern because it poses epistemic and practical risks: as people make important decisions about their lives (e.g., health, finances, education, or government), their reliance on inaccurate beliefs may result in various kinds of harm (e.g., illnesses, bankruptcy, ignorance, or poor leadership). Responding to this phenomenon, LIS scholars and practitioners, along with scholars in other disciplines, have rightly emphasized the role of scientific research in making sense of fake news and building literacy practices that contribute to educating information users. For instance, Cooke (2017) claims that information behavior research of such phenomena as information seeking, information selection, information avoidance, and information usage could “contribute to our understanding of how information

*Corresponding author, Iulian Vamanu, University of Iowa, School of Library and Information Science

is consumed on a daily basis and provide additional explanations for why people are susceptible to fake news” (p. 213). In addition, she emphasizes the importance for information consumers to acquire “basic evaluation skills,” such as the ability to understand the nature of the language by means of which information is conveyed (p. 217). Cooke’s (2017) claims are supported by recent research which shows that engaging in argumentation practices may prepare individuals to deal with inaccurate information. As Cook, Lewandowsky, & Ecker (2017) put it, “people can be ‘inoculated’ against misinformation by being exposed to a refuted version of the message beforehand. Just as vaccines generate antibodies that help one’s body fight viruses, inoculation messages equip people with counter-arguments that potentially convey resistance to future misinformation, even if the misinformation is congruent with pre-existing attitudes” (p. 4). However, while research and research-informed literacy practices seem to be the right prophylactic response to risks of fake news contagion, it is not always clear what the viruses look like, what the right “vaccines” may be, and why some of these vaccines are better than others.

According to Media Literacy for Citizenship, a European NGO devoted to advancing media literacy, when talking about fake news, we may actually be referring to one or more of ten types of “misleading news” which differ in terms of their motivation and impact: propaganda, clickbait, sponsored content, satire and hoax, error, partisan, conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, misinformation, and bogus (Steinberg, 2017). Three of these types of fake news (namely, propaganda, partisan, and conspiracy theory news) form a special cluster (which, for convenience, I will call “propagandistic”); they display an affective dimension and involve power relations in a way that the other types of fake news do not. Scholars across disciplines have paid special attention to propagandistic fake news and best practices available for epistemic self-defense. For instance, philosophers have been interested in the recent emergence of a post-truth climate in our societies, where “belief no longer has to follow fact” (Bermúdez, 2018, p. 88) or “strong opinion is considered to be worth more than facts” (Legg, 2018, p. 43) and often discuss it, more or less explicitly, in the context of propaganda (e.g., Bermúdez, 2018; Fairfield, 2018; Gelfert, 2018; Habgood-Coote, 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Stanley, 2015). These authors draw their intellectual resources and impetus from traditional philosophical epistemological frameworks (such as David Hume’s empiricist philosophy or Charles S. Peirce’s semiotic theory) to develop and recommend epistemic strategies individuals may use to cope with the spread of fake news (e.g., Fallis, 2004; Legg, 2018). Fake news is also a salient research topic in Mass Communication and Journalism Studies. Besides attempting to define fake news (e.g., Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018), scholars in this field focus on concrete cases of propagandistic use of fake news, such as the media war waged by Russian agencies against certain Russophobe political organizations competing in elections in Ukraine and the United States (e.g., Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Oates, 2018). Library and Information Science (LIS) scholars are interested in the qualities of information, and discuss fake news as an example of inaccurate information, often with the goal of developing literacy programs (e.g., Cooke, 2017, 2018; Rochlin, 2017) and articulating good practices for assessing the credibility of claims to truth (e.g., Fallis, 2004; Rieh & Danielson, 2007). When approaching post-truth, fake news, and propaganda, a few of the above-mentioned scholars rely, more or less extensively, on findings from Cognitive Psychology research (e.g., Gorman & Gorman, 2017; Levitin, 2016; Mercier and Sperber, 2017). In particular, they emphasize cognitive biases and their role in making people susceptible to forms of inaccurate information (e.g., Bermúdez, 2018; Fairfield, 2018; McIntyre, 2018).

In this context, I view my article as a contribution towards the integration of these multi-disciplinary perspectives on fake news and the development of tools for individuals who seek to research them and to resist their appeal. I employ a framework developed by Argumentation theorist Douglas Walton to describe ten dimensions of propaganda. I also explore the extent to which instances of fake news fit in with these dimensions. Finally, I inquire how Critical Discourse Research, an emerging cluster of theoretical and methodological approaches to conducting discourse-oriented qualitative research, can serve as a basis for understanding propagandistic uses of fake news and for building scientific literacy practices that may help people acquire epistemic self-defense skills.

2 Background

Scholarship across disciplines has recently started exploring the links between fake news and propaganda. In general, researchers tend to distinguish between the two phenomena, while also carefully noting areas of overlap. For instance, they often claim that at least certain types of fake news stories can be used for propaganda purposes (see Steinberg, 2017, cited above for a typology of “misleading news”). Indeed, as one philosopher puts it, fake news is “the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design” (Gelfert, 2018, p. 108). “Misleading by design” is precisely what propaganda aims to achieve. Although, according to the same author, an ideological agenda may not always be present, it is precisely the propagandistic dimension that has recently brought the fake news phenomenon to the foreground of social life.

Philosophers have actively explored the types and effects of propaganda in the context of the emerging “post-truth regime” (Harsin, 2015). Fairfield (2018) draws on the work of Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher who distinguished between “vertical” (or “subversive”) propaganda and “horizontal” (or “integration”) propaganda, and suggests ways in which such a typology may help us make sense of post-truth and the recent spread of fake news. According to Ellul (1973), “vertical” propaganda refers to the effort of a higher-order entity (such as a State or organization) to subvert an existing government, political enemies within the same country or system, or external foes, by influencing public opinion (German Nazi or Soviet Russian propaganda are standard examples, in this respect). In contrast with vertical propaganda which operates top-down, horizontal propaganda involves individuals who interact as peers within small groups; it aims to secure their voluntary “conscious adherence” to the group ideals by engaging them “in a genuine and lively dialogue.” It is in this process of mutual exchange that an individual can “gradually discover his own convictions (which also will be those of the group)” (Ellul, 1973, p. 81). Through repeated distribution of “deliberately falsified” information, horizontal propaganda ensures that all the members of the group ultimately discover “the correct line, the anticipated solution, the ‘proper’ convictions” (p. 81).

Fairfield’s discussion allows us to regard fake news as an instrument of propaganda in both senses of the word. First, recent Journalism Studies research has indeed documented “vertical” propagandistic uses of fake news in cases of reputation smearing. For instance, Khaldarova & Pantti (2016) discuss the propaganda war Russian agencies have waged against the neighboring state of Ukraine, especially after the 2014 Ukrainian elections. They note that fake news has been used strategically as “propaganda entertainment (*kompromat*), a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context” (p. 893). In the same vein, Oates (2017) explores the *kompromat* phenomenon in more detail in the context of Russian agencies’ use of social media during the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections. Finally, in what looks like a new twist on this familiar understanding of propaganda, McIntyre (2018) indicates that fake news may be part of certain political leaders’ agenda of establishing an authoritarian rule by inducing a target population to believe that they have “authority over the truth itself” (p. 113; also see Stanley, 2015). Second, the scholarly literature has focused less on “horizontal propagandistic” uses of fake news, yet the concurrent emergence of social media and “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011) and of studies linking the successful spread of fake news to the manipulation of consumers’ cognitive biases strongly point in this direction. Indeed, some cognitive biases may account for the ways in which people acquire beliefs by being exposed to them repeatedly (the “repetition effect”). Cognitive biases may also explain why people are reluctant to discard beliefs when confronted with evidence that goes against them, because they tend to avoid inner disharmony induced by beliefs at odds with the beliefs they already entertain (“cognitive dissonance”) or because they prefer their beliefs to accord with those held by their peers (“social conformity”). Finally, cognitive biases may provide insights into why individuals actively try to find information that strengthens the beliefs they already hold (“confirmation bias”) (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 39-44; Gelfert, 2018, p. 112; Oswald & Grosjean, 2004, pp. 79-96).

Given how pervasive the propagandistic utilization of information has become, many studies have reflected on possible solutions to the epistemic crisis which has emerged as a result. Magazine and newspaper writers have already focused on the “fake news” phenomenon and its implications, often pointing to concrete steps people should take to identify and avoid inaccurate information when encountering it

(a piece by Eugene Kiely and Lori Robertson, “How to spot fake news,” published on FactCheck.org on November 18, 2016, is significant in this respect). The academic publishing landscape, too, has shown signs of strong interest in practices of fake news detection. In particular, Habgood-Coote (2018) discusses and lists possible lines of action recommended by a few monographs devoted to post-truth (e.g., D’Ancona, 2017; Davies, 2017; Ball, 2017; McIntyre, 2018). Such studies fall under three thematic categories: epistemological-educational (e.g., learning and practicing critical thinking more intensely); social epistemological (e.g., encouraging and developing fact-checking services; designing and implementing technologies that enable the circulation of accurate information; and renewing one’s trust in traditional news institutions); and political (e.g., renewing individuals’ commitment to the intellectual values of democracy; supporting political leaders committed to democratic values and institutions).

In particular, and especially in LIS literature, scholars have emphasized the importance of literacy practices in preparing people to deal with inaccurate beliefs. Studies have approached emancipation efforts in this direction within the framework of various forms of literacy (e.g., Bluemle, 2018; Cooke 2017, 2018; Neely-Sardon & Tignor, 2018; Rochlin, 2017) and described tools for assessing claims to truth (e.g., Fallis 2004; Rieh & Danielson, 2007). In this context, LIS research has emphasized the relevance of “critical information literacy” (Elmborg, 2006), media literacy, digital literacy (Koltay, 2011), and even metaliteracy (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). Scientific literacy would be a useful addition to this family of literacies. Defined as “the cognitive and social understanding of the basic purpose, process, and value of research and research participation” (Brody et al, 2011, p. 725), this form of literacy encompasses “(1) knowledge of research concepts; (2) self-efficacy in the ability to weigh participation decisions; (3) attitudes towards research; (4) increased motivation to explore research options; and (5) participation in research” (p. 726). In particular, understanding how science works and being able to conduct scientific research may enable people to acquire the right skills to cope with the onslaught of fake news (also see Lehrer & Schauble, 2006).

3 Fake News, Propaganda, & Critical Discourse Research

In this section I explore how critical discourse research, a particular scientific approach, may help one examine fake news and potentially build a relevant scientific literacy practice. The guiding premise, whose dimensions I explore in what follows and which may suggest a program of empirical studies, is that people acquiring research skills may display higher levels of epistemic vigilance when confronted with fake news. I restrict my discussion to discourse-oriented methodologies, because many of the relevant questions one needs to ask when encountering a piece of fake news are the same questions that traditionally occupy the discourse researcher striving to explore facets of “discursive statements” (Keller, 2013). In particular, this methodology can help us articulate ideological aspects of various types of texts, which is precisely what propaganda, by definition, illustrates.

I use the phrase “critical discourse research” (henceforth, CDR) to refer to an emerging cluster of discursive approaches in the arena of European and (to a lesser extent) North-American social sciences. Arguably, Reiner Keller, a German sociologist who founded the “Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse” (SKAD) research program and the “Critical Discourse Studies” (CDS) group, in particular Norman Fairclough, Siegfried Jäger, Florentine Maier, Michael Meyer, Martin Reisigl, Teun van Dijk, Theo van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak, are its most important contributors. What makes these authors’ projects converge is, first, their understanding of discourses as social practices of language and sign use which (re)produce and transform society, and achieve concrete power effects by means of a material and ideational infrastructure that includes artefacts, technologies, policies, and regulations (Keller, 2013, p. 72); and second, their efforts to develop concrete methodologies for articulating discourses and their power effects. These methodologies are described particularly well in the third edition of the collective volume edited by Ruth Wodak & Michael Meyer (Wodak & Meyer, 2016), and in Keller (2013). Moreover, since according to both SKAD and CDS discourses are intertwined with patterns of argumentation, I include in this theoretical-methodological cluster the contributions to Argumentation Theory made by the Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rhetoric (CRRAR) in Windsor (Canada) and Douglas Walton in particular (Walton 2007).

As currently employed, the CDR framework aims to sensitize the researcher to three major dimensions of a text, namely the contexts within which it appears, the formal structure of the text, and its content. Since it is linked to power, ideologies, and affect, propaganda material constitutes the perfect test case for discursive approaches. In the remainder of this article, I look at propagandistic forms of fake news (to which I will refer as “stories”), and describe their key aspects by using Walton’s (2007) ten-dimension framework for identifying and describing instances of propaganda. Whenever appropriate, I link them to possible cognitive biases that may enhance their manipulative impact. I end the discussion of each of these ten elements with suggestions about how methodological aspects of CDR may help the researcher identify various cognitive biases.

3.1 (F1) Dialogue Structure

Walton (2007) defines propaganda as the concerted effort of a social group “to get an audience to support the aims, interests, and policies of a particular group, by securing the compliance of the audience with the actions being contemplated, undertaken, or advocated by the group” (p. 111). Propaganda unfolds as a communicative discourse which involves a proponent, i.e., the participant who initiates the communication game by disseminating propagandistic information, and a respondent, i.e., the participant who receives that information (p. 109). The respondent need not be just a passive receiver of proponent’s messages. In fact, an active respondent is central to “horizontal” propaganda (discussed above), since conversation is the indispensable medium through which alone the individual can acquire the beliefs, develop the attitudes, or engage in the actions the propagandist desires. Communication acts involving fake news stories display a similar structure: on one hand, there is an author, writing under a real name (e.g., Alex Jones) or a pen name (e.g., “Stryker”), and usually affiliated with a media outlet (e.g., “InfoWars,” “America’s Last Line of Defense”); on the other hand, we have an intended (or ideal) audience that is supposed to interact with the author’s messages and develop a certain reaction or response. Given the current affordances of social media (such as the ability to “like,” re-post, or comment, or a post), the audiences’ reactions or responses are readily available to the propagandist and can be decoded in terms of acceptance and rejection (e.g., on Twitter), as well as excitement, surprise, sadness, or anger (e.g., on Facebook). The possibility to re-post and/or comment on a posting is the basic mechanism that enables and enhances conversation around the story. In fact, according to Garcia & Lear (2016), certain fake news stories (e.g., “Thousands of fraudulent ballots for Clinton uncovered”) have reached millions of users across various social media platforms; they have engaged with these stories by sharing, re-posting, and/or commenting on them. Overall, as Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) indicate, 115 pro-Trump fake stories were shared on Facebook 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories were shared 7.6 million times (p. 212). These numbers reveal the fundamentally interactional nature of fake news stories.

CDR pays particular attention to the authorship of fake news stories, whether this refers to the author of the piece of news or to the author of a claim to which the story refers. Research in evolutionary psychology shows why such attention is warranted; according to Sperber et al (2010), human beings have developed high levels of “epistemic vigilance directed at the source of information” they encounter in the environment (p. 369).

The key question, “Is the source credible?”, can be specified further:

(1) Does this source have a good “past track record” (Goldman, 2001, p. 106) or “reputation” (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 340)? In other words, “has this source usually provided accurate information in the past?” (Fallis, 2004, p. 469). Other markers of credibility pertain to the source’s web presence, e.g., a professional website with which the source is associated or documentation of her activities in other credible sources of information, such as a reputed newspaper or magazine (Gorman & Gorman, 2017, p. 205). For instance, the record of the doctor who came forward in August 2016 and claimed that Hillary Clinton had serious health problems contains a series of dubious decisions, according to an article in *The New York Times* (Jesella, 2008). This, of course, undermines his credibility.

(2) “Does anything suggest that this information source would not provide accurate information in this particular case?” (Fallis, 2004, p. 469). In other words, is there any reason to believe that the source may not possess accurate information (i.e., incompetence) and/or may not intend to share that information with her audiences (i.e., indifference or malevolence)? (Sperber et al. 2010, p. 369). For instance, did the doctor claiming that Hillary Clinton had severe health problems really have access to her medical files? Even if a doctor is qualified to make claims about a person’s health condition, her expertise may still be limited by lack of access to relevant medical records.

(3) Is there any mention of (or can one locate) other sources (preferably experts working independently from one another), who can corroborate a particular claim? (p. 471). In fact, Dr. Lisa Bardack, Hillary Clinton’s personal doctor, stated clearly that she was “in excellent physical condition and fit to serve as President of the United States.” (FactCheck.org, 2016, August 16. Available at: https://www.factcheck.org/wp-content/cache/wp-rocket/www.factcheck.org/2016/08/fake-clinton-medical-records//index.html_gzip).

3.2 (F2) Message Content

Walton (2007) claims that the message content of propaganda always takes the form of a more or less elaborate argument, which can be expressed verbally, pictorially, or both (pp. 109-10). Under the assumption that argumentation is an intrinsic feature of discourses, CDR encourages researchers to investigate the argumentation patterns of fake news stories, together with possible implications and insinuations, figures of style such as metaphors or symbols, and vocabulary (Jäger, 2001, p. 55; Jäger & Maier, 2016, p. 130; Keller, 2013, p. 112).

According to the basic model of argumentation developed by Stephen Toulmin, the structure of an argument consists of: a claim (C), i.e., the point that the proponent wants the respondent to accept and support; the data (D), i.e., “the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim;” and the warrants (W), i.e., “the practical standards or canons of argument” that link C and D and constitute the argument that the respondent is supposed to accept (Toulmin, 2003, pp. 90-1; see also Helder, 2003, p. 111). In addition, an argument may sometimes need to be specified in terms of other optional features: a qualifier (Q), i.e., an “explicit reference to the degree of force which our data confer on our claim in virtue of our warrant;” a rebuttal (R), i.e., the anticipated counter-arguments the proponent believes she needs to address (p. 93); and a backing (B), i.e., additional support for W in case the respondent does not accept the standard embedded in W (p. 96).

The crucial link is that between C and D: normally, D must be not only accurate, but also relevant as a support for C. That the quality of D matters so much is hardly surprising: research in evolutionary psychology shows that people display particularly high levels of “epistemic vigilance” not just in regard to the source of information, but also in regard to its content (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 374). Of major importance, then, are the *prima facie* plausibility of the claim (is the claim plausible, given all we know about the world?) and the strength of supporting evidence (i.e., is the claim warranted by relevant facts?). If the answer to at least one of these questions is no, the argument is fallacious (Helder, 2003, p. 117).

The argument of a fake news story can be quite schematic (e.g., messages posted and re-posted on platforms like Twitter) or more elaborate (e.g., blog postings often featuring images to support their claims). Indeed, according to Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral (2018), Twitter seems to be particularly favorable to the spreading of false information. In either case, one or more of the links among the six elements of the argumentation model are usually weak. D is often inaccurate. For instance, a piece published on September 30, 2016 in the *Christian Times Newspaper* (an online publication which mimicks the established newspaper *Christian Times*) claimed that “thousands of fraudulent ballots” for Presidential candidate Hilary Clinton had been “uncovered.” The only alleged pieces of evidence provided by the story were a photo of an official handling ballot boxes, which had in fact been taken in Birmingham, England in 2015, and a replica of

a ballot displaying a vote for Hillary Clinton. This so-called “evidence” only demonstrated that certain elections had occurred in Birmingham in 2015 and that somebody had marked a circle on a voting ballot. As an additional point, pictorial elements are particularly relevant to propaganda, as images tend to elicit powerful emotional reactions (Messaris, 1997; Kjeldsen, 2018).

3.3 (F3) Goal-Directed Structure

Propaganda is a communication practice which aims to induce the respondents “to carry out a particular action or to support a particular policy for action” (Walton, 2007, p. 110) and to erode undesirable ideals. The former is known as “supporting propaganda,” while the second is known as “undermining propaganda” (Stanley, 2015, p. 53). This useful distinction maps onto types of fake news stories. For example, a “supportive” fake news story had claimed that the youngest son of the current President of the United States had won a National Academic Award. This narrative, titled “Barron Trump Wins National Academic Award,” was published in the online newspaper *The Daily Chronicle* on June 18, 2017. It extolled the alleged science skills of President Trump’s son, thereby placing his father in a positive light according to the “like father, like son” common place. An example of an “undermining” fake news story is titled “Waters: SCOTUS Pick Should Be Illegal Immigrant.” This was a Twitter message sent from an account labeled @CNNPolitics on June 28, 2018. It claimed that a Democrat representative had suggested that the vacant seat on the Supreme Court of the United States be occupied by an illegal immigrant. This story was likely meant to draw a strong connection between Democratic politics and illegal immigration, thereby undermining the credibility of the Democratic Party. Often, articulating the goal of a fake news story requires the reconstruction of the relevant contexts in which the story appeared. The historical moment, cultural environment, and social-political conditions constitute such contexts (Keller, 2013, p. 110). For instance, it makes a real difference if a fake news story about the health condition of a Presidential candidate is released right before the elections or after. In August 2016, a physician and media personality (Dr. Drew Pinsky) appeared on the “McIntyre in the Morning” show on KABC-TV in Los Angeles. During the interview, which was further distributed by the “Conservative Citizen” Youtube channel, Dr. Pinsky expressed concerns about the health condition of Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Such an incident is significant because, as recent studies have shown, a critical mass of this kind of stories of this kind disseminated in the media may have negatively impacted the public’s votes for Hillary Clinton (see, for instance, Jamieson, 2018).

3.4 (F4) Involvement of Social Groups

According to Walton (2007), the propagandist always speaks in the name of a higher-order entity, such as a country, a political party, or a corporation, and aims to get the audience to embrace the ideals of this collectivity (p. 110). Indeed, fake news stories often involve social or political groups as originators and/or as targets. The authors often use linguistic and rhetorical means to position themselves as legitimate speakers on behalf of the group (e.g., “Angry Patriot,” “America’s Last Line of Defense,” “Red State,” “Students for Trump,” “Conservative Citizen,” or “Occupy Democrats”). They also use similar tools to delegitimize (members of) opposite groups. For instance, a blog entry posted on the website Newsfeed USA on April 12, 2018 falsely claimed that former President Barack Obama was building a private army with support from foreign entities with whom he was holding meetings and planning “a coup against his own government.” What is striking about this story is the way it played on two dichotomies (American vs. Global and Patriots vs. Traitors) to portray the former President (and by implication the Party he represents) as a “traitor” and “American-hating globalist.”

3.5 (F5) Indifference to Logical Reasoning

A propagandist is not committed to logical reasoning unless he believes that doing so will serve her goals better (Walton, 2007, p. 110). Instrumentalizing logical reasoning (i.e., using logical reasoning only when one believes it will serve one's ends) echoes people's propensity towards "motivated reasoning" (Kunda, 1990). This is a pattern of reasoning where one's "assessment of the evidence's worth is unintentionally subordinated to [one's] preexisting motivations and preferences. In these cases, people's reasoning leads them not to adjust their commitments in accordance with the evidence but to assess the evidence in accordance with their commitments" (Bermúdez, 2018, pp. 91-2; also see McIntyre, 2018, pp. 47-8; Stanley, 2015, pp. 229-230). When one abandons logical reasoning, one usually engages in fallacious reasoning, i.e., reasoning that is "invalid, specious, or deceptive" (Helder, 2003, p. 128). An example is the "False Dilemma/Choice fallacy," also known as the "False Dichotomy" (p. 133). For instance, the fake news story about Barack Obama described above (F4) not only represents the former President's business activities inaccurately; it also displays fallacious reasoning, because it assumes that being a traitor is the only alternative to being an American patriot.

3.6 (F6) One-Sided Argumentation

The pattern of argumentation used in propaganda is always unilateral. It only emphasizes only some aspects of an issue, without encouraging people to deliberate among alternative perspectives and counterarguments (Walton, 2007, pp. 110-1). In terms of Toulmin's model of argumentation (see F4), propagandistic argumentation avoids including alternative points of view, which would require a rebuttal (R). Fake news stories provide essentially one-sided arguments. For instance, a chain email message which has been circulating since February 26, 2009 claims to have "exposed" the fact-checking website Snopes.com as a medium with a strong progressive bias. The alleged evidence runs as follows: the project started as a hobby of David and Barbara Mikkelsen and involves "no big office of investigators and researchers, no team of lawyers;" its owners have "no formal background or experience in investigative research;" they are "very Democratic (party) and extremely liberal;" finally, the Snopes.com did not investigate "to the bottom" an issue that the author of the fake piece of news suggested it should have. Regardless of whether these are facts themselves, it is glaringly clear that the chain email makes no effort to commend at least part of the work that the Mikkelsons do at Snopes.com (FactCheck.org, 2019, April 10, available at: <https://www.factcheck.org/2009/04/snopescom/>).

3.7 (F7) Involvement of Persuasion Dialogue

The goal of propaganda is to induce audiences to act in particular ways, "to comply with action, or to accept and not oppose a certain line of action" (Walton, 2007, p. 111). Stanley (2018) articulates a similar action-oriented approach when he claims that propaganda often involves a "call to action" (p. 53). The fake news story about Snopes.com ends with an urge to action: "So, I say this now to everyone who goes to snopes.com to get what they think to be the bottom line facts ... 'proceed with caution.' Take what it says at face value and nothing more. Use it only to lead you to their references where you can link to and read the sources for yourself. Plus, you can always google a subject and do the research yourself. It now seems apparent that's all the Mikkelson's do" (FactCheck.org, 2019, April 10, available at: <https://www.factcheck.org/2009/04/snopescom/>).

To be persuasive, propaganda and fake news build scenarios with certain stable elements. CDR provides a framework for locating these elements: there is usually a central issue (topic) and the story describes how it emerged (causes); its consequences are evaluated against the background of certain values or principles (reference values); furthermore, some individual or group is usually considered authorized to address the issue (responsibilities), and the best ways to address it may be spelled out (need for action or mode of

problem-solving); finally, the authors may construct themselves (self-positioning) and other stakeholders (positioning of opposite others) in certain ways that support their claim (Keller, 2013, pp. 115-6). Researchers can fruitfully use this framework to analyze the content of fake news stories.

(1) The topic of the fake news story is the main theme or issue, which the author attempts to convey by categorizing or classifying a person, a group of persons, or a phenomenon. For instance, illegal immigration is a problem because illegal aliens are involved in criminal activities. This is the first level at which the critical thinker needs to assess whether the claim of the fake news story is factually accurate. Are illegal aliens involved in criminal activities? If so, do illegal aliens commit significantly more crimes than legal residents and citizens? Are these crimes significantly more serious than those committed by legal residents and citizens?

(2) Causalities are usually present in the form of explanations that link the phenomenon under scrutiny to a particular social actor (Gerhards, 1992, p. 231). According to many fake news stories, illegal immigration exists because Democratic politicians and progressive social groups support it. At this level, the critical thinker needs to ask whether evidence supports the alleged causal link. For instance, are Democrats and progressive groups really *for* illegal immigration? What measures have they taken, more specifically, in this respect?

(3) The critical thinker must also articulate the reference values that the fake news story uses to assess the consequences of the phenomenon it construes as problematic. Fake news stories may be more or less explicit about these values. For instance, when they warn about allegedly high levels of crime among illegal aliens, they imply that property, safety, and even life are the affected values. As an example, in an interview broadcast on Fox News Network on March 7, 2018, TV show host Sean Hannity stated that “over 200,000 individuals with a criminal history [had] committed over 642,000 crimes” in Texas over an eight-year period. At this level, the critical thinker must ask whether the values embedded in the story are really at stake in the respective situation, and whether there may be other values not made apparent in the story. In the latter case, value conflicts may arise and need to be addressed. Are American citizens’ lives truly threatened by illegal immigrants? How about the safety and lives of immigrants fleeing violence in their home countries? These values are often suppressed by fake news stories, but illegal immigration as a phenomenon obviously raises humanitarian concerns which need to be considered and balanced against citizen rights.

(4) Responsibilities are attributed to persons or entities purported to be entitled and even required to address the problem under consideration. In cases of illegal immigration, many fake news stories point both to politicians and to law enforcement (e.g., the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency) as parties responsible for making and enforcing laws to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country. In this regard, the critical thinker needs to ask questions about the possible limitations of these individuals and agencies. For instance, are politicians and/or law enforcement officers the only actors who should be involved in decision-making regarding illegal immigrants? How about immigrant-friendly civic organizations and communities? Their perspectives should at least be considered in the process.

(5) Finally, fake news stories point to courses of action (modes of problem-solving) deemed appropriate in addressing the negative consequences of the phenomenon under consideration (e.g., advocacy, measures, policies, laws). For instance, fake news stories on illegal immigrants often seek to persuade citizens to support deportation of illegal immigrants and vote against pro-immigration politicians. Clearly, the critical thinker should raise questions about the appropriateness of recommended courses of action. For instance, deportation as a blanket measure is deeply problematic: not all immigrants cross borders illegally for the same reasons. For some, this is a desperate attempt to escape violence and save their lives.

3.8 (F8) Justified by Results

Propaganda justifies itself in a consequentialist fashion, i.e., by pointing to the desirable ends that will allegedly be achieved if the recommended course of action is adopted (Walton, 2007, p. 111). Fake news stories are not always explicit about the results they aim to bring about or about their justification. Sometimes, such justification is implicit. For instance, on October 16, 2017, the right-wing website Breitbart published a story titled “Wine Country Homeless Man Arrested on Suspicion of Arson,” which claimed that a person by the name of Jesus Fabian Gonzalez had been arrested for starting wildfires in Sonoma County, California. A follow-up article titled “ICE Detainer Issued for Suspected Wine Country Arsonist in Sonoma Jail” was published on the same website on October 17. This article framed the detainee within an illegal immigration discourse. The implication was that illegal immigrants harm the environment and put communities in danger, hence deportation measures would have positive consequences.

3.9 (F9) Emotive Language and Persuasive Definitions

Propaganda is a discourse that makes extensive use of rhetorical figures, emotive language, and persuasive definitions (Walton, 2007, pp. 111-2). According to philosopher Jason Stanley, it seeks to “overload various affective capacities, such as nostalgia, sentiment, or fear” and place them “behind a goal that furthers an explicitly provided ideal” (Stanley, 2015, p. 53). Indeed, many fake news stories aim to activate consumers’ affective capacities. Fear is one emotion that many of these stories play on. As an example, one piece of fake news reads as follows: “We’ve had over 600,000 crimes committed by illegals since 2011. Over 1200 homicides. We’ve had human trafficking. We’ve had all kinds of drug crimes.” These were the words of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. He made these statements during an interview on the “Fox & Friends” television show on August 27, 2018. The context was Paxton’s re-election campaign, during which he claimed that his Democratic competitors were bent on decriminalizing illegal entry to the United States. Clearly, he appealed to local audiences’ deep-seated fears of crime. Pointing to illegal aliens as the cause of a large number of crimes was a clear call to political action: vote for me and I will remove the cause of these crimes.

3.10 (F10) Eristic Aspect

Finally, propaganda is a discourse built around powerful dichotomies (e.g., good vs. evil; pure vs. impure) which are used to label particular groups (also see F5). It works by associating these groups with the pejorative terms of the dichotomies, and thus justifies their marginalization and oppression (Walton, 2007, pp. 112-3). These polarizations may result in the so-called “affective arousal bias,” which often contributes to the intensification of “partisan bias and evaluative judgments” (Gelfert, 2018, p. 112). Fake news stories are often constructed around dichotomies of high import to American life. For instance, the Conservative vs. Liberal divide seems to occupy center stage, with other dichotomies mapped onto it (e.g., Patriot vs. Traitor, Honest vs. Fraudulent, Law-abiding vs. Law-breaking, or True vs. Fake). Special mention ought to be made of the appropriation of the “Fake News” label as a discrediting device in the propaganda toolbox. Indeed, allegations of fake news (“That’s just fake news!”) have become a common strategy of marginalizing or delegitimizing uncomfortable views (Dentith, 2017, p. 77; Gelfert, 2018, p. 93). For instance, a propaganda piece titled “Environmentalists Aren’t Just Wrong. They’re Loathsome And Evil Too” published by one James Delingpole on the Breitbart website on March 25, 2017 was structured around the powerful “David vs. Goliath” dichotomy: “I refer, of course, to the tiny, elite fellowship of scientists, economists, politicians, journalists and bloggers who have bravely taken the right side of the climate argument and spoken up for truth, integrity and the scientific method in defiance of the vast and terrifying propaganda behemoth they call the Green Blob.” Ironically, accusing an opposite other (individual or group) of engaging in propaganda may be one of the most surreptitiously efficient ways of conducting successful propaganda operations.

4 Conclusion

Fake news has been discussed as a disturbing factor in recent elections across the globe. As such, it has recently become a major object of inquiry for scholars and practitioners in various fields of study and practice. My article has employed intellectual resources from some of these fields (Library and Information Science, Communication Studies, Argumentation Theory, and Discourse Research) to investigate propagandistic dimensions of fake news and to suggest possible ways in which scientific research may inform practices of epistemic self-defense. Specifically, the article has focused on a cluster of fake news of potential propagandistic import (e.g., stories about illegal immigration), employed a framework developed within Argumentation Theory to explore ten ways in which fake news may be used for propaganda purposes, and suggested how Critical Discourse Research, an emerging cluster of theoretical and methodological approaches to discourses, may provide people with useful tools for identifying and debunking fake news stories. My study has potential implications for further research and for literacy practices. In particular, it calls for empirical studies of its guiding principle that people who are familiar with the research methods of CDR may be less susceptible to fake news. It may also contribute to the design of research literacy practices conducive to the acquisition of epistemic self-defense skills.

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