



Digital Media
Research Centre

Responding to 'Fake News'

Journalistic Perceptions of and
Reactions to a Delegitimising Force

Dr Aljoshia Karim Schapals | @aljoshakarim

Prof. Axel Bruns | @snurb_dot_info

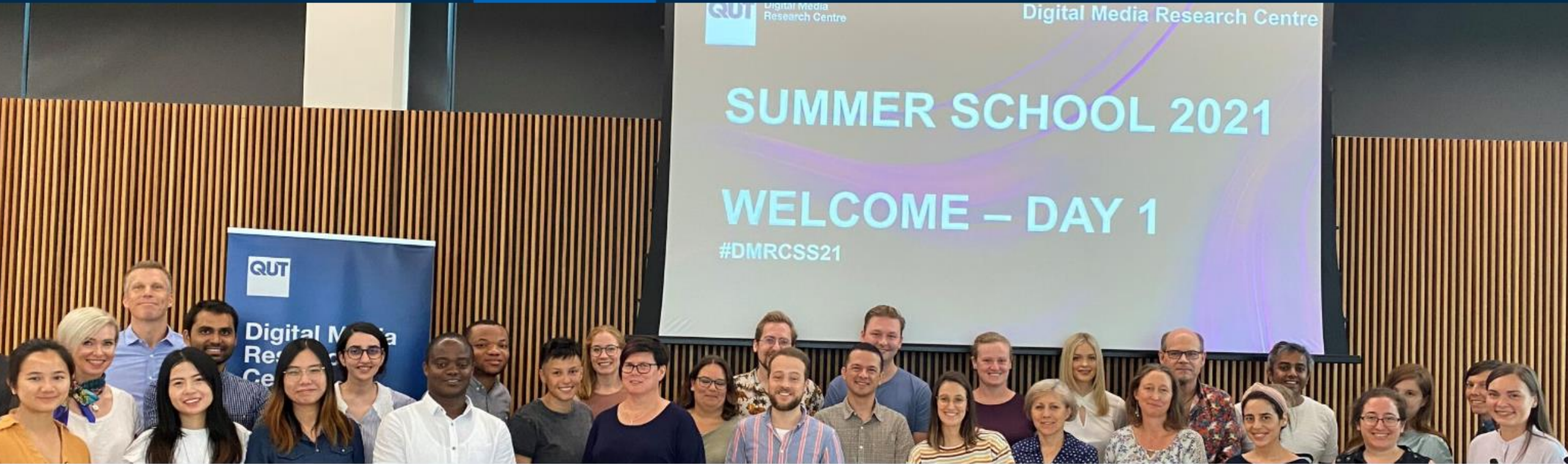
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Introduction

- Proliferation of the ‘fake news’ phenomenon in the aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential Election
- **Long-term consequences:**
 - Sharp increase of bullying, harassment, verbal attacks on journalists;
 - Physical attacks on law enforcement (6 January 2021);
 - Significant decline in trust in news: 38% in 2019 (down from 44% in 2018), only 9% among those affiliated with the political right (down from 17% in 2018) (Digital News Report, 2019)
- Accusations of ‘fake news’ have potential to **threaten journalistic authority and associated legitimacy claims** of the profession:
 - “Trump’s fake news accusations can be regarded as a means to retain direct interpretative authority about his political legitimacy When political actors take up fake news accusations, they seek to damage news outlets’ sovereignty of interpretation and legitimacy and attempt to gain interpretative power for themselves.” (Lischka, 2019, p. 291)
 - ➔ Negative impact on audience perceptions of news media as credible purveyors of information

Research Questions

- Using these developments as a starting point, we ask:
 - **RQ1:** How do journalists *perceive* attacks on their profession during times of political upheaval?
 - **RQ2:** What *reasons* do they see for these attacks?
 - **RQ3:** What *consequences* does antagonistic discourse have on their profession?
 - **RQ4:** What *strategies* do they have in place to counter hostile accusations of illegitimacy?

Theoretical Framework

- Theories of journalists' **professional roles** used as a theoretical framework
- Claims to journalistic legitimacy **not static, but dynamic**: subject to **negotiation and re-negotiation** as journalism *as an institution* is either subject to general scrutiny or specific legitimate or illegitimate media criticism
- Journalistic authority is a **site of struggle**: between those wanting to maintain it, and those intent on destroying it
- “Maintaining journalistic authority is an ongoing project that rests in part on journalists’ discursive construction of their roles in the midst of **discursive struggles with others** who also lay claim to such authority or who challenge that of journalists” (Lawrence & Moon, 2021, p. 157)

Theoretical Framework

- Emphasis on journalistic roles even more critical “at a time when journalism’s **social legitimacy and epistemic authority** are being existentially questioned” (Standaert et al., 2021, p. 920)
- Standaert et al. (2021): journalistic roles in *political* (as opposed to *everyday*) life used as a theoretical framework – six roles in total, e.g., the **critical/monitorial role** (journalists acting as a “fourth estate,” the one most pronounced in Western contexts)
- In their analysis, Standaert et al. (2021) find largely unquestioned *doxa* – the system of rules governing the journalistic field: “despite the manifold, and in some places dramatic, changes in the profession, journalism’s **normative mythology seems to be surprisingly intact**” (p. 932)

Method

- Mix of **mainstream + emerging** media outlets having attracted significant **audience reach** over time, supplemented by **convenience sampling** of journalists researchers had an established rapport with
- Audience reach: data gathered from *SimilarWeb* (UK) + *Hitwise* (Australia)
- Identification of staff working for these outlets, excluding specialised reporters covering only one beat (e.g., sports – except if covering the politics beat)
- Following identification of relevant staff working for these outlets, Aljoshia conducted 33 longitudinal **in-depth interviews** between early 2017 and late 2019 in Australia and London (at the beginning and height of the Trump presidency, to assess developments *over time*)
- In-depth interviews as “one of the **most effective methods for collecting rich data on newsroom practices and attitudes** among decision-makers in news organisations” (Koliska & Assmann, 2021)
- Subsequent **thematic analysis** to distil possible themes and cluster them accordingly:
perceptions, reasons, consequences, counterstrategies

Outlets

Australia		UK	
1A	The Australian	1U	Al Jazeera English
2A	Sky News Australia	2U	BBC News
3A	Techly	3U	The Guardian
4A	The Age	4U	Bellingcat
5A	BuzzFeed Australia	5U	openDemocracy
6A	The New York Times	6U	BuzzFeed UK
7A	New Matilda	7U	The New European
8A	BuzzFeed Australia	8U	The Guardian
9A	Junkee	9U	The Mirror
10A	ANZ Bluenotes	10U	Daily Record
11A	VICE News Australia	11U	The Telegraph
12A	The Herald Sun	12U	The Independent
13A	Australian Financial Review	13U	The Guardian
14A	The Saturday Paper	14U	The Telegraph
15A	The Age	15U	The Times
		16U	The Guardian
		17U	The Mirror
		18U	The Guardian

Findings: Perceptions (1/4)

- How do journalists **perceive this phenomenon** at a time when the industry has come under significant attack, and trust in news media has fallen globally?
 - Journalists show significant **concern** initially, but are also **empowered** by the ‘Trump bump’ in the aftermath of his election:
 - “To some degree, Trump and the argument of fake news has undermined faith in journalism for a lot of people. But I think on the other hand, it’s also brought a lot of people back to journalism and made them see the value of it. So, I think it’s sort of a mixed bag in that regard.” (journalist at *The New York Times*, Australia)
- Journalists **discursively stress the value of journalism** as a public good, and, in so doing, **defend their profession** against external, threatening forces (see also Jahng et al., 2021)

Findings: Reasons (2/4)

- What **reasons** do journalists see for these attacks?
- Reasons were threefold:
 - (1) the use of the term by politicians to **distract from unwanted scrutiny**;
 - (2) the use of the term as **discursive means to sow distrust** in authorities and institutions as a whole;
 - (3) the rise of the **broader issue of online polarisation**:
- “From a reporter’s point of view, I notice it in certain places that when you say you’re a reporter, you’re met with a hostility that you wouldn’t have had ten years ago. And the other things are the attacks on the media and the credibility of mainstream media, not just by Donald Trump, but generally. To which I think the media has a lot to answer for They’ve all gone a long way to undermine journalism through their lies and misreporting and hate campaigns” (journalist at *The Guardian*, UK)

Findings: Consequences (3/4)

- Noteworthy dichotomy between journalists' **palpable concerns** about the rise of 'fake news', but also their **firm confidence** that the present moment of crisis could be turned into an opportunity for journalism: for the profession to reassert its professional authority, and for audiences to return to trusted, established news brands (especially in the latter set of interviews)
 - “Two years ago [in 2017], everybody was in a state of flux because of Trump and fake news, and there was this period where he almost succeeded in making people believe that all media are untrustworthy. And I think that actually made people realise – after a little stumble – that you need to pay for good journalism, and ... you need to be able to trust them.” (journalist at *The Age*, Australia)
- ➔ Journalists' belief that, by highlighting and re-asserting journalism's authority, the delegitimising crisis brought about by the 'fake news' phenomenon may well be **turned into an opportunity** to emphasise the value of journalism as a public good (Balod & Hameleers, 2021)

Findings: Counterstrategies (4/4)

- Counterstrategies were fivefold:
 - (1) Raising journalistic **standards**;
 - (2) More solidly embedding **verification strategies** in newsrooms;
 - (3) Increased **transparency** in the news production process;
 - (4) More investment into and training staff in **open-source intelligence**;
 - (5) Strengthened **digital literacy** among news consumers
- On **news transparency**:
 - “The way to combat it is just a ground war [of] constantly reminding people of ‘this is where this comes from.’ This analysis relies on this evidence, [and] even if you don’t believe our conclusions, you can go back to the evidence and follow it through.” (journalist at *ANZ Bluenotes*, Australia).
- However, increased transparency measures may not suffice to safeguard journalism from discursive threats to its authority. Critics bemoan that, while well-intended, their real value remains **at best symbolic** (Lischka, 2021)

Conclusion

- Initial concern **replaced** by renewed levels of confidence to affirm the institutional value of journalism as a public good (a result of the longitudinal nature of this study)
- Although we have seen a return to trusted news brands during periods of isolation during COVID-19, leading to a slight increase in trust in news (38% in 2018, 44% in 2022), the road ahead looks difficult
- Transparency, open-source intelligence, digital literacy – and also increases in newsroom diversity – were either suggested or partly implemented as **tangible counterstrategies**; otherwise, they were of a **discursive nature**
- Despite industrial turmoil in journalism (e.g., the rise of peripheral actors; Schapals, 2022), consistency in that journalists held on “to their democratic roles as **normative anchors in unsettling times**” (Vos & Thomas, 2018, p. 2007)
- **Critical/monitorial role** (Standaert et al., 2021) most pronounced, but this is the result of the sample comprising similar media systems in Australia and the UK (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)
- More work in countries where a slide towards illiberalism and populism is even more pronounced is needed: e.g., Prager & Hameleer’s study on the role perceptions of Colombian journalists facing conflict and Balod & Hameleer’s study on the role perceptions of Filipino journalists in an age of mis- and disinformation

Article is out now:

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Article

Responding to “Fake News”: Journalistic Perceptions of and Reactions to a Delegitimising Force

Aljosha Karim Schapals * and Axel Bruns

Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

* Corresponding author (aljosha.schapals@qut.edu.au)

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Abstract

The “fake news” phenomenon has permeated academic scholarship and popular debate since the 2016 US presidential election. Much has been written on the circulation of “fake news” and other forms of mis- and disinformation online. Despite its ongoing proliferation, less effort has been made to better understand the work of those engaged in daily news production—journalists themselves. Funded by the Australian Research Council project Journalism Beyond the Crisis, this study investigates how journalists perceive and respond to this phenomenon at a time when the industry has come under significant attack, and trust in news media has fallen globally. To do so, it draws on in-depth interviews with journalists in Australia and the UK, providing topical insights on their perceptions of and reactions to this profoundly delegitimising force. While on one hand, our findings show journalists expressing significant concern about the rise of “fake news,” they also proactively seek—and, in some cases, implement—deliberate counterstrategies to defend their profession. These strategies range from discursive means—such as stressing and re-asserting journalists’ professional authority and legitimacy—to tangible measures at an organisational level, including newsroom diversity and increased transparency in the news production process.

Keywords

fact-checking; fake news; journalism; misinformation; news verification; objectivity; professional roles; Trump election



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Thank you!

Any questions?

Dr Aljoshia Karim Schapals | @aljoshakarim

Prof. Axel Bruns | @snurb_dot_info

Queensland University of Technology | Brisbane, Australia