

1 The Age of Post-Truth Politics

In the summer of 2021, *New York Times* reporters Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang published *An Ugly Truth*, which raised uncomfortable questions about the relationship between social media usage, fake news, and misinformation (Frenkel and Kang, 2021: 40). One major event the authors emphasized is the “big lie” propaganda promoted by Donald Trump and his allies from late 2020 onward, as the outgoing president sought to stoke outrage with his supporters via baseless claims about a stolen election. Trump’s “Stop the Steal” disinformation campaign, the authors reflect, was coordinated through social media platforms such as Facebook, eventually culminating in the failed insurrection at the US Capitol Building on January 6.

Frenkel and Kang tie social media to the power of deception. Kang explains regarding the “Stop the Steal” big lie campaign that “I had never seen a Facebook group grow so quickly, adding thousands of users within hours to this group in which they were sharing all sorts of falsified videos and documents about election fraud . . . It’s very clear from our reporting that Facebook knew the potential for explosive violence was very real [on January 6]” (Gross, 2021). Kang and Frenkel recount that Facebook executives considered appealing to Trump directly to ask him to “defuse” the January 6 insurrection, but decided against this appeal (Gross, 2021). After the events at the capitol, Facebook suspended Trump’s account, announcing it would only be reopened if “the risk to public safety has receded” (Gross, 2021). This action, coupled with Twitter’s “permanent” suspension of Trump (later lifted in 2022), represented an implicit admission by these platforms of the dangers of social media in stoking political disinformation. Social media executives’ concern with official disinformation was not hyperbolic, considering national polling data revealed that Republicans who relied on Trump for their news were much more likely than those who did not – by nearly 20 percentage points – to be concerned about “election fraud,” in line with the president’s propaganda about a stolen election (Jurkowitz, 2021).

What is the larger role of the US news media when it comes to disseminating, understanding, and challenging fake news and disinformation? What role do social media play more broadly regarding concerns about the

proliferation of fake news and the spread of misinformation – on the “left” and “right” sides of the political spectrum? To answer these questions, it is important, first, to dive into previous scholarly works on fake news, propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation.

Social Construction Theory

Sociologists have historically stressed how reality is socially constructed to shape how one understands politics, culture, society, and how one interacts with others. Similarly, political communication research has examined how Americans’ understandings of reality are defined, circumscribed, and constructed based on how pollsters define the choices available to survey respondents (Lewis, 2001). Berger and Luckmann examine the centrality of language in creating and reinforcing perceptions, beliefs, and values: “Every life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share” with “fellow” people (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 37). “An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 37). In other words, language is essential for achieving shared meaning in a society or subculture. Berger and Luckmann also write: “Language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience . . . I can speak about innumerable matters that are not present at all in the face-to-face situation, including matters I never have and never will experience directly” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 37). This reflection is important when speaking of shared meaning in communities and nations, as individuals engage with and consume the news, official rhetoric, and political discourse, which all shape their political beliefs and values, even as people do not have direct experiences with the matters in question. For example, individuals may not have direct experiences with the insurrectionists who assaulted the United States Capitol on January 6, but may have strong feelings about their actions based on the information they consume. And someone may not have ever witnessed a single act of voter fraud, but may come to believe that it is rampant if they relied heavily on President Trump and his Twitter feed for information.

For Berger and Luckmann, language mattered to the social construction of reality and for forging “collectivities” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 39), with groups of people establishing common pathways for understanding the world. In helping to form collective identities, language might be “coercive in its effect” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 38). For example, someone might look today at how language is utilized through the embrace of fearmongering against an “other” to bring a group of people together – partisans, a racial or ethnic group, or a nation. Speaking to this point, social science research emphasizes how officials utilize fearful rhetoric through the media

(Bonn, 2010; DiMaggio, 2015). Party officials and partisan pundits might indulge in conspiracies through various media outlets to unite party members in fear of an “other,” and to consolidate their own power.

“Language,” Berger and Luckmann wrote, is also useful in “constructing symbols” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 40). This point relates directly to fearmongering and social construction of the “other.” A dangerous “other” might come in the form of a conspiracy that former president Barack Obama was seeking to create “death panels” in his health care reform law to harm disabled children and the elderly. Or it might be the claim that Obama was not really “born in the United States” and is secretly a Kenyan who illegitimately became president. Or that Covid-19 is a manufactured threat from the “deep state” and shadowy global elites. Or even that the Democratic Party is secretly coordinating a satanic bloodthirsty child sex-trafficking ring. In the foreign policy realm, the social construction of a dangerous “other,” as I describe in this book, included efforts to describe Iraq’s former dictator Saddam Hussein as a “threat,” and depictions of an ominous “deep state” as a menace to Trump’s presidency via the perpetuation of the Ukrainegate and Russiagate “hoaxes.”

Public Intellectuals and Their Importance to Propaganda Studies

Many writers have contributed to the discussion of contemporary propaganda in democratic western societies. The intellectual Walter Lippmann theorized about biases in the information-gathering process and why they matter, as they shape “the pictures” that individuals form “in our heads.” The world, Lippmann argued, “is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.” Looking for simplified ways of understanding the world, individuals are susceptible to propaganda and manipulation by elite societal actors. This was a point that Lippmann recognized when he wrote about the “manufacture of consent” of the mass public – which he deemed a “bewildered herd” that was incapable of deep insights (Lippmann, 1993: 145; 1997: 158). “The common interests very much elude public opinion entirely, and can be managed only by a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond locality” (Chomsky, 1989: 17). For Lippmann, “a fairly large percentage” of Americans were superficial in their political calculations and “bound to agree” on political issues “without having taken the time, or without possessing the background to appreciate the choices which the leader presents to them” (Lippmann, 1993: 145; 1997: 157–158, 195).

Lippmann’s contempt for the mass public was reinforced by his participation in the government’s Committee on Public Information (the Creel

Committee) during the First World War (Broom, 2014). The group worked to produce pro-war propaganda to mobilize public support for US military intervention. Also writing during Lippmann's time, the political scientist Harold Lasswell addressed "propaganda" during wartime, referencing the "management of opinions and attitudes" via the "manipulation of social suggestion" – as it occurred within warring countries, including the United States, France, Britain, and Germany. For Lasswell, manipulation was about more than wars; it included the "propagandists of plutocracy" from the upper class, who exercise power over public thought. This elite "defends and asserts itself" by imposing its agenda on the mass public through the manipulation of imagery: "When elites resort to propaganda, the tactical problem is to select symbols and channels capable of eliciting the desired concerted acts" (Lasswell, 1972: 19, 31, 37). Propaganda, Lasswell maintained, is essential, because "men are often poor judges of their own interests, fitting from one alternative to the next without solid reason" (Chomsky, 1992: 368).

Conventional ways of thinking about propaganda conceptualize it as the stuff of authoritarian societies and dictatorships – not as integral to open, democratic ones. Propaganda is something "other" countries do, not something practiced by US political officials or in western media. As Jacques Ellul wrote, citizens of democracies are often averse to thinking about being manipulated by propaganda: "The notion of rational man, capable of thinking and living according to reason, of controlling his passions and living according to scientific patterns, of choosing freely between good and evil – all this seems opposed to the secret influences, the mobilizations of myths, the swift appeals to the irrational, so characteristic of propaganda" (Ellul, 1973: 233). Most Americans do not want to see "propaganda" as "normal and indispensable, even intrinsic" to their country's politics (Ellul, 1973: 233). Ellul rejected this position, arguing that "private propaganda" was a reality within democratic societies as a tool of control utilized by "powerful companies" (Ellul, 1973: 237) and by political elites in historical settings – for example, as used against enemies of state in the Cold War (Ellul, 1973: 238). Numerous scholars following Ellul echo his position, examining how propaganda is utilized through modern advertising, public relations, politics, and the "everyday use and abuse of persuasion" (Pratkanis and Aronson, 2001; Sproule, 2005).

History undermines the notion that democratic societies are immune from propaganda. Modern propaganda was not pioneered by totalitarian dictatorships like the Third Reich, but in western democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom. In the United States, the father of the modern public relations industry, Edward Bernays, literally wrote the book on propaganda. After working for the Committee on Public Information during the First World War, Bernays applied the skills he learned as a propagandist to personal benefit, representing a slew of corporate clients. Whether selling cigarettes to

women, representing the United Fruit Company in its attacks on the government of Guatemala in the Cold War, or making efforts to sell products by linking them to subconscious human needs and desires, Bernays pioneered the practice of propaganda as a means of social control.

As Bernays argued in *Propaganda*, indoctrination by elites is an integral part of western politics. “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of” (Bernays, 2004: 37). These “invisible governors,” Bernays noted, work to disseminate “propaganda” which serves as “the executive arm of the invisible government” (Bernays, 2004: 48), molding the minds of the masses.

For Bernays, the “engineering of consent” was a constant project under corporate capitalism (Chomsky, 1989: 16). It involved more than just selling a product, but a way of life and identity tied to a consumerist lifestyle and philosophy. “Business realize that its relationship to the public is not confined to the manufacture and sale of a given product, but includes at the same time the selling of itself and of all those things for which it stands in the public mind” (Bernays, 2004: 83). In the elite-driven indoctrination process, there is little room for mass empowerment. As Bernays posited, the US public is an “ill-defined, mercurial, and changeable group of individual judgments” (Bernays, 2011: 87). Most Americans do not develop their beliefs “on a basis of research and logical deduction.” Instead, their beliefs are “dogmatic expressions accepted on the authority of his parents, his teachers, his church, and of his social, his economic, and other leaders” (Bernays, 2011: 87–88). Such contempt for the average person is not surprising from those committed to practicing propaganda.

Some intellectuals characterize US political culture as paranoid and anti-intellectual – points that would appear to feed into Americans’ susceptibility to manipulation by propaganda. The historian Richard Hofstadter warned in his 1962 book about “[a]nti-intellectualism in American life” that it “is, in fact, older than our national identity, and has a long historical background” (Hofstadter, 1962: 6). Among the nation’s anti-intellectual “attitudes and ideas,” Hofstadter included “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it” (Hofstadter, 1962: 7) and a “folkish dislike of the educated classes” and “specialists and experts” who “insult the people” and are irrelevant to the masses and their “common sense” (Hofstadter, 1962: 12, 14). Anti-intellectualism was tied in part, Hofstadter argued, to Christian evangelism and the “fundamentalist mind.” This “Manichean” thinking about the world imagined “conflict between absolute

good and absolute evil” and allowed no tolerance for “ambiguities” (Hofstadter, 1962: 135). Hofstadter also linked anti-intellectualism to failures of education, spotlighting US problems with “underpaid teachers, overcrowded classrooms . . . broken-down school buildings, inadequate facilities,” the “cult of athleticism” that dominates in formal school settings, “de-intellectualized curricula” and the “failure to educate” Americans “in serious subjects” of inquiry (Hofstadter, 1962: 300–301). Anti-intellectualism, Hofstadter lamented, threatened to “gravely inhibit or impoverish intellectual and cultural life” (Hofstadter, 1962: 9) – a point taking on added weight when considering his warnings about the public’s embrace of conspiracy mongering.

A political culture drawn to anti-intellectualism is also one that is susceptible to paranoia. Lasswell saw the common person as lacking reason and susceptible to manipulation by symbols and propaganda. Hofstadter, like Lasswell, was concerned with “the emotional and symbolic side of political life,” as he focused on Americans’ preoccupation with conspiratorial thinking and the “non-rational side of politics” (Hofstadter, 1964: xxxiii). Hofstadter’s famous 1964 essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, which later became a book, drew attention to how “American political life” is mobilized “again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds” and for “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter, 1964: 3), particularly on the American right and in the Republican Party (Hofstadter, 1964: 1, 93–141). Among these historic conspiracies, Hofstadter included:

1. Rantings about “one world socialistic government” during the McCarthyist era and beyond, with communist subversives seeking to “create chaos,” aid “our enemies,” and “seize power.”
2. Warnings about “fluoridation of municipal water supplies,” which serve as “catnip for cranks of all kinds, especially for those who have excessive fear of poisoning.”
3. Scare stories about secret societies of “Free Masons” and “Illuminati” who are depicted as dark, satanic, anti-Christian, murderous forces working to undermine law and order and republican government (Hofstadter, 1964: 5, 9–10, 17).

Hofstadter’s writings make it clear that paranoia, anti-intellectualism, and conspiracy are long-standing traits of American culture. They may ebb and flow over time, intensifying and receding in waves.

As I discuss in Chapter 7, the United States is experiencing a new wave of conspiratorial paranoia that corresponds with the rise of modern communication technology in the digital media era. This would not surprise popular culture critic Neil Postman, who spotlighted the decline of US intellectual discourse in the age of television and show business entertainment politics, which he lamented for corroding political discourse. Following Marshall

McLuhan, Postman believed the method of delivering a message impacted the quality of content. He believed “the decline of a print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of a television-based epistemology . . . has had grave consequences for public life,” producing content that favored superficiality and titillation over education (Postman, 2005: 24). In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman warned that serious political content would be trivialized in the television era by media outlets that pursued profit, ratings, and spectacle:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility. (Postman, 2005: 155–156)

Subsequent research confirmed Postman’s concerns with increased public reliance on television, which is associated with declining civic and political engagement, reduced social connectivity, increased fear and distrust of others, and reduced political knowledge – particularly for those relying on local and broadcast network television over print sources (Putnam, 1995; Norris, 1996; Shanahan and Morgan, 1999). Still, questions remain about new digital media – including social media platforms – and whether they have encouraged superficiality in media content. As I discuss later in this chapter, some scholars argue that these platforms are central to activist and social movement efforts to mobilize, thereby complementing the democratic process and empowering citizens. On the other hand, some scholars and intellectuals lament social media for creating informational “echo chambers” that promote partisan polarization and provide fertile ground for the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Historical and Contemporary Propaganda

Propaganda as a concept is commonly associated with authoritarian states. As Axelrod recounts:

Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, the totalitarian regimes of the interwar “Age of Dictators” – we think of them as the twentieth century’s great factories of propaganda. In reality, working within the world’s largest democracy to promote a war “to make the world safe for democracy,” it was George Creel who carried out the century’s first, most ambitious, and most successful experiment in propaganda . . . Today, Creel is little remembered outside of academic circles of historians and students of culture and media, but he and the works of his committee were apparently very familiar to such earnest students of propaganda as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, both of whom looked to the American government’s World War I “information” program as a model on which to build the propaganda industry by which, when the time came, they sold their own war to the people of Germany. (Axelrod, 2009: xi)

Despite exceptionalist notions that only “other” countries practice propaganda, a growing volume of scholarship has emerged from historians, political communication scholars, and others documenting how US political officials have utilized the media to cultivate public support for war. Some research on this topic focuses on US involvement in the First World War, particularly on the Woodrow Wilson administration’s fanciful promises of pursuing a “war to end all wars” and make “the world safe for democracy” (Axelrod, 2009: 55), defend against German aggression, promote national sovereignty and self-determination for nations of the world, and combat German human rights atrocities (Brewer, 2011: 51, 76). These propaganda points were undermined by inconvenient facts, including Wilson’s own white supremacy (Matthews, 2015), in addition to the United States’ whitewashing of allied atrocities during the war, which raised questions about the selective emphasis on allegations against Germany (Brewer, 2011: 51).

Other scholarship focuses on the means of public mobilization and the selling of US propaganda during the First World War. It emphasizes the incredible reach of the propaganda employed by the government’s Committee on Public Information (CPI), covering various forms of communication, including window displays, posters, magazine ads, news stories, cartoons, films, news reels, and the monitoring of, and coordinating with, the press to promote pro-war messages (Brewer, 2011: 46–86). The government appealed to citizens’ sense of civic pride, recruiting them to support the war effort, conserve food, and buy war bonds, while calling on Americans to defend civilization and to vilify the enemy, which was seen as a threat to the American way of life (Kingsbury, 2010). In an incredible domestic mobilization, 75,000 “Four Minute Men” volunteers were recruited to give more than a quarter million speeches to nearly 400 million people at picnics, clubs, churches, schools, fairs, and theaters promoting the war (Brewer, 2011: 63; Auerbach, 2015: 84); and another 250,000 spies were recruited as part of the “American Protective League” to root out alleged foreigners and war critics (Brewer, 2011: 70). These efforts appeared to be hugely successful, with the primary reasons young men gave when volunteering to serve in the war being a combination of appeals to patriotism, freedom, and fear of the Germans – in line with the propaganda of the Wilson administration and the CPI (Brewer, 2011: 73).

Scholars also emphasize how US officials employed propaganda during the Cold War to manipulate the press and the public. They have explored how US presidents, departments, and agencies used rhetoric and other messages to popularize efforts to “contain” communism across the globe (Fitzgibbon, 2020), utilizing the media to cultivate public support for war, while stirring up anti-communist hysteria (Bernhard, 2003; Casey, 2010). Additionally, organizations such as the United States Intelligence Agency (USIA) and

Voice of America (VOA) promoted a “message of America” (Hixson, 1997: 33) that was sympathetic to official propaganda interests, celebrating the United States as promoting free enterprise, capitalism, freedom, and democracy at home and abroad (Osgood, 2006; Cull, 2009; Belmonte, 2010) and, in the process, challenging the Soviet Union’s propaganda messages (Hixson, 1997).

Scholars dissect how propaganda defines official messages and those disseminated by the media, and how it relates to US wars in the Middle East and the “War on Terrorism.” Studies focusing on the 1990–1991 Gulf War emphasize how officials used rhetoric to sell the invasion of Iraq, focusing on themes such as humanitarianism and executive management of the press. On the alleged humanitarian front, the George H. W. Bush administration drew on the propaganda lie that Saddam Hussein’s government had stolen incubators from Kuwait following Iraq’s invasion and occupation of the country, leaving Kuwaiti premature babies to die. This story was popularized by a 15-year-old Kuwait girl named “Nayirah” who testified before the US Congress, although it was later revealed that she was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States. Subsequent reporting also showed that she was coached in delivering her lines by the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton – which was paid by the Kuwaiti government to engage in a propaganda campaign to drum up international opposition to the Iraqi regime and its occupation of Kuwait – and that there was no evidence that the incubator “atrociousness” ever occurred. Despite the fabrication, US media failed to systematically challenge this propaganda narrative (MacArthur, 1992; Oddo, 2018).

Critical inquiries into the 1990–1991 Gulf War also spotlighted official efforts to manage the press through a Pentagon-press pool system in which journalists were “embedded” with US military forces to report on the war effort. As one journalistic account found, the pool system was a “leftover from the carefully managed invasion of Panama eight months earlier,” imposing an arrangement on reporters “that sharply curtailed when and how they could talk to the troops,” and raising concerns about military censorship, should reporters raise critical points about the war that were deemed objectionable by military brass (MacArthur, 1992: 7–8, 17). A more sophisticated system of embedding was instituted during the 2003 war with Iraq, when embedded reporters signed contracts empowering the military to review their reporting and censor critical stories if they were deemed inappropriate by officials (DiMaggio, 2008).

Propaganda studies grew in prominence after September 11, 2001. The shock of the terror attacks prompted mass support for US militarism abroad, but also drew attention from scholars studying how officials utilize rhetoric and the media to build public support for foreign wars. Academics and even a former Bush administration official implicated the government directly in

promoting propaganda in its attempts to sell war (McClellan, 2008; Snow, 2011; Briant, 2015; DiMaggio, 2015). Some of this research found that major news media heavily emphasized a “war frame” following the September 11 attacks – emphasizing military planning, strategy, and progress under utilizing a “law and order” frame, which would have treated the attacks as a crime in which evidence was presented of who was responsible, extradition was sought, and trials pursued against the alleged perpetrators (DiMaggio, 2008, 2015). Other research found evidence of an “echoing press” in newspaper editorials prior to and after September 11, overlapping heavily with “fundamentalist” themes offered in President Bush’s speeches that focused on “good” and “evil,” “security” and “peril” in the “War on Terrorism” (Domke, 2004). Still other research showed that the Bush administration’s use of terror alert threats coincided with increased reporting on alleged terror threats and coverage of terrorism in general, and was associated with shifts in public opinion, including rising concern with terrorism, and increased approval of the administration and its handling of terror threats (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro, 2011). Finally, scholars emphasize how the media aided the administration in justifying war against designated enemies of state through the use of dehumanizing animalistic metaphors (Steuter and Wills, 2008).

Scholars also identify how the media were mobilized in favor of Bush administration war propaganda. “Agenda setting” outlets heavily deferred to the Bush administration and its claims that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction,” despite the country being disarmed of its chemical and biological weapons by the United Nations before the 2003 invasion (DiMaggio, 2008). Other studies found that reporting in national newspapers, on broadcast television, and on cable heavily privileged Bush administration sources and themes related to WMDs, by associating Iraq with evil and terrorism and emphasizing themes such as human rights and democracy (Bonn, 2010; DiMaggio, 2015). Reporters failed to challenge the administration on its claims that Iraq was seeking to secure various infrastructure, including aluminum tubes and uranium, to develop a nuclear weapon to threaten Americans (Oddo, 2018). Consumption of reporting on Iraq was associated with increased concern with terror attacks against the United States, with support for war, and with support for the Bush administration’s handling of war once it began (Bonn, 2010; DiMaggio, 2015). Finally, scholars emphasize how US media fall in line with nationalistic priorities and propaganda, devoting heavy attention to human rights rhetoric and concerns related to “enemies” of state and their victims, which are deemed “worthy” by US officials. Little to no attention is devoted to the “unworthy” victims of human rights abuses and atrocities committed by the United States and its allies (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; DiMaggio, 2010; Zollman, 2017).

In addition to the case studies and conflicts discussed thus far, there is the question of how to define propaganda. But propaganda is characterized by multiple definitions. Jowett and O'Donnell differentiate persuasion from propaganda. The former "seeks voluntary change" and assumes "the audience has access to information about the other side of a controversial issue," whereas with propaganda, the content involves "misleading and manipulating an audience" through one-sided content and denying access to alternative views (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018: 44). Stanley defines propaganda, not as information that is false or insincere but as a tool of "manipulation" that elicits emotions and fear over "rational" thought and discourse and that "close[s] off debate" (Stanley, 2016: 41–43, 48). Propaganda is effective when individuals succumb to "the grip of a false belief caused by a flawed ideology" (Stanley, 2016: 46). My previous work defined one-sided partisan media content as propagandistic, pertaining to how cable news media indoctrinate viewers (DiMaggio, 2019). Herman and Chomsky establish a "propaganda model" that describes the news media as disseminating the views of powerful political and economic actors. They establish five filters through which the model works to reinforce these actors' interests: (1) "profit orientation" of capitalist media and "concentrated ownership" by corporate conglomerates; (2) "advertising as the primary income source of the mass media"; (3) "the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power"; (4) "flak" as a tool for "disciplining the media utilized by these powerful political and economic actors"; and (5) "anticommunism" "as a national religion and control mechanism" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 2).

For Herman and Chomsky, the official source bias is central to media propaganda. As they argue in *Manufacturing Consent*, a "democratic propaganda system" operates in a way that it "does not proclaim the party line – so that it can be easily refuted – but presupposes it – thus helping to establish it even more deeply as the very precondition of discussion, while also providing the appearance of lively debate" (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 17). This position is reinforced by research emphasizing that propaganda in democratic societies is characterized by official dominance of the news, with journalists *voluntarily* deferring to officials from both major parties. This empowers the parties to circumscribe the range of views reported in the news (DiMaggio, 2017). Previous scholarship understands propaganda in democratic societies as dramatically different than in authoritarian ones. As Chomsky has argued, propaganda is to democracy what violence is to a dictatorship – which is to say that it is a means of controlling the masses (Chomsky, 2002: 20).

There are other ways of looking at propaganda as well. In *Media Control: Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, Chomsky sketches out a vision of

propaganda with many facets. These include the view that propaganda involves a specialized class of political and economic elites that manipulates the masses – who are seen as spectators in a larger political game (Chomsky, 2002: 17, 19). It includes the practice whereby Americans are marginalized, distracted, and pushed to apathy and political disengagement by the mass media's emphasis on consumerism, sports, and entertainment (Koppes and Black, 1990; Chomsky, 2002: 25, 31–32, 43; DiPaolo, 2011; Rider, 2016). Chomsky also sees people as propagandized by sloganeering, social conditioning, and nationalistic rhetoric, with political officials using the rhetoric of fear to construct enemy threats and dangerous “others” to sell US interventions (Chomsky, 2002: 26, 28, 44, 65, 70). For Chomsky, propaganda means the omission of dissident voices in favor of governmental perspectives and an official source bias (Chomsky, 2002: 54–55). Finally, propaganda involves the use of lies, disinformation, and efforts to “falsify history” in favor of the perspectives and agendas of political and business elites (Chomsky, 2002: 35).

For the purposes of this book, this review of previous research provides nuance and depth to our understanding of propaganda. I define propaganda as the repeated dissemination of false or distorted information on behalf of powerful political and economic actors, at the expense of alternative viewpoints and evidence, with the potential to deceive, indoctrinate, manipulate, and misinform the masses and stoke mass fear, paranoia, and hysteria. The fostering of mass fear and hysteria through manipulation is central to the case studies explored in this book. And this fear relates in significant part to the phenomenon of “othering,” whereby powerful societal actors seek to construct “in groups” and “out groups” to sell their political agendas and policies. I draw on different parts of this definition throughout the book, particularly in the case study chapters.

Disinformation, Misinformation, Post-Truth, and Fake News

Heavily overlapping with the concept of propaganda is disinformation. Scholars understand disinformation as the use of spin (Jackson and Jamieson, 2007), lies (Fetzer, 2004), or false or misleading information (Pottier, 2002; Fallis, 2015; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Bennett and Livingston, 2018) to communicate a message or achieve a goal. Keeping with past scholarship (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Bennett and Livingston, 2018), I use “disinformation” interchangeably with “propaganda” and “fake news,” while arguing that propaganda relates to intentional efforts to deceive *by stoking hysteria and mass fear* of an “other.”

I draw on a definition of disinformation that stresses efforts at “manipulating and misleading people intentionally to achieve political ends” (Benkler, Faris,

and Roberts, 2018). Discussions of manipulation will vary by individual case studies when examining the Iraq war, climate change, health care reform and death panels, birtherism, Russiagate, Ukrainegate, QAnon, and Covid-19. But with each example, there is evidence that the purveyors of disinformation either knowingly misrepresented facts and reality, in the process manipulating the public, or at least selectively presented information to ignore compelling counterpoints, positions, and evidence. Through such manipulation, these political actors made it more difficult for the public to challenge falsehoods, one-sided narratives, and propaganda.

Closely related to disinformation is misinformation. Scholars conceptualize misinformation as a function of the masses holding factually incorrect beliefs (Hochschild and Einstein, 2015; O'Connor and Weatherall, 2020), and accepting misleading or partial information (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2020). They view misinformation as a form of mass confusion that is deliberately provoked and encouraged (Berinsky, 2017) – often by elite economic actors (Oreskes and Conway, 2011), and as arising from journalistic failures to inform the public (Oreskes and Conway, 2011; Pickard, 2019) on important societal matters. Put simply, misinformation refers to when the public (or a part of it) responds to disinformation and propaganda by embracing false beliefs, “without meaning to be wrong” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018: 24). Misinformation is important because it fuels the political beliefs of the misinformed (Kuklinski, 2000), and is particularly dangerous for people who are active in politics (Hochschild and Einstein, 2015). Conceptually, I link together concepts in this way: Propaganda, disinformation, and fake news are the tools through which political and economic actors promote mass misinformation, within a political culture that is characterized, more broadly, as post-truth.

Regarding “post-truth,” this concept has received a growing amount of attention in the era of Trumpism. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (OxfordLanguages, 2016). The post-truth mindset becomes reality when people identify more with false information, lies, and “alternative facts” than with notions of truth based on verifiable, empirical evidence (Rabin-Havt, 2016; Farkas and Schou, 2019). McIntyre maintains that “post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not” (McIntyre, 2018: 12). Other scholars emphasize how post-truth thrives in an era when mass commercialism distracts much of the public from paying attention to political matters (Higdon and Huff, 2019).

I echo the definition of post-truth as the elevation of beliefs and emotions over facts and evidence-based arguments. Propaganda is the primary method through which our post-truth world is maintained. Closely related to post-truth is anti-intellectualism. Americans are socially conditioned to embrace anti-intellectualism and discount the assessments and judgments of academics, medical researchers, and other experts, in favor of the belief that the “average person” can use “common sense” to make their way in life (Pierce, 2010; Nichols, 2018). Post-truth politics have been with us as long as propaganda has defined political discourse. Still, contempt for evidence-based reasoning has intensified in the United States over the last decade with the growth of conspiratorial paranoia and fearmongering, in large part because of the Trump administration’s sustained assault on facts and expertise.

Finally, a growing number of scholars are paying attention to the concept of fake news since it was popularized by the Trump administration. Some scholars emphasize the difficulties intellectuals and scholars face in defining fake news (Maret, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2019; Higdon, 2020). Some scholars take a historical view, pointing out that fake news is not new. Higdon writes that “from a historical perspective, the expression was invoked fairly regularly starting in the 1890s, appearing in newspapers” that “were employing the phrase, as it would come to be used for a century, to denounce false stories packaged and sold as legitimate news content” (Higdon, 2020: 4). Cortada and Aspray cite historical examples of fake news, including conspiracy theories about the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, lies for war defending US interventions in Cuba and the Spanish-American War, and misinformation embraced by the public and fueled by the tobacco and fossil fuels industries (Cortada and Aspray, 2019).

There are various ways scholars define fake news. Some link it directly to propaganda (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling, 2017; Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019; Higdon and Huff, 2019; Andrejevic, 2020), disinformation (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Bennett and Livingston, 2018), and the propagation of falsehoods, lies, and fabrication (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; McNair, 2017; Cortada and Aspray, 2019). Others emphasize fake news as media trafficking in tabloid-style and sensational news (Higdon and Huff, 2019). And some scholars provide limited, narrow definitions of fake news as falsified news content passed off as real, and produced by bogus news outfits (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nagler, and Tucker, 2019; Allen et al., 2020; Lions et al., 2021; Osmundson, 2021). This plethora of definitions reinforces one of my main themes in this book – that based on competing discourses on fake news, it is difficult, probably impossible, to come up with a single authoritative definition of fake news. The concept is characterized by contested meanings because so many different definitions are put forward by political officialdom (Trump), journalists, scholars, and the public.

To Report or Not to Report? The Misinformation Conundrum

One serious concern is that disinformation stories, if spread widely, carry the risk of manipulating the public in mass – even when reporting is accompanied by systematic efforts to correct them. For example, O'Connor and Weatherall argue in *The Misinformation Age* that “fake news, unsubstantiated allegations, and innuendo can create interest in a story that then justifies investigations and coverage by more reliable sources. Even when these further investigations show the original allegations to be baseless, they spread the reach of the story – and create the sense that there is something to it” (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2020: 162–167). They cite the examples of Pizzagate (the precursor to QAnon), and the allegation that Seth Rich was secretly murdered in a Democratic conspiracy planned by Hillary Clinton. O'Connor and Weatherall worry that “reliable news sources,” by “investigating allegations, checking facts, and refuting false claims” related to misinformation, engage in “risky” behavior, since their coverage may “expand the reach of fake stories” (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2020: 168).

These fears are based largely on conjecture, not documented evidence. It may be that journalists, by reporting on conspiracies, popularize them to a larger audience. Alternatively, it may be that fake news conspiracies, if allowed to travel unchecked through social media platforms and other media venues, reach millions or tens of millions of Americans without being seriously challenged by professionally trained journalists. Journalists might argue they are taking the high road by ignoring these conspiracies, but that may also mean abdicating on their professional responsibility to investigate and debunk falsehoods, thereby denying a vital informational service to the public. An answer to this debate cannot be definitively provided here, so I return to this question in my case study chapters, as I examine how mainstream journalists cover various conspiratorial claims and what the implications are for the public. I also examine the propaganda claims of powerful political actors, including claims from the Bush administration that Iraq was secretly developing WMDs, and claims supported by the fossil fuel industry that climatologists deceptively manipulate data to misinform the public on climate change. Through these case studies, I explore how mainstream journalists respond to conspiracy theories and propaganda, while assessing the effects that their reporting has on mass audiences.

Disinformation, Fake News, and Social Media

Finally, there is concern in political discourse with social media as an increasingly popular medium for political engagement, and how they relate to disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. Social media are maligned

by pundits and scholars claiming that they serve as “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” for insulating users from competing and contrary viewpoints (Sunstein, 2007; Pariser, 2012; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Settle, 2019). Some scholarship emphasizes how elite political actors may manipulate social media, electoral outcomes (Jackson and Jamieson, 2007; Woolley and Howard, 2018), and the masses through demagoguery (Fuchs, 2018), and how social media undermine trust in democracy (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Others draw attention to how social media are utilized to promote reactionary political agendas (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018) and to cultivate misinformation regarding public health issues (Fang et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2019). Some emphasize the need for greater self-regulation through the flagging of inaccurate social media content (Eckler, Lewandowsky, and Tang, 2010; Pennycook et al., 2020) or using algorithms to elevate higher quality news content over inaccurate stories (Pennycook et al., 2020). Others emphasize government regulation of these platforms to combat misinformation (Napoli, 2019; Pickard, 2019).

Contrary to the works discussed thus far, numerous scholars argue social media can be used for positive democratic purposes, helping young, alienated, and marginalized groups to collectively organize social movements (Castells, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2018; Tufekci, 2018; Jackson, Bailey, and Welles, 2020). Others emphasize the potential of social media to encourage political participation and mobilization (Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero, 2012; Raine et al., 2012; Gainous and Wagner, 2013; Feezell, Conroy, and Guerrero, 2016; Halpern, Valenzuela, and Katz, 2017). I also discuss in a previous work how social media are mobilized for democratic mass action (DiMaggio, 2020a). Clearly, scholars are not all of one mind on the effects of social media on politics and society.

Critical scholars express concerns about the negative effects of social media. Higdon views these heavily corporatized entities as “an existential threat to democracy” (Higdon, 2020: 7), depicting their users as operating in “a digital cave or bubble of fake news content that influences and directs their attitudes and behaviors” (Higdon, 2020: 94). Higdon elaborates:

The economic goals that shape social media algorithms have the side effect of popularizing fake news content . . . internet users desire content that confirms rather than challenges their views. In an effort to keep users on their platform, tech companies create a bubble around each user that filters out the content that challenges users’ beliefs and popularizes content that confirms their ideological position. (Higdon, 2020: 102)

Reinforcing Higdon’s point, Twitter and Facebook enable these bubbles by allowing users to unfollow, block, or unfriend those with whom they no longer wish to be associated. Settle provides evidence to validate such concerns, showing that social media users are more likely to confer favorable judgments

on those “in their own parties” when it comes to perceived political knowledge, in contrast to “out-group” partisans on the other side, who are seen as having “lower levels of knowledge” (Settle, 2019: 207–208).

Some critics point to corporate interests as fueling the rise of a “misinformation society” (Pickard, 2019). Pickard spotlights the “new digital monopolies” and “the commercialism that lies at the center of” social media’s “maladies” (Pickard, 2019: 4–5, 125). These venues are subject to numerous public complaints for having “mishandled users data,” for having platformed and “proliferated dangerous misinformation and propaganda,” and for having “enabled foreign interference” in relation to the 2016 election and attempts by the Russian government to sway the outcome (Pickard, 2019: 125). Facebook, Pickard warns, played a “central role in this misinformation ecology” by working to “advance far-right discourses” (Pickard, 2019: 105, 108). These criticisms are not based on hyperbole, as scholarship documents how social media are utilized disproportionately by the US right. As Benkler, Farris, and Roberts conclude in *Network Propaganda*, there is evidence of a “right-wing media ecosystem” that “differs categorically from the rest of the media environment” in “how much more susceptible it has been to disinformation, lies, and half-truths” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018: 13). They look at right-wing media such as Breitbart News, InfoWars, Zero Hedge, Gateway Pundit, Fox News, and Daily Caller, and how they are engaged with on social media. They find evidence of “asymmetric” polarization, with social media Twitter and Facebook shares heavily tilted toward right-wing informational sources (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018: 54–56).

Despite evidence of the rightward tilt of social media, Benkler and his coauthors do not blame Twitter or Facebook. They argue against “the internet did it” hypothesis: “Instead, we suggest that technological, institutional, and political dynamics have been interacting for over 40 years to lead the Republican Party and Republican voters to gradually become more extreme versions of themselves, without operating symmetrically on the Democratic Party and its supporters or on most independents” (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018: 292). There is plenty of political science scholarship to reinforce “asymmetrical polarization” – revealing that ideological polarization in US politics, media, public opinion, and voting is primarily a right-wing phenomenon (Hacker and Pierson, 2005; Grossman and Hopkins, 2016; McCarthy, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2016; DiMaggio, 2019). But asymmetrical polarization on the right does not preclude the possibility that social media may be having an independent impact, pulling American political discourse to the right – even as liberals and conservatives maintain their ideological echo chambers and filter bubbles. I devote space in later chapters to exploring how social media push American discourse to the right – after controlling for users’ partisanship and ideology – on major political issues, including QAnon, “Big Lie” election

fraud propaganda, and Covid misinformation and conspiracy theories. Through a social constructionist framework, I identify how social media are manipulated to unite users in fear against those that are described as dangerous “others.” Disinformation, misinformation, and fake news are integral to this process.

Polarization, Conspiracy Theories, and the Fall of the Republican Party

Recent scholarship asserts that there is “significant conspiracy theorizing on both sides of the partisan aisle” in the United States (Uscinski, 2020: 92). There is some truth to this statement, as I document later in this book, with liberal media pundits affiliated with the Democratic Party falling into extravagant conspiratorial speculation about an overarching grand narrative alleging active collusion between Donald Trump and Russia – assertions that were never verified despite a detailed investigation involving US intelligence agencies. Still, my examination of contemporary disinformation, misinformation, and fake news reveals that we should avoid false equivalencies suggesting that conspiracy theorizing is occurring at comparable levels in both the Democratic and Republican parties (Uscinski, 2020). The case studies examined suggest that conspiracy theorizing has become part and parcel to how the Republican Party operates, with conspiracies dominating the party’s politics in modern times. The party can scarcely go a year without a major conspiracy scandal, be it “death panels” during the health care reform debate, or birtherism in the early 2010s, or during the Trump years when conspiracies became the currency of the administration. These include baseless “Big Lie” propaganda about voter fraud, groundless claims that the Democrats spied on and tried to overthrow (former) President Trump, speculation about Hillary Clinton as a murderer (the Seth Rich fabrication), the fiction of Chinese-invented climate change, claims about Covid-19 as a manufactured threat and as a government-engineered “bioweapon,” QAnon fanaticism, and rhetoric about the “deep state” manufacturing Ukrainegate as a “witch hunt” against the Trump administration. Social media, I argue, provides fertile ground for these sorts of conspiracy theories. Conspiracies now represent the core of Republican politics, suggesting the “party” – to the extent that it can be called one in the traditional sense – has largely abdicated on parliamentary-style governing responsibilities, preferring the politics of insurgency, paranoia, and disinformation. The risks of this shift are profound. When a party decides to “govern” through rampant propaganda, delusion, and falsehoods, the risk is that its partisans will exit the real world and enter into one constructed by disinformation, misinformation, and “alternative facts,” and defined by post-truth.