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Fake News: A Framework for Detecting and Avoiding Propaganda

1. Summary
1.1 Professional persuaders and influencers have engaged in propaganda for so long that many people no longer trust mainstream news to be communicating truthful and accurate information.
1.2 Rather than expecting citizens to have the skills to detect fake news, professional persuaders and influencers should develop less propagandistic modes of persuasion; and mainstream journalists should get better at detecting propaganda.
1.3 We provide a framework for avoiding and detecting propaganda.

2. Introduction about yourself/your organisation and your reason for submitting evidence
The authors have published many academic books and articles on deception, public relations, propaganda, and attempted manipulation of media and publics.

3. Introduction A core problem of the contemporary fake news phenomenon is that professional persuaders and influencers have engaged in propaganda for so long that many people no longer trust mainstream news to communicate truthful and accurate information. We therefore need professional persuaders and influencers to develop less propagandistic modes of persuasion; and we need mainstream journalists to get better at detecting and revealing propaganda. We provide a framework for how this may be initiated.

4. Contemporary Context Fake news is generally regarded as news that is either *wholly false* or that has *deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content.* However, since January 2017, the meaning of the term 'fake news' has rapidly shifted given repeated usage by US President Donald Trump to refer to all news that he disagrees with, no matter how factually based or reputable the news outlet. Since taking office Trump has accused the media of:
4.1 Lying about the size of his presidential inauguration crowd (Frisk 2017);
4.2 Lying about the existence of his feud with US intelligence agencies (Hirschfeld and Rosenbergjan 2017);
4.3 Dishonestly reporting that his administration is in chaos (Byers 2017);
4.4 And under-reporting terrorist attacks, to further the media's own (unspecified) agenda (Tracy 2017).
5. In his lengthy (77 minutes) press conference on 16 February 2017, Trump repeatedly used the term 'fake news' to describe: press stories about his campaign advisers' communications with Russia; *CNN*'s reportage; and wider press coverage in general (Byers 2017).
6. Yet, in the midst of his anti-media tirades, Trump does hit upon truths, themselves evidenced by decades of academic research. These include:
6.1 The profit-orientation of the media and the dominance of Public Relations (PR) that privilege corporate and elite interests (Herman and Chomsky 1988, Schlosberg 2016). Trump, in his press conference on 16 February, said: 'Unfortunately, much of the media in Washington, D.C., along with New York, Los Angeles in particular, speaks not for the people, but for the special interests and for those profiting off a very, very obviously broken system' (Blake 2017).
6.2 The leaking of classified information for political maneuvering and gain (Hastedt 2005, Lashmar 2013, Bakir 2017). Trump, in his press conference on 16 February, said: 'How does the press get this information that's classified? How do they do it? …It's an illegal process and the press should be ashamed of themselves. But more importantly, the people that gave out the information to the press should be ashamed of themselves, really ashamed' (Blake 2017).
7. Fake news appears to have at least two objectives: to act as clickbait (to drive internet traffic) for financial gain; and/or to influence public opinion through propaganda. The 2016 US presidential election battle between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton focused attention on fake news as clickbait. Pro-Trump fake news stories, many plagiarised from right-wing American websites aimed at conservatives and pro-Trump *Facebook* users, generated significant *Facebook* engagement, in turn, accruing advertising revenue for the fake news web-site owners (Kirby 2016, Silverman and

Alexander 2016). Also evident were the propagandistic intentions of some of these fake news websites (Silverman 2016), and fears were expressed that fake news may have influenced the election's outcome. However, a study from New York and Stanford Universities concluded that, for fake news to have changed the election's outcome, a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

8. Nonetheless, given the recent furore over the spread of fake news, *Facebook* has now turned to its users to help it detect fake news. Since mid-December 2016, third-party fact checking organisations have been analysing *Facebook*'s news feeds to identify and disprove fake news (Adair and Holan 2013). One of their methods is to fact-check news stories that have been flagged by readers as potentially fake or deliberately misleading. If these fact-checking organisations agree that a story is false, it gets flagged as 'disputed' when *Facebook* users attempt to share the post (Mosseri 2016).

9. However, relying on users' ability to recognise or to suspect fake news (to enable flagging and fact-checking), shifts responsibility from the fundamental problem: ***that professional persuaders and influencers have engaged in propaganda for so long that people no longer trust mainstream news to tell the truth.*** Opinion polls show that we do not believe that our news is unbiased, or very accurate. In 2016, 74% of Americans said that news organisations are biased; only 22% said they 'trust the information' they get from local news organisations 'a lot'; and only 18% said they trust information they get from national news organisations 'a lot' (Pew Research Center 2016). Similarly, only 25% of Britons trust journalists to tell the truth, and even fewer (21%) trust politicians to tell the truth (Ipsos MORI 2016). These low figures have been evident for decades (Bakir and Barlow 2007).

10. Over a Century of Fake News Today's furore over fake news must be seen against the backdrop of over a century of systematic political and commercial efforts in liberal democracies such as the UK and USA to persuade and influence populations through mass communication (Simpson 1994, Miller and Dinan 2008). From scholarly tomes to 'how-to' manuals, a large body of knowledge has emerged concerning the histories and techniques of *propaganda*, *PR*, *public diplomacy, political marketing, strategic communications, strategic narratives* and *spin.* Similarly, military circles have generated practices of *perception management*, *psychological operations, information operations* and *public affairs.*

11. The news media are often a focus for these various efforts to persuade and influence, as they have a professional commitment to accuracy, facticity, and in some cases impartiality and objectivity. Thus, information imparted through the medium of news (or what looks like news) confers a sense of credibility and truth to the content, especially if it has been widely shared online (which is regarded as a proxy for endorsement). Governments rarely admit to their use of propaganda in the news, and if found out will normally excuse it as being in the interests of national security or the national interest. Nonetheless, empirical examples of government propaganda have accumulated over time across a range of liberal democracies including the UK (discussed in Section 4).

12. Due to declining paying audiences, and hence revenue, for over a decade, legacy news outlets have been closing and reducing staff. These factors mitigate against time-consuming, fact-checking journalism, increasing the press' susceptibility to 'PR-isation' (the use of unchecked PR material in news) and '*editorial subsidies*' where PR practitioners go beyond providing *information subsidies* (such as facts, statistics or quotes) to providing the very editorial framing of stories (Jackson and Moloney 2016, Bakir 2017).

13. Rather than shifting the responsibility for initiating fact-checking of news stories to citizens (as *Facebook* advocates), ***we recommend that professional persuaders and influencers should be required to adhere to ethical conduct in their attempts at persuasion; and journalists need to become better at detecting, avoiding and flagging up propaganda.*** To facilitate these developments, we need to clearly understand how propaganda operates.

14. Detecting Propaganda: the Organised Persuasive Communication (OPC) Framework
Although with a much longer pedigree than the term 'fake news', the term 'propaganda' also elicits confusion. Early 20th century mass communication researchers had no qualms in calling the object of their research 'propaganda', to include any attempt by governments or corporations to persuade or influence. Today, however, 'propaganda' is a loaded term, associated with highly manipulative and nefarious communication (Miller et al. 2016). It is helpful, then, in evaluating the legitimacy (or otherwise) of public communication, to define terms more precisely and less emotively.

15. To that end, we have developed a typology of what we term *Organised Persuasive Communication* (OPC), to cover all forms of communication intended to persuade audiences, and that emanates from organisations (Bakir et al. *under review*). This typology flags up the characteristics of propagandistic versus non-propagandistic, communication.

16. To avoid being propagandistic, OPC should incorporate the principle of informed consent. This constitutes *consensual OPC*. If informed consent involves freely given and informed agreement with something, *consensual OPC* must meet two requirements. Firstly, sufficient information must be provided to enable informed decision-making on the part of the citizen: this information should be of a non-deceptive nature so that consent is not achieved on false premises. Secondly, the process must be neither incentivised nor coerced so that consent is freely given.

17. By contrast, *non-consensual OPC* involves either (a) *deception* that prevents informed consent, or (b) *incentivisation* or *coercion* whereby someone is induced or forced into consenting. *Non-consensual OPC* can be equated with what is commonly perceived today as propaganda (see Figure 1).

17. Non-consensual OPC (a.k.a. Propaganda) We divide non consensual OPC into three types: deceptive, incentivized and coercive communication. We deal with each in turn before describing 'consensual' OPC.

18. Deceptive OPC This involves persuasion through *lying*, *distortion*, *omission*, *misdirection* and *bullshitting* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Organised Persuasive Communication: A Typology to Detect Propaganda
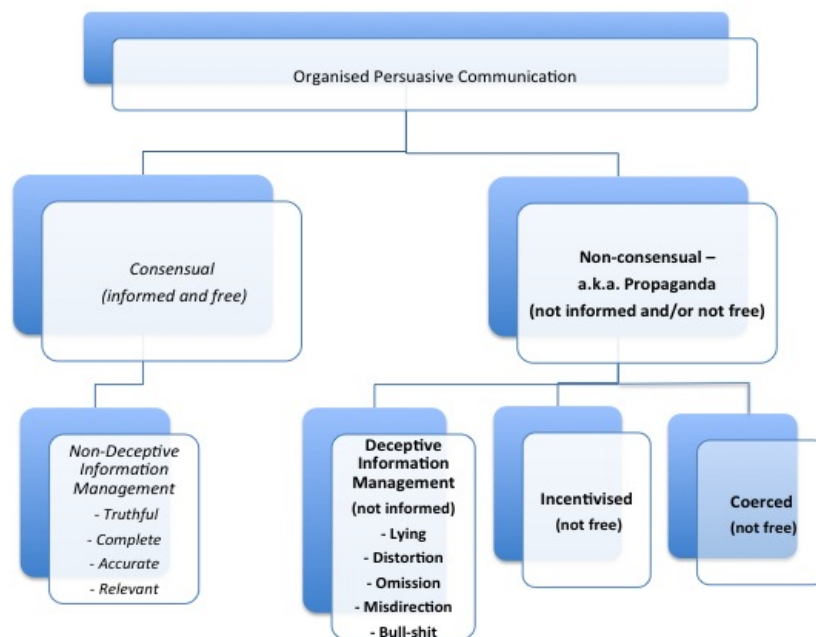
19. Deception through *lying* involves making a statement that is known to be untrue in order to mislead. For instance, in 2004 the US administration of George W. Bush paid actors to produce news, journalists to write propaganda, and Republican party members to pose as journalists (Tryhorn 2004).

20. Deception through *distortion* involves presenting a statement in a deliberately misleading way (for instance, exaggerating or de-emphasising information) to support the viewpoint being promoted. For instance, Phythian (2005) discusses British press presentation of the post-9/11 terrorist threat, some involving security or intelligence briefings or comment: by early 2005, the frequency with which these alarmist reports appeared and their use by government ministers was reportedly concerning the British security services.

21. *Deception* through *omission* involves withholding information to make the viewpoint being promoted more persuasive. Herring and Robinson (2014) show how the British government's

published dossier on 24 September 2002 setting out its claims on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction, through *omission* (and *distortion*) deliberately and deceptively portrayed a misleading picture of greater weapons capability and greater certainty than the intelligence warranted.

22. Deception through *misdirection* entails producing and disseminating true information intended to divert public attention away from other problematic issues. For instance, in 2014, the Obama administration declassified the Executive Summary of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on the Bush-era CIA Detention and Interrogation Program. This report scapegoats the CIA for avoiding oversight procedures, and makes no demands for responsibility to be taken by the Bush administration that secretly ordered the Program; or by its lawyers that secretly legalised the Program to avoid CIA operatives from retrospectively being charged with torture. Bakir (2017) demonstrates that such misdirection influenced press demands for accountability.

23. *Deception* through *bullshitting* is where the communicator pretends to have concern for the truth but is actually indifferent to it, and so feels free to espouse both falsehoods and truths – whichever is most useful to conveying the desired impression (Seymour 2014). For instance, the Trump administration's deployment of 'alternative facts' to describe the size of Trump's presidential inauguration crowd in January 2017, appears to be an example of bull-shitting. Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, claimed that this was 'the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe'. When the mainstream press proved the (small) size of the crowd with visuals, White House counselor Kellyanne Conway responded that Spicer had used 'alternative facts' (*BBC News Online* 2017): a more precise term would have been 'bull-shit'. Indeed, supporters of Trump interviewed by *Channel 4 News* afterwards said that they were unconcerned about whether or not he had actually lied on this precise issue, saying: 'This is typical of the press to obsess on points of trivia. … We take Trump seriously but not literally' (*Channel 4 News* 2017).

24. Incentivised OPC *Incentivised* OPC is a process of persuasion that involves providing incentives aimed at overcoming or overriding an individual's actual desire or belief. Examples include foreign broadcasters being incentivised to use British-supplied, free news clips that promote the British government's agenda abroad: their professional commitment to provide accurate and non-biased news is over-ridden by cost-reducing practices of using free supplies of news. *British Satellite News* (*BSN*), was a free TV news and features service launched in 2002, funded by the UK Foreign Office. It provided foreign broadcasters with free *BSN* material including a plethora of positive news stories about the on-going Iraq war: by November 2003 *BSN* 'news' was being used regularly by 14 Middle East countries (Miller 2006). Even earlier, the *London Radio Service*, also funded by the Foreign Office, supplied information for re-broadcasting to foreign radio stations, including in the USA (Miller 1994).

25. Coercive OPC *Coercive* OPC is an act of intimidation to compel people to act against their will through psychological pressure, threats or physical force. For instance, Trump provided a barrage of flak against mainstream news, calling them broken', 'illegal' (Blake 2017), 'among the most dishonest human beings on earth' (Davis and Rosenbergjan 2017), pushing 'lie(s)' (Frisk 2017) and 'the enemy of the American people' (Siddiqui 2017). He then excluded mainstream news outlets (including the *BBC, The Guardian*, the *Daily Mail, The New York Times*, *CNN*, *Politico* and *BuzzFeed*) from his informal press briefing on 24 February 2017, denying them their customary daily press briefing. These actions can be viewed as attempts at psychological coercion to browbeat the press into being less critical of his administration.

26. Consensual OPC : This comprises non-deceptive, non-incentivised, uncoerced information management. To be classified as consensual OPC, the communication must be both informed and free. To be informed, it must provide truthful, complete, accurate and relevant information (providing enough pertinent information to ensure that the persuadee is not misled). To be free, the information provided must not be incentivised or coerced.

27. If there was greater clarity and transparency by practitioners and by journalists in their public communications, it is likely that the character of news would change, as would people's trust in news. It would also, over time, become much easier for news consumers to be able to tell fake news from genuine news.

28. Recommendations Our analysis provides communications practitioners and journalists with a set of broad guidelines for ethical and democratic, non-manipulative, persuasive communication. Professional persuaders and influencers could be encouraged or required to be more honest and

transparent when constructing their messages and campaigns. Deception should be outlawed and covert communications that disguise the source should not be acceptable in public debate – whether the deceptive communications originate from political parties, interest groups or indeed governments. Both the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the Public Relations and Communication Association, maintain general ethical guidelines, but there is no independent mechanism for either evaluating the guidelines or enforcing them. If trust is to be returned to our politics much more needs to be done here.

29. While journalists in both traditional and new media are under all sorts of time pressures which adversely affects their ability to check sources, there is some merit in promoting fact checking and increased transparency in journalism. By transparency, we mean that it should be the responsibility of journalists, especially those bound by a legal duty to impartiality, to be transparent about the role of vested interests in news coverage of controversy. For example if a vested interest (say the tobacco industry) funds a think tank that appears on the news media, it has been suggested that this should be disclosed.(Monbiot 2014) In our view a much more extensive regime f disclosure of this type would enhance both transparency and public trust. These measures can help in detecting propaganda and in sharing with audiences information about which interests stand behind apparently independent voices in the news..

30. References

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