Chapter x: Fake News According to Trump

Dave Whitsett
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No topic better illustrates what it means to live in the “post-truth” era than fake news. I'll go into greater depth about what I think “post-truth” means later on in the dissertation, but for now let's just treat it as an era one of whose signature features is the heated contestation of politically relevant terms. In this sense, surely the brief and spectacular history of the term “fake news” is a post-truth issue *par excellence*.

Though it has been kicked around by the odd commentator at least since Edward McKernon published an article including it in its title in *Harper's* in October of 1925,¹ the term “fake news” did not come to the fore of public consciousness in the contemporary era until the 2016 election cycle. It did so in response to an upsurge in a variety of online-published articles that experienced wide circulation on social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter. These articles bore many of the trappings of conventional news, yet made wildly implausible claims, such as that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump for president² or that certain Democratic politicians were running a sex trafficking program³ through a Washington-area pizza chain. When the manufacture and spread of these articles were recognized, they quickly gained the label “fake news.”

When the term first burst on the scene, it seemed clear what “fake news” meant. It meant made-up stories done up in the style of traditional news. And, partly because it was so obvious what the term “fake news” meant, it also seemed relatively easy to agree on its implications for democracy. Ever since the Progressives in the late-19th and early-20th century led America out of the dark era of political patronage, precinct bosses and the scourge of yellow journalism – or so the canonical story goes –

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¹ McKernon (1925)
² The original article is no longer available, but fact-checking sites like Snopes still archive their rebuttals of this particular instance of fake news (Evon 2016).
³ This variety of fake news abounds on the internet. See Bougis (2016) for a paradigmatic example.
Americans have been raised on the credo that Democracy “depends on citizens being informed.” Though at a later point in this dissertation I will call both the canonical telling of the Progressive movement and the importance to democracy of the sort of “informedness” they peddled into question, for now I will take both as truisms in the non-pejorative sense. If, as that story goes, democracy depends on citizens being informed, the inference about fake news' implications for our republic needs no great logician: by mis-informing the public, fake news seems to be a problem for democracy.

Enter Donald Trump. Say whatever else you will about the 45th President of the United States, from the very beginning he has displayed an uncanny knack for post-truth politics. Never was this more apparent than when, with the ink spelling out the term “fake news” still drying on the headlines of the “real news,” Trump put it to a novel and contradictory use which would soon be taken up by numerous of the world's most despised political leaders. In the mouths of Trump and these others, “fake news,” which when it first emerged meant imposters pretending to be part of the mainstream news establishment, was now used as a term of mockery and disparagement toward mainstream news itself.

This latter move by the world's authoritarian leaders has been the subject of widespread and vocal indignation on the part of scholars, journalists, and mainstream political commentators. Many have claimed it amounts to an assault on the free press, either by undermining the public's trust in the “fourth estate” or by attempting to intimidate journalists into timidity by creating a public atmosphere of hostility toward them. Others have claimed that it allows authoritarians to consolidate and extend their power by giving them access to a new and particularly potent rhetorical weapon. Whatever the specific nature of the danger posed by these leaders' use of “fake news,” for many commentators it has at least one thing in common with the first: it, too, is a threat to democracy.

In this chapter, I'll critique the response of these scholars, journalists and mainstream political commentators to the term “fake news” as it has come to be used by Trump and other political leaders. My procedure in doing so will be as follows. First, I will relay a brief contemporary etymology of the
term “fake news,” placing it within the context of contemporary politics in which it evolved. I'll identify and formally define two senses of the term “fake news,” which I'll call “fake news” in its original and delegitimizing senses, respectively (Section 3.1).

The rest of the chapter will deal exclusively with the latter, delegitimizing sense of “fake news.” Specifically, it will be a critique of the reaction to that usage that has played out in the mainstream political commentary sphere. I will argue that the accusations most commonly leveled by those who object to the delegitimizing use of “fake news” – namely, that it serves to empower authoritarians and that it constitutes a threat to journalists and/or the free press more generally – are unconvincing.

Claiming that providing authoritarians with a new rhetorical tool empowers them attributes an excessive and implausible degree of causal power to political leaders' rhetoric while turning our attention away from the antecedent conditions that incline the public to be receptive to that rhetoric, and without which that rhetoric would be impotent. Rather than taking this tack, I will argue, we should concentrate our energies on understanding and addressing those antecedent conditions (Section 3.2).

As for the argument that leaders' delegitimizing use of “fake news” is a threat to press freedoms, I will argue that although democratic citizens have a standing reason to remain vigilant toward the workings of political leaders, in the current American context there is no reason for them to escalate from that vigilance into a state of alarm. This is true, first, because there has been no legal movement by the president to curtail press freedoms. But even if there had been, the worry that would arise from such action would not stem from the president's speech but from the abuse of his powers of office. Neither, in the current American context, is there is no reason to believe that the president's rhetoric is creating an atmosphere of intimidation that might be considered a de facto threat to press freedoms. On the contrary, seldom has an oppositional press flourished more in the history of the republic. Finally, calling political leaders' attempts use speech to persuade the public that the mainstream news doesn't deserve its trust an assault on the freedom of the press is deeply mistaken. Neither the press nor anyone
else in society does or ought to be considered to hold a right to the public's trust. The only contexts in which such behavior may credibly be characterized as dangerous to the free press are ones in which many much more fundamental things have gone wrong for democracy, and in that case it is these fundamentals we ought to be worried about, not whatever rhetorical tools of convenience happen to be favored by political leaders at that particular moment (Section 3.3).

In the course of making the case against the mainstream political commentary sphere's response to the delegitimizing use of “fake news” popularized by Donald Trump, I will identify a series of what I take to be problems with the ways we think and talk about the relationship between knowledge, communication and democracy. These problems include confusion about the role of rhetoric in political speech; a truncated view about the nature, purpose and value to democracy of a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press; a one-sided and largely uncritical conception of the professional news media as beneficial to or even indispensable for maintaining the epistemic well-being of the republic; and the role of trust in epistemic authorities and the conditions under which it ought to be granted them by lay citizens. Each of these problems is one part of what I believe to be a central deficiency in the way both theorists and lay citizens tend to think about what I call civic epistemology, which is the relationship of individual epistemic behavior to the epistemic (and general) well-being of democracy. Though this chapter is titled “Fake News According to Trump” and takes as its subject matter current events, it does so as a means of introducing and illuminating a complex of interconnected problems with the way we think and talk about politics at a more fundamental level. Each of these individual problems will be dealt with in greater depth in following chapters. This chapter, then, should be read on two levels. First, it is an intervention into a specific and immediately relevant contemporary issue to which I believe the response has been largely poor, that of American president Donald Trump's attempts to undermine the public's trust in the professional news media. Second, it is a preliminary introduction to and illustration of the problems that beset contemporary theoretical and public discourse.
when it comes to thinking and talking about civic epistemology.

Section 1.1: A Brief History of the term “Fake News”

For many in this particular political moment, the term “fake news” has become inseparable from the figure of Donald Trump, and by extension to a group of global figures often lumped into the same category of “authoritarian” leaders. In these figures' mouths, the term “fake news” is used to disparage the credibility of mainstream media outlets who report unfavorably upon them or their regime, a tactic which has been vociferously condemned by social scientists and mainstream political commentators worldwide. Yet, despite his own claims to the contrary, the contemporary usage and rise to prominence of the term “fake news” was neither initiated by Trump nor had anything to do with him. Trump's first public use of the term occurred in January, 2017, when he famously, and rather bizarrely, told CNN's Jim Acosta, “You are fake news,” a charge he has leveled at numerous mainstream news organizations since. By this time, however, “fake news” was already common parlance in the United States, with commentators, including former president Barack Obama and 2016 presidential runner-up Hillary Clinton painting fake news as putting “democracy” and “lives” at risk, respectively, while others regularly insinuated that fake news played a causal role in catapulting Trump to victory in the 2016 presidential election.

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7 Fang (2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/obama-facebook-fake-news_us_582deba6e4b099512f815e4a)
How, apart from the gravitational pull by which all contemporary politics seems to be pulled into Trump's orbit, did a term that originally had nothing to do with our current president come to be seen as inseparable from him? That process must be understood in order to understand the multiple meanings the term “fake news” has come to hold in our society, as well as their implications for politics.

“Fake News” in the Original Sense

From today's perspective, one of the remarkable things one discovers in reading article including the term “fake news” published between the latter half of 2016 and the first few months of 2017 is the absence of debate over what, back then, the term “fake news” meant. The definition offered by Elle Hunt in a December 17th *Guardian* article, which defined “fake news” as “completely made up [stories] manipulated to resemble credible journalism” is highly similar to that given by *Politifact’s* Angie Drobnic Holan, who said “fake news” was “made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports.” These definitions closely mirror the one offered around the same time by Factcheck.org, which wrote that “fake news” consisted of “fake stories – as in, completely made-up 'news.'” While these and other contemporaneous sources sometimes quibbled over taxonomical minutiae on the margins, such as whether satirical news like *The Onion* ought to count, the majority depicted “fake news” as made-up stories, published online and done up in the style of professional journalism.

This shared early understanding of “fake news” as made-up stories posing in the style of professional journalism also explains why so many of the guides that sprang up in order to help internet users avoid falling prey to fake news included instructions to perform a more fine-grained search for signs of *officidom* or *professionalism* than users had been accustomed to doing in the pre-“fake news”

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world. For instance, Harvard Summer School's “Four Tips for Spotting a Fake News Story” suggests that readers can mitigate the danger that they will be duped by fake news by looking for whether a publishing site carries a domain name ending in “.com,” “.org,” or “.net,” rather than “.com.co” or other derivatives. Elsewhere, it suggests checking whether the article is authored by someone providing a gmail address in their contact info, rather than an e-mail address whose suffix contained a professional organization's website. The guide also prompts users to ask themselves whether the source under consideration would meet “academic citation standards,”13 which, according to a representative citation guide provided by Yale's Center for Teaching and Learning, means seeing whether the article was published by a “credible” newspaper such as The New York Times or The Wall Street Journal.14 Similar advice is given by CNET, which asks users to check URLs and trace links back to original sources in order to see whether doing so leads the reader to “websites with paid journalists who fact-check their reporting and build their brands on accuracy” while implementing “rules on fact-checking” that improve the average veracity of their stories.15

Both these early editorials on “fake news” and the many guides that subsequently cropped up to combat it demonstrated a clear consensus: “fake news” meant made-up stories, published online, done up in the style of “reputable” or “credible” news organizations, where “reputable” and “credible” are clearly meant in a sense that is closely synonymous with professional. This is what I call “fake news” in its original sense.

Since early commentators shared this idea of what “fake news” was, it is not surprising that they also shared a similar set of beliefs about the appropriate steps citizens ought to take to combat it, nor that one of the major steps they ought to take involved being more attentive to signs of professionalism and officialdom. Such responses seem perfectly appropriate if one takes one's task primarily to be

14 Yale, Center for Teaching and Learning, https://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/scholarly-vs-popular-sources
avoiding getting suckered by what were then taken to be “fake news” producers: Internet trolls, news satire sites, and Macedonian teenagers trying to make a buck on the side. But as firm as this original consensus on what “fake news” was and what the lay citizen ought to do to try and combat it was, it would not last.

“Fake News” in the Delegitimizing Sense

Fast-forward less than two years and my, how things have changed. Far from its straightforward and consensual beginnings, the meaning of the term “fake news” has become politicized and contentious. Indeed, for many today its use more readily conjures up the images of authoritarian leaders than it does images of the internet trolls and Macedonian teens with whom the term was originally associated. This is largely because in January of 2017, U.S. president Donald Trump began the now in-vogue practice of using the term as a favored epithet to hurl against professional news media companies he perceives as his adversaries, behavior which was quickly picked up by unsavory political figures worldwide. When it makes an appearance in the speeches and Twitter feeds of Trump and these other figures, the term “fake news” means something quite different than “made-up stories, published online, done up in the style of professional news.” Instead, it is an *ad hominem* whose intention is to discredit, not internet trolls and other 21st century forgers of professional news, but rather professional news agencies *themselves*. Where before professional news agencies were the *cure*, in the rhetoric of these leaders they were the *disease*.

One need not possess oracular powers of discernment to see that these leaders' use of “fake news” is much more likely to be a strategic attempt at deflecting criticism of their regime than the

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16 In case this essay is dated by the time of reading, the reference to Macedonian teenagers owes to the discovery by *Buzzfeed’s* Craig Silverman and Lawrence Alexander that much of the fake news that emerged in 2016 originated on websites created by university students in Veles, Macedonia, where a cottage industry centered around gaining ad revenue for promoting fictitious news articles with sensational themes could earn them a decent revenue stream. Silverman and Alexander (2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo)
proffering of sincere doubts as to the reliability of the news organizations labeled with the term.

Trump's original labeling of of Jim Acosta and CNN as “fake news,” for example, followed releases by CNN and, later, BuzzFeed of a story claiming that a “British intelligence operative” had provided US officials with a series of memos documenting Russian possession of “compromising personal and financial information about Mr. Trump.”\(^1\) It is not clear whether it was CNN's original, rather vague report or BuzzFeed's considerably more “salacious”\(^1\) publication of the memos' contents that drew Trump's ire, but either way Trump's initial use of the epithet “fake news” against the news media establishment was clearly a response to the release of a story with negative implications for the then-president-elect. This has been the dominant pattern of Trump's use of that term, mainly through the medium of Twitter, for the first year and a half of his presidency: Trump's ire will be sparked by a particular instance of what he perceives (correctly enough) as largely negative coverage from the mainstream news media, and he will respond by calling the offending entity in that particular case “fake news.”\(^1\) He has even explicitly equated negative coverage of himself with the term “fake news” in one of his own tweets, saying “91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake).”\(^2\) The same pattern is easily recognizable in the use of the term “fake news” by authoritarian political leaders like Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, and Nicolas Maduro.\(^3\)

Though it originated with Trump and was mimicked most publicly by authoritarian leaders around the world, this second usage of the term “fake news” is no longer limited to political leaders, authoritarian or otherwise. On the contrary, anyone with an appreciably diverse range of politically active friends on Facebook can see that the term “fake news” has become something of a general term of disparagement about the credibility of claims of fact that meet with a given individual's personal

\(^{19}\) For just a few examples, see his tweets on 10/4/17, 6/4/18, and 7/17/18.
\(^{20}\) https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/988080733058836992
\(^{21}\) See the examples provided by Kruzel (2018) for just a few illustrations.
incredulity. In this way, the latter usage of “fake news” has come to operate in much the same way as identifying a claim as “gossip,” “just a rumor,” or a “conspiracy theory” long have – that is, as a shorthand, *ad hominem* dismissal of the reliability of a given claim.\(^{22}\) I will call this use of “fake news” the *delegitimizing sense* of “fake news.”

I will now provide the formal definitions of the two senses of “fake news” I will use in this dissertation.

**Fake News (Original Sense):** Made-up stories, published online, designed stylistically to resemble the reports published by professional news services.

**Fake News (Delegitimizing Sense):** An *ad hominem* used to disparage the credibility or reliability of a claim or claimant.

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to the use, public criticism, and implications for democracy of the latter, delegitimizing use of “fake news.” What I have called the *original sense* of “fake news” will be left to later chapters.

**Section 1.2: Empowering Authoritarians**

As I mentioned above, although the *original* use of “fake news” did not originate with Donald Trump, the *delegitimizing* use, at least in contemporary times, did. Since that first use in January, 2017, Trump's propensity to use the term “fake news” in this delegitimizing sense has increased over time. After averaging about 17 tweets per month containing the words “fake,” “phony” or some equivalent for the first year and a half of his presidency, Trump averaged 36 tweets including these terms from

\(^{22}\) I do not mean to imply that this ad hominem use is the *only* way in which terms like “gossip,” “rumor” and “conspiracy theory” can be used; I just mean it is a *common* use of those terms.
June through August in 2018, topping out at no less than 47 in August.\textsuperscript{23}

Brendan Nyhan has warned Americans about Trump's Twitter-fueled attempt to get Americans to buy into the idea that the mainstream media is a “hatred & agenda”-driven\textsuperscript{24} source of “fake news,” especially about Trump himself. According to Nyhan, Americans ought to be “very concerned when they see leaders with authoritarian tendencies telling their supporters things that are false over and over again and attacking other sources of information.”\textsuperscript{25} Others have sounded similar alarms in the mainstream media sphere,\textsuperscript{26} and sympathetic voices are beginning to make their way through the slower publication processes of the academy.\textsuperscript{27}

I agree with what I take to be the spirit of Nyhan's assertion. Specifically, I agree with Nyhan and others who have argued that democratic citizens have good reason to be worried if they notice a substantial chunk of their fellow citizens zealously \textit{joining in with} their Fearless Leader's requests that they abandon all sources of information other than those approved by the Fearless Leader himself. However, I believe that the majority of commentators' ideas about what, \textit{precisely}, concerned democratic citizens ought to be on the lookout \textit{for} and \textit{why} they ought to be on the lookout for it are most often poorly articulated by the commentators who raise such worries (if indeed they are articulated at all). My aim in this and the next section will be to critique the range of existing objections to Trump's and other political leaders' use of “fake news” in the delegitimizing sense.

\textit{Some Clarificatory Remarks on the General Approach}

Before I start, a brief explanatory note. In contrast to the \textit{original} sense, either due to lack of

\textsuperscript{24} Donald J. Trump, Twitter update, August 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2018
\textsuperscript{27} For an early example, see Lischka (2017).
interest or the sluggishness of the publication process, I could find nothing in the academic publishing world that offered an explicit critique of the *delegitimizing* usage of the term “fake news” by Trump and other authoritarian leaders. The only published article that explicitly deals with this usage is an empirical piece by Juliane A. Lischka whose emphasis is not on Trump's efforts at delegitimizing the press but rather on the *New York Times'* attempts to discredit that effort.\(^28\) The situation in the editorial sphere is just the opposite. Dozens, if not hundreds, of pundits have sounded off against authoritarians' use of “fake news” as an epithet invoked to discredit the mainstream media, or what I have called its “delegitimizing” use. In this section, then, I will be primarily responding to commentators in the mainstream.

The two most common critiques of the delegitimizing use of the term “fake news” among mainstream pundits, like so much of contemporary political commentary, revolve around the figure of Donald Trump. As they are the best indicator of the state of the overall discourse, and are sufficient to highlight the underlying problems with the discourse I am interested in identifying, I will focus on these, but I will try to resist the seemingly inexorable pull of the gravitational field by which Trump tends to draw all contemporary political issues unto himself by emphasizing how the issues I discuss have implications that go beyond Trump. The main three critiques to be found in the aforementioned editorials are as follows. First, Trump is accused of “empowering despots” around the world, either by giving them a new “weapon” with which to discredit adversarial media or by adding to an air of permissiveness in the field of international relations that emboldens authoritarians. Second, Trump's use of the term “fake news” is seen as an “assault” on the free press in the United States and as undermining the cause for free presses around the world.\(^29\)

As will become apparent, I find much lacking in both lines of criticism. In this section, I will

\(^{28}\) Lischka (2017)
deal with the first, in the next, the second.

**Intentionality and/or Recklessness**

A number of mainstream political commentators have condemned Trump's usage of the term “fake news” because it was picked up by authoritarian political leaders around the world and used as a rhetorical tool aiming to discredit criticism of their regimes. Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, for example, accused the world media reporting on the catastrophic political situation of that country in recent years of “besieging” the country with “lots of lies” before concluding, “This is what we call 'fake news' today, isn't it?”

The Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, meanwhile, claimed that the brutal drug war he is widely believed to have carried out was nothing more than “fake news and concocted figures.” Across the South China Sea (and the Mekong Delta) U Kyaw San Hla, a member of Myanmar's military administration, responded to accusations by the international press of the army's having overseen the mass relocation and widely suspected ethnic cleansing of Myanmar's Rohingya minority with the simultaneously bizarre and chilling claim that there is “no such thing as Rohingya...It is fake news.”

These figures' newfound affinity for the term “fake news” has not gone unnoticed by political commentators, many of whom have gone on to indict the term “fake news” and Trump's use of it as being complicit in and perhaps adding to the effectiveness of the rule of these deservedly detested figures.

Several parts of this line of critique are quite obviously justified. At the descriptive level, the entities who have picked up Trump's neologism are among the most unsavory political figures contemporary world leadership has to offer. They are also clearly using “fake news” the same way Trump does: in an attempt to discredit press criticism of them and their political regime. The timeline

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fits, too: Trump started using the term “fake news” to disparage the mainstream media first, and all these leaders followed. Critics have been correct, then, to attribute global authoritarian leaders' use of the term “fake news” to discredit adversarial media to Trump's inventive first use. Part of the normative critique, which is more often implicit than explicit in the editorials that bear these opinions, has also been correct. I take this to be that we all ought to be deeply suspicious of, and speak out in opposition against, the attempts of leaders to cover up reports of atrocities committed by them with ad hominems and perfunctory dismissals whose implicit justification is “because I said so” or “because I don't have to answer to anybody.”

While all this is true enough, it must also be admitted that attempting to discredit adversarial media in an effort to cover up atrocities is not new behavior for authoritarian leaders. On the contrary, disparaging media that report unfavorably on one's regime is now and has consistently been one of the most common tactics used by authoritarians in the modern age. By providing authoritarians with the phrase “fake news,” then, Trump has not invented a new tactic for authoritarians to use. It would be more accurate to say that he has provided them with a new catch-phrase. While we might understandably bristle at any catch-phrase being turned to sinister use by authoritarians, common sense moral reasoning recommends that our outrage at such eventualities ought to be proportional to (a) the extent to which that phrase was intended to, or could reliably have been expected to, contribute to authoritarianism and (b) the actual harm it causes, or is likely to cause, over and above what would have happened anyway.

Some commentators seem to be leveling claim (a). Some of the critiques of Trump's use of “fake news” strongly imply that he intended for, or should reasonably have expected, authoritarians to take up its use. This argument is implicit in Adam Gabbatt's pronouncements that “Trump's 'fake news' gave authoritarian leaders a new weapon”\(^{33}\) to discredit adversarial media. The verb “gave” and its

\(^{33}\) Gabbatt (2018), my emphasis
equivalents generally imply intentionality, but it is by no means obvious that Trump has ever intended to do anything with the term “fake news” other than to disparage whatever media entities have irked him at the given moment. Some may move the charge from one of intentionality to one of recklessness as the two are often treated as interchangeable in law. But to do so in the present case renders the charge entirely vacuous. “Reckless use of rhetoric that might be co-opted and put to nefarious use by authoritarian leaders” is a crime of which practically every politician in a representative democracy has at one time or another has been guilty. It is an offense that has been committed by American politicians on a daily basis for at least the past two decades. The creation and exchange of highly charged rhetorical expressions engineered to manipulate the public, any one of which might be appropriated by despots and strongmen, is a chronic feature of representative government, not the unique province of authoritarian political leaders.

So, neither the charge of intentionality nor that of recklessness seems to have much force. Still, some might argue that it is still appropriate to place moral blame on individuals if their actions cause a great deal of harm, regardless of whether that harm resulted from intentionality or recklessness on their part. And indeed, this seems to be the case made by some critics of Trump's use of “fake news.” Two lines of argument seem to have been forwarded along these lines. The first, which I'll call the “new weapon” thesis, is the idea that the specific term “fake news” is an especially effective rhetorical tool for discrediting adversarial media in the eyes of citizens around the world. If this is true, then by providing authoritarian leaders with a more effective means of consolidating their rule by duping their various publics, Trump's innovative delegitimizing use of “fake news” would certainly have caused a great deal of harm. The second, which I'll call the “emboldening” thesis, is the idea that Trump's use of the term “fake news” to undermine the media serves as a sort of international green light to authoritarians, encouraging them to feel more free to step up their efforts at curtailing their media.

34 This is, of course, nearly all government, since practically no political leader in the modern era has claimed not to be the representative/champion/servant of the people.
opponents above and beyond what they would have done otherwise in the full assurance that America and the West will not stand in their way. Let me deal with each argument in turn.

The “New Weapon” Thesis

At the outset, it bears repeating that authoritarians have consistently and shamelessly attempted to discredit adversarial media throughout at least the modern era. We cannot lay the blame for their continuing to do so at the feet of Donald Trump or any other contemporary political leader. Accordingly, no plausible version of the “new weapon” thesis can claim that Trump's use of “fake news” in an attempt to delegitimize the adversarial media constitutes an innovation in tactics for authoritarians.

Rather than an innovation in tactics, what Trump has contributed to global authoritarians is a catchy new turn of phrase. I emphasize this distinction because it can be difficult to remember if one wades too long amidst the waves of portentous rhetoric that emanate daily on the topic from the pundit sphere. When we read The Guardian's Adam Gabbatt warning of Trump's having made a “new weapon” available to authoritarian leaders enabling them to better “explain away atrocities and human rights abuses,”35 we need to remember that the thing he is calling a “weapon” is a snazzy new sound byte. The same is true in relation to the charges leveled against Trump by the New York Times' Steven Erlanger, who paints Trump as having provided a “cudgel for strongmen” before warning of the threat posed by its growing use among “the world's autocrats and dictators.”36 Again, we should remember that the “cudgel” wielded with menace by these imposing figures is a hip new hot take. The “new weapon” argument is, in short, an argument about rhetoric. It proposes that there is something special about the rhetorical appeal of the term “fake news” that makes it especially effective for furthering authoritarians’ efforts to discredit media that oppose them.

35 Gabbatt (2018), my emphasis
36 Erlanger (2017), my emphasis
This way of thinking about rhetoric holds a certain conception about the relationship between form of a rhetorical message and people's receptiveness to that message. In short, it implies that the former determines the latter. On this view, silver-tongued speakers are able to hoodwink lay citizens into believing something they wouldn't otherwise believe simply by virtue of their skill at manipulating language. This old prejudice against rhetoric and its much-maligned fellow-traveler “demagoguery,” which sees them as manipulative and abusive enemies of “rational” discourse, is part of a long tradition in Western thought that goes back at least as far as Socrates' backhandedly self-congratulatory remarks about the plainness of his own speech (as opposed to the rhetorical embellishments of his accusers) in the Apology. I believe, however, that this old suspicion of rhetoric as somehow imbuing speech with mysterious persuasive powers, is deeply misguided. In the great majority of situations, and with people's receptiveness to authoritarians' delegitimizing use of “fake news” in particular, the motivational power of rhetoric is caused by, rather than the cause of, the beliefs and group affinities that it is in the traditional view seen as causing. In other words, it is people's prevailing receptiveness to a message that determines whether its form will be attractive to recipients, and not the form that renders otherwise recalcitrant listeners receptive.

As the work of psychologists and other social scientists who have studied persuasion suggests, Homo sapiens is, by and large, an obstinate species. New information that would gain passage into the citadel of our beliefs must first pass through gates guarded by a cadre of group loyalties as well as ideological and emotional commitments, all of which are notoriously jealous of their monopoly on our favor. As anyone who has been lampooned unawares by the fire-and-brimstone fulminations of a vocally gifted street preacher can attest, one of the very worst ways for an enterprising member of our

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37 The term “language” here is meant broadly, including bodily gestures, voice inflections, etc. It is not relegated to the strictly lexical operations of semantic language.

38 Indeed, so out of character are Socrates' backhanded compliments to himself, and so dissonant are they with his deeply democratic respect for the reason of others and epistemically humble approach overall, that I am tempted to read his comment in this part of The Apology as more reflective of the philosophy of his elitist and far less epistemically humble interlocutor, Plato. For a similar view, see Popper (1960).
species to try and change another's mind is through a frontal assault to their core beliefs by a series of testimonial assertions to the contrary.\textsuperscript{39} Few of us are likely to be persuaded to uproot our beliefs about the world simply on account of happening upon someone who claims, in words, to know better than we do. Nor is this intransigence overcome – in fact, it is often only made worse – when these ideological entrepreneurs attempt to grease the gears of persuasion with the sorts of theatrical flourishes talented rhetoricians typically employ. The same teary-eyed emotivism of the televangelist that seems an undimmed portal to his chaste soul in the eyes of the Pentacostal true believer is hucksterism of the most intolerable sort to the atheist. When Cicero's voice echoed off the walls of the curia, it seemed inflected with the wisdom of Romans' ancestors in the ears of the republicans; meanwhile the Casearians heard nothing more than the bombast of an old blowhard whose time had passed. The very same rhetorical flourishes that endear those who already shared the same group loyalties and ideological affinities as the speaker are very often viewed as cynical attempts at manipulation, terrifying signs of ideological zealotry or loud-mouthed foolishness from the perspective of opponents.\textsuperscript{40}

Now, people are not fully immovable. Sometimes, they abandon even long-cherished beliefs in

\textsuperscript{39} Though few of us need social science to be persuaded of this, the evidence is overwhelming. For a succinct explanation citing many different studies, see Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Briony Swire and Stephan Lewandowsky (2014), “Correcting Misinformation – A Challenge for Education and Cognitive Science” in eds. David N. Rapp and Jason L. G. Braasch, \textit{Processing Inaccurate Information: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives from Cognitive Science and the Educational Sciences} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014). For a run-down of the social science establishing the difficulty of persuading people who initially disagree with a given belief or take themselves to belong to a different social group written for a lay audience, see Lupia (2015), chs. 7-11.

\textsuperscript{40} The reception of Senator Lindsey Graham's theatrical participation in the recent confirmation hearings for now-Justice Brett Kavanaugh are a nice case-in-point. Frank Bruni in the \textit{New York Times} characterized them as an “overwrought aria” worthy of a “diva at La Scala” (Bruni 2018: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/06/opinion/sunday/lindsey-graham-brett-kavanaugh.html). The \textit{New Republic}’s Alex Shephard characterized Senator Graham's performance as a “rant” that was part of a “coordinated effort to distract from the questions being levied by Democrats.” On the other side of the aisle, \textit{The Weekly Standard} defended Graham's outburst as “the hot-tempered defense of a man accused of crimes without evidence” (Swain 2018: https://www.weeklystandard.com/2018/10/06/opinion/sunday/lindsey-grahams-rage-helped-the-supreme-court-nominee) and \textit{The Hill} described it in honorary terms of “defense” and “advocacy” (Burke 2018: https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/409121-graham-defends-kavanaugh-against-temperament-criticism-he-was-rightly).
favor of those that were once scorned. But even when they do change their beliefs, that change is most
often due to either (a) their having gone through some formative experience or set of experiences that
have rendered unstable their previously steady set of beliefs or else (b) their having been persuaded to
shift their ideas, not by some complete stranger with a penchant for a well-turned phrase, but instead by
someone with whom they already share a sense of solidarity. The importance of (b) is worth
emphasizing. It is apparently much more common for people to use an already shared group identity as
the necessary condition for their acceptance of a person's speech than to choose whether to accept that
speech as true on the basis of the speech's form or contents. Indeed, this tendency is so dominant as a
means of opinion formation in general that, according to psychologist of attitude change William
McGuire, “the receiver [of new information] can be regarded as a lazy organism who tries to master the
message contents only when it is absolutely necessary to make a decision. When the purported source
is clearly positively or negatively valenced, he uses this information as a cue to accept or reject the
message's conclusions without really absorbing the arguments used.”⁴¹ In other words, it is far more
common for people to first identify whether or not someone is an authority (a) to whom they feel
comfortable yielding their epistemic deference on the matter and (b) who is on their team than it is for
them to even get to the point where the form and contents of the message matter.

But even if the listener does eschew the usual way of belief formation and actually troubles
herself to subject a given speaker's message to critical scrutiny, it will still not be easy for the speaker to
persuade her if she has many other beliefs and symbolic attachments that contradict the message being
sent by the speaker. This is so for the perfectly rational reason that our prior beliefs serve as the
gatekeepers for new beliefs. Not easily should we abandon well-established beliefs in the face of some
upstart new claim, and as a matter of fact most of us do not, no matter how thoroughly laced with

rhetoric the new claim may be. Much to our society’s detriment, to the sincere bigot in the 1960s Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words were no more persuasive than yours or mine would have been. But what is depressing in one case is relieving in another, for it means that even the most talented “demagogue” will not easily be able to persuade citizens brought up to cherish ideals like the freedom of the press to abandon their commitment to those ideals. Instead, their supplications will bounce off of her just as easily as those of street preachers bounce off the rest of us as we walk down High Street, just as Crazy Uncle Jerry’s politically motivated Facebook rants bounce off us as we scroll through our News Feed in the mornings, and just as do all the supplications of the people we have, in our eternal efforts at cognitive economizing, categorized in our minds as “not worth listening to.”

Since rhetoric derives its persuasive potency primarily from the antecedent beliefs and group affinities of the audience toward which it is aimed, an authoritarian leader's selection of which particular rhetorical “weapon” to hurl at any particular enemy at any particular time would seem to be rather a more cosmetic than a substantive choice. Whatever term they happen to use, its effectiveness will be fundamentally dependent upon the feelings of solidarity the people already feel (or are disposed to feel) toward that kind of leader or, among the more thoughtful subset of the crowd (who might, in turn, influence others in their group), the stock of antecedent beliefs they already hold. In the present case, if large numbers of people do feel sufficient solidarity to an authoritarian leader to view him as an appropriate epistemic authority, or if they do hold enough antecedent beliefs about the unreliability of the media being criticized by the leader to agree with his dubbing that media “fake news,” then that is what commentators should be worried about, not which particular terms go viral among authoritarians of a given era.

In short, rather than accusing Trump of giving authoritarians a rhetorical “weapon” which, absent these antecedent conditions, is entirely impotent, commentators should be focusing on the conditions themselves. What is it about American civil and political life that makes a significant chunk
of citizens feel a sense of *solidarity* with a figure like Donald Trump? What is it *about* life in countries led by “demagogues” more generally that inclines citizens to look to *them* for leadership rather than other available institutions? What is it *about* the mainstream news media, or about the late-20th and early-21st centuries' rapidly evolving informational environment, that has brought the public to the point where it is *receptive* to the delegitimizing sense of “fake news” – that is, where its antecedent beliefs incline it to agree with rhetorical terms that denigrate the epistemic authority of the professional news media – when uttered by the president? In later chapters, I will offer some of my own views on these questions, which I take to be a far more worthy subject of our attention than the mannerisms and behaviors of the current president.

For now, though, I simply want to point out that this sort of exploration of the antecedent conditions that create an receptive environment for the rhetoric employed by politicians is exactly the *opposite* of what the “new weapon” thesis invites us to do. Rather than treating the persuasive force of the delegitimizing use of “fake news” as *derivative from* and *caused by* these antecedent beliefs among the public and thereby inspiring us to look closer at those conditions, it treats the rhetorical force of the delegitimizing use of the *term* “fake news” as a “weapon” that possesses some persuasive power of its own. I believe this is a deeply misguided and unfruitful line of critique.

The “new weapon” thesis is, then, unpersuasive for at least two reasons. First, there is no reason to believe Trump either willingly or recklessly provided the expression to authoritarians with the intent of helping them undermine adversarial media. Second, there is no reason to believe his provision of this so-called “weapon” has actually played, or is every likely to play, a significant causal role in increasing
authoritarians’ ability to persuade their publics that adversarial media are unreliable. The real culprits here are the feelings of solidarity felt by the public toward these leaders and the antecedent beliefs they hold about the (un)trustworthiness of the adversarial media, at least vis-a-vis the Fearless Leader. If that is the case, though, critics are better advised bending their efforts toward (a) making salient in the minds of the public other, more beneficent group affinities and (b) remediating the mistaken beliefs that inspire them to be so receptive to the delegitimizing use of “fake news.”

The “Emboldenment” Thesis

The “new weapon” thesis is not the only argument that has been forwarded in defense of the idea that the delegitimizing use of “fake news” empowers despots. Politifact's John Kruzel encapsulates an alternative line of argument in the title of an article in which he claims that Trump's epithet “emboldens despots around the world.” The Washington Post's Meg Kelly gives voice to a similar line of thought, arguing that since “U.S. presidents are held up as examples on the world stage,” Trump's “willingness to dismiss negative news coverage as 'fake’” has “opened the door for leaders of other countries to follow suit.” Elsewhere, the New Yorker's Steve Coll claims that Trump's disparagement of the media has caused “serious harm,” citing a Libyan broadcaster's reference to a Trump tweet in an attempt to discredit a CNN report about the continuance of slavery in that country. “[W]hen the leader of a nation previously devoted to the promulgation of press freedom worldwide seeks so colorfully to delegitimize journalism,” Coll concludes, “he inevitably gives cover to foreign despots who threaten reporters in order to protect their own power.”

42 That is, of course, assuming those beliefs are in fact mistaken. I will call this assumption into question in the contemporary American context in later chapters.
43 Kruzel (2018), my emphasis. The New York Times’ Steven Erlanger does Kruzel one better, identifying the specific weapon Trump gave to authoritarians: a “cudgel” (Erlanger 2017):
then, argues that where once the world's authoritarian leaders were held in check by the shining moral example of Western leadership, or were at least cowed by the high-minded rhetoric of American presidents, Donald Trump's public denunciations of the press have given them greater confidence in taking a more openly combative stance toward the press.

One way of assessing the “emboldenment” thesis is to ask ourselves how timid authoritarian leaders were toward the press before the term “fake news” came to be wielded by the U.S. president as an epithet demeaning mainstream news organizations. Were authoritarian leaders around the world prior to Trump hesitant to try to undermine media sources that reported unfavorably upon them? The question, for anyone even loosely familiar with the tactics typically employed by any authoritarian leader since the advent of the modern form of journalism near the turn of the 20th century, is no sooner asked than answered. Far from hesitant, the world's authoritarian leaders have always, without any exception I am aware of, demeaned, intimidated, bullied, abused, shut down and/or physically assaulted members of the adversarial press to the maximum extent they could get away with doing so without instigating domestic reprisals. Their propensity for doing so is a large part of what makes them “authoritarians.”

Nor has this behavior evidently ever been deterred by the rhetoric of American or other liberal-democratic political leaders. On the contrary, the willingness of authoritarian leaders to engage in behavior antithetical to press freedoms, and even to perpetrate atrocities against journalists, editors and anyone who dared publish a word against their rule, persisted through the entire 20th century despite an endless barrage of pro-press freedom rhetoric hurled forth from the bully pulpits of presidents from the second Roosevelt right up through Obama's annual statements, issued every May 3rd, which is “World

46 Bromides about the real-world importance of U.S. leadership's moral example are common in the editorial pages of major U.S. journals. See, for example, Dan Stewart's article published in the most recent edition of TIME, which argues that such moralistic forces as the U.S.'s role as a “moral lodestar for the world” and its unique (vague and undefined) “weight of authority” are important means of keeping global authoritarians in check. Dan Stewart, “Autocrats Grow Bolder.” TIME. October 22nd, 2018.
Press Freedom Day,” for the duration of his presidency.

Have things changed in the 21st century? Sadly, they have not. In fact, authoritarian leaders' indifference to American leaders' pro-press rhetoric is perhaps most obvious among the very authoritarian leaders most commonly claimed to have been “emboldened” by Trump's use of “fake news,” that is, the political leadership of Russia, Syria, China, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Myanmar, respectively. We can see this by simply looking at their behavior toward the press before Trump began to use the term “fake news” in the delegitimizing sense. Recall that Trump's first use of “fake news” in this sense occurred in January of 2017. As I mentioned before, no world leader before this time appears to have used the term to discredit an adversarial media, but after Trump first used the term they quickly followed suit. This is a convenient timeline because it means that any “emboldening” effect of Trump's usage must have occurred after the turn of the calendar year from 2016 to 2017. How did these leaders treat the press prior to January of 2017?

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Freedom House are two widely respected organizations that attempt to closely track and report countries' performance along a number of dimensions, including freedom of the press. What do these reports tell us about these leaders' “pre-emboldenment” performance regarding freedom of the press? The answer is as clear as it is depressing. Freedom House ranks countries into three tiers, which it labels “Free,” “Partly Free” and “Not Free.” Countries that score highest on a scale of 1-100 are the least free, while the lowest scorers are the most free. With the exception of the Philippines, all of the countries whose leaders are said to have been emboldened by Trump's use of the term “free speech” were categorized by Freedom House under the worst designation, “Not Free,” in both the years 2015 and 2016. Syria is the standout performer in this regard, having made its “Worst of the Worst” list, which ranks the worst ten countries in terms of press
freedom, every year since the organization established that category in 2014.\textsuperscript{47} The mean score for the six countries in 2016 was 76.3, more than 50% worse than the global mean of 49.4.\textsuperscript{48} However, there is good reason to believe that even 76.3 may be an optimistic estimate, as it is weighed down by the outlier of the Philippines, whose “Partly Free” score of 44 in both years may be undeservedly low.\textsuperscript{49} Freedom House intimates as much when it says in its profile of the Philippines that “the Philippines remains one of the most dangerous places in the world to practice journalism.”\textsuperscript{49} According to Freedom House, then, all of the places whose leaders are said to have been “emboldened” by Trump's use of the term “fake news” were places whose authoritarian leaders were already profoundly aggressive in their fight against press freedoms before January, 2017. Indeed, they were among the most unapologetically ruthless suppressors of the press the world had to offer. This depiction is broadly supported in each individual country's case by the HRW reports for the years that preceded Trump's election.\textsuperscript{50} During all this time, as I said, then-president Obama regularly spoke out in favor of press freedoms and in condemnation of authoritarian regimes for their suppression of it. There is no evidence I am aware of to even suggest these speeches had any effect whatsoever on authoritarian regimes' treatment of the press.

Just like the “new weapon” thesis, then, the “emboldenment” thesis overstates the real-world significance of the rhetoric of political leaders, only in this case in international rather than domestic politics. Just as antecedent feelings of solidarity and/or shared beliefs played the most important causal role in the domestic case, it is realpolitik considerations of costs and benefits that play the most important role in the international. Global authoritarian leaders know that the norm of sovereignty is
strong in the current international environment and other countries are loathe to break that norm, given the material and political risks entailed by such action. As long as this remains the case, the rhetoric of liberal-democratic polities' leaders will mean as little to authoritarians in other parts of the world as Uncle Jerry's Facebook rants mean to us. If Trump's use of “fake news” has had any effect on the relationship between global authoritarian leaders and the press, it has been not to “embolden” the former but to furnish them with a trendy new term to use in press conferences and public announcements and, apparently, to provide the latter with a new attention-grabbing phrase to attract attention to, and clicks on, their headlines. There is no reason to believe that it has played any significant role in worsening the already deplorable state of press freedoms under the world's authoritarian regimes by “emboldening” their leadership.

Conclusion

Since (a) there is no reason to believe that Donald Trump intended to provide, nor acted any more recklessly than the average democratic politician in providing, global authoritarian leaders with the delegitimizing use of “fake news;” and since (b) even if he had, calling that rhetorical phrase a “new weapon” mistakenly treats rhetoric's form as the primary cause of its persuasiveness among the public, rather than its persuasiveness of that form being primarily caused by the beliefs and conditions that prevail among society; and since, furthermore, (c) authoritarians showed consistent and unrepentant “boldness” in attempting to stifle, shut down and otherwise persecute the free press before 2017 despite the consistent pro-press freedom rhetoric of Western leaders, we have no reason to suppose the world's authoritarian leaders have been significantly empowered by Trump's delegitimizing use of “fake news.” The whole line of argument is, in my view, misguided. Whatever else might be wrong with the delegitimizing use of “fake news,” it has nothing to do with empowering authoritarians.
Section 1.3: Freedom of the Press

But its putative role in empowering authoritarians is not the only line of argument that has been forwarded against the delegitimizing use of “fake news.” Another series of reactions sees this use of “fake news” by the president as objectionable because it endangers the freedom of the press. Again, two lines of argument are forwarded in support of this charge. The first is the “direct” thesis, which argues that we have good reason to fear that Trump will use his authority as the nation's executive to enact policies that stifle press freedoms either through de jure or de facto coercive means. The second is the “undercutting” thesis, which contends that by attempting to undermine the public's trust in the mainstream news media, Trump is undercutting the media's ability to perform its critical “watchdog” role for democracy. I will deal with these in turn.

The “Direct” Thesis

I believe that the “direct” thesis is based on a recognition of the value of a certain kind of general disposition toward political leadership that has great merit for democracies, but which is poorly applied to the issue of the delegitimizing sense of “fake news.” That disposition is one of vigilance toward the signals emanating from those in power, which can serve as a sign to lay citizens of their leaders' future intentions. Though his conduct often makes it difficult enough to fully accept, Donald Trump is the president of the United States. While this does not give him the power to revoke broadcasting or publishing licenses, as he has at times insinuated a desire to do,\(^{51}\) he does have the authority to appoint the members of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) as well as the potential ability to rile up his substantial fan base to exert public pressure on the FCC. Thanks to sound institutional design, the process of awarding and/or rescinding broadcasting licenses is insulated to a large degree from the direct power of the president. But institutions are often fragile and the power of

\(^{51}\) October 11\(^{th}\), 2017: https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/918112884630093825
the president in the United States has enlarged over the past century. The more that power grows, the more we are reminded that institutions are only as strong as is political leaders' and citizens' adherence to the norms that undergird them. We ought, then, to be attentive to signs that those norms might be deteriorating.

These considerations constitute a good standing reason for all democratic citizens to be watchful of any chief executive, even with regard to matters over which the executive has no formal or direct power, as is the case with publication and broadcasting rights. But we must differentiate between having a standing reason to be vigilant from having an exigent reason for alarm. The former requires only moderate and occasional injections of attention. Accordingly, we are able to maintain a posture of vigilance over a very large array of institutions at a given time. Alarm is another story entirely. It requires a concentrated injection of attention on a particular topic, which, given our finite resources of energy and attention, necessarily comes at the expense of the attention we may allocate to other institutions. What is more, a state of alarm excites anxiety, fear, agitation, and other mental states that are appropriate for emergencies but often detrimental to sound judgment and decision-making in other contexts. Given these considerations, it is important for commentators concerned for the public good to judge accurately whether political leaders' actions warrant escalating into a state of alarm or whether instead simply maintaining (what should be) the standing posture of vigilance that is the appropriate stance of democratic publics toward all politicians and institutions with regard to the norms that undergird the guarantee of their civil rights.

Does Trump's delegitimizing use of the term “fake news” give us reason to transition from what ought to be our standing posture of vigilance into an exigent posture of alarm? Should, in other words, Trump's regular and repeated depictions of the mainstream news media as “fake news” cause us to worry that the widely cherished liberal tenet of freedom of the press is actually under immanent, or even probable, danger? There are two primary why the public might be prompted by the rhetoric of a
political leader, such as the president, to transition from a posture of vigilance to one of alarm about the
danger such rhetoric portends for press freedoms. The first is when the leader's rhetoric appears to be a
precursor to or justification of some ongoing or immanent attempt by that leader to use their *powers of
office* to abrogate civil liberties. The second is when a politician's rhetoric seems to be effective at
ginning up popular antagonism toward the press, which might *intimidate* the press into silence.

In my view, citizens in the current context have no reason to worry about either eventuality in
the present moment. First, we have no reason to suppose freedom of the press is under *legal* threat
because there has as yet been no actual movement on the part of the Trump administration to take the
“legal” route to shut the press down. Though he has engaged in the occasional bluster on Twitter,
Trump has not explicitly lobbied the FCC to rescind any company's license, nor does he have any
authority to require them to do so, nor is there any indication they would be the slightest bit inclined to
cooperate if he did.\(^{52}\)

What about the other possibility I mentioned, though, the one in which the leader excites his fan
base to put public pressure on the FCC to get a tighter grip on the offending media companies? Does
there appear to be any appreciable sign of a public pressure campaign to get the FCC to shut down,
repress, or even regulate the media companies Trump calls out on Twitter? This case has been most
forcefully made by *The Boston Globe* in the flagship article it published on August 15\(^{th}\), 2018, as part of
the above-mentioned coordinated effort with editorial boards across the United States in opposition to
Donald Trump's “assault” on the press. In that article, *The Globe* made its case by reference to three
data points which, according to the *Globe*, ought to cause us to worry about the security of press
freedoms in this country. But a closer look at these same data give us every bit as much reason to be

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52 As Harold Feld of the Public Knowledge advocacy group puts it, “Trump can't order the FCC to [revoke media licenses],
the FCC wouldn't want to do it, and even if they did poke around they couldn't really do anything other than poke around
and demand documents based on what precedents are.” Mindock (2018)
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-nbc-broadcast-license-fake-news-attack-
a8522651.html
reassured about popular support for freedom of the press, even among the conservatives that form the bulk of Trump's fan base, as they do reason for alarm.

The first data point cited by The Globe is the fact that, in the Ipsos poll sourced by the Globe for all three data points, 48% of those who identify as Republicans agreed that “The news media is the enemy of the American people.” The Globe laments this as a sign that the “broad, bipartisan, intergenerational agreement” that used to exist in the United States about the importance of “the press” is “no longer shared by many Americans.”53 But we ought not to confuse people's opinions about the scurrilousness of the professional news media with their opinions about whether or not the United States ought to persevere with its commitment to a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press. As I will argue in more depth later, “the press” is not synonymous with “the professional news media,” so people need not think the same things about the former as the latter. Moreover, many people think lies, rumors, conspiracy theories, religion, atheism, and a whole pantheon of other phenomena are inimical to the American people, yet still believe they ought to be protected by constitutionally guaranteed civil rights. This first data point, then, gives us no clear reason to view contemporary American attitudes as uncommonly or dangerously adversarial toward the freedom of the press.

I believe the other two data points provided by The Globe actually give us more reason to be relieved about the state of epistemic vassalage in the United States, and of the prospects for press freedom, than they do cause to be alarmed. One of these data points shows 43% of the Republicans supporting the statement that “the president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged in bad behavior.” Again, there is the problem of ambiguity. The term “bad behavior” is, first of all, possibly even more vague than “enemy of the people” was, and it is not at all clear what images this expression elicited in the average survey-taking American. Nor is it clear whether respondents took “the president” to mean Donald Trump or any sitting president. This makes it difficult to see to what

53 “Journalists are not the Enemy” (2018)
degree survey respondents' answers owed to the spread of epistemic vassalage to Trump vis-a-vis greater support for the power of the executive in general, or whether instead it meant something unrelated to either of these two things.

However, several considerations should make this statistic less alarming than the picture of Republicans chomping at the bit to stamp out the freedom of the press painted by The Globe. As a rough first guess at parsing out how much epistemic vassalage to Trump motivated Republicans to support “the president's” authority to punish news organizations engaging in “bad behavior,” as opposed to whatever other motives they may have had for doing so, we might note that, first of all, 12% of self-identified Democrats expressed support for the proposition. It is highly unlikely that most of these did so out of epistemic vassalage to Trump. A more plausible explanation is that there is a baseline of American support for the idea that the president ought, as a matter of general policy, to be able to “close news outlets for bad behavior.” That would certainly square with The First Amendment Institute's finding that between 1997-2009 (the only years during which they conducted the relevant poll) 40% or more of Americans agreed with the statement that the press had “too much freedom,” a sentiment which, though it long preceded the rise of Trump, is not at all out of keeping with the idea that “the president” ought to be able to crack down on bad actors. Since I share The Globe's opposition to any support for the president's ability to censor the press, I am not greatly encouraged by the presence of this latent sentiment among substantial chunks of the American public. However, I do believe it supports the idea that a better explanation for The Globe's second data point is that a generally authoritarian attitude consistently prevails among a substantial subsection of the American public, one that has managed to coexist alongside a steadily expanding societal and judicial interpretation of what the First Amendment is meant to protect.

But the biggest reason to doubt that Republican attitudes about the role of the president in

54 “State of the First Amendment 2009” (2009)
regard to the free press stem from epistemic vassalage to Trump comes from a comparison between the above data points and the third used by *The Globe* to raise alarm about our putatively imperiled press freedoms. That third data point indicates that 23% of Republicans, 10% of Independents, and 13% of the American public in general espoused support for the statement that “President Trump should close down mainstream news outlets, like CNN, the Washington Post, and The New York Times.” This third data point is clearly a better metric of the extent to which Trump's supporters actually supports the abolition or bypassing of the First Amendment's protection of the free press. It suffers from none of the ambiguity that plagued the previous two survey items. Unlike “the president,” “President Trump” clearly means the sitting president of the United States, right here, right now. And unlike “media companies engaged in bad behavior,” “like CNN, the Washington Post, and The New York Times” refer to *exact* entities whose current “behavior” can at least be estimated in the minds of respondents.

Moreover, Trump has regularly and repeatedly disparaged all three of CNN, the Post and the Times specifically in his “fake news” diatribes against the media. If the Republican-skewed antipathy toward the media *The Globe* claimed to detect in its first two data points was a result of their being ginned up by the rhetoric of Trump, we should expect support for shutting down the media he *frequently and explicitly* condemns to be *higher* than support for shutting down media he does not single out. But the trend in the data is the exact opposite. Republicans were barely *half* as willing to show support for shutting down the specific entities most commonly singled out most frequently by Trump as “enemies of the people” as they were to support “the [unnamed] president's” being allowed to shut down (unidentified) “news outlets” *in general* for (unspecified) “bad behavior.”

This conclusion is buttressed by a final consideration. It is easy, when studying America's bimodal politics, to slip into the default view that half the population is Republican and the other half Democrat. But this is emphatically not the case. In fact, never in the last century-plus has this idea been farther from the truth. According to the most recent Gallup poll, barely a quarter of the country identify
as Republican (26%), while a similarly low percentage identify as Democrat (27%). Both are dwarfed by the ever-growing number of Independents, who weigh in at a hefty 44% of the total population.\textsuperscript{55} On top of this, both parties are viewed in an unfavorable light by the majority of the American public.\textsuperscript{56}

Those who do continue to expressly identify as a member of either party are abnormally partisan, abnormally interested in politics, abnormally ideological and, in a word, abnormally rabid participants in American politics.\textsuperscript{57} To identify oneself as either a Republican or a Democrat is, all else equal, a good indication that you care more about politics, and care more about being a Republican/Democrat, than most Americans do. The 23% of self-identified Republicans, then, who said Trump should close down CNN, the Times and the Post did not constitute 23% of the American people. They did not even constitute 23% of \textit{half} of the American people (11.5%). A more accurate characterization would be to call them 23% of the \textit{most rabidly partisan subset of conservatives in the country}, which is \textit{six percent of the total voting population}. Even if we include the 10% of Independents who according to Ipsos supported President Trump shutting down the likes of CNN, The New York Times, and The Washington Post, we find a far from reassuring, but also far from terrifying, total of 13% support for such measures among the voting-age American public. While not ideal, this number continues to be swamped by the 66% of Americans who expressly oppose such action on the part of Trump. It is \textit{equaled} by the number of self-identified Republicans – i.e. 49% of even the \textit{most rabidly partisan subset of conservatives} in the country – who explicitly oppose shutting them down.

In short, the data cited by \textit{The Globe} as evidence that Trump's "faithful are following him into undemocratic territory" by supporting his "assault" on the free press\textsuperscript{58} suggests nothing of the sort. Neither, I think, ought we take too seriously \textit{The Globe}'s editorial board's insinuation that Trump's

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} https://news.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx
\item \textsuperscript{56} https://news.gallup.com/poll/24655/party-images.aspx
\item \textsuperscript{57} The interrelatedness of this set of traits is one of the most well-established facts in American political science. For one of the hundreds of articles that finds evidence for it, see (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).
\item \textsuperscript{58} “Journalists are not the Enemy” (2018)
\end{itemize}
rhetoric is imperiling journalists. *The Globe* editorial board warns readers that Trump's “model of inciting his supporters” by disparaging the mainstream media “is how 21st-century authoritarians like Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan operate” and later concludes that “you don't need formal censorship to strangle a supply of information.”\(^{59}\) Undoubtedly in the Russian and Turkish contexts *The Globe's* story is true, but it is more than a little ironic that this alarmism about the intimidating effect of Trump's rhetoric toward the press is located in the same editorial that spearheaded the successful coordination of 350 newspapers publicly, brazenly and apparently fearlessly publishing bald condemnations of the country's executive leader. As *The Globe's* own remarkable success in coordinating that effort attests, and as the deafening roar of opposition to Trump that daily pours unfiltered through the world's printing presses, airwaves and ethernet cables further demonstrates, nobody, least of all the mainstream news media, appears in danger of being intimidated into silence by Trump's rhetoric either in the United States or, apparently, anywhere else in the world. Contrary to what is implied by *The Globe*, citizens should not be convinced by such hand-waving to leave their standing posture of vigilance and join *The Globe's* editorial board in their descent into alarm.

In conclusion, the “direct” thesis articulates a legitimate reason for *standing vigilance*, but does not appear to warrant *alarm* over the precarity of our civil liberties in the current political moment. Accordingly, I reject the “direct” thesis as a reasonable grounds for worrying that the current president's delegitimizing use of “fake news” or any other term intended to discredit the media in the eyes of the people poses any real threat to the freedom of the press.\(^{60}\)

*The Undercutting Thesis*

What about the “undercutting” thesis? The “undercutting” thesis argues that by constantly

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60 Of course, such rhetoric may conceivably serve as the inspiration for citizens beholden to the leader to threaten or attack members of the media they see as “enemies of the people,” as they have sometimes been called by Trump and many other American leaders throughout history. I address this possibility below.
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attacking and undermining the credibility of the mainstream media, Trump is eroding one of the pillars of democracy, the so-called “fourth estate,” which is worrisome because that “estate” plays an integral role in holding power accountable. This concern is implicit in Steve Coll's accusation, in the same *New Yorker* article cited above as an example of the “emboldenment” thesis, that Trump is attempting to “delegitimize journalism.”

The Atlantic's Dick Polman, for his part, characterizes Trump's use of “fake news” as an “unprecedented assault on the media” and goes on to approvingly cite First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams' claim that Trump “easily surpasses Richard Nixon as the greatest threat the news media in America has ever faced.”

Before launching into a critique of the “undercutting” thesis represented by these commentators, let us remember what that thesis is not. First, it is *not* a *legal* argument. As I argued in the rebuttal of the “direct” thesis, leaders' use of *rhetoric to disparage* media entities is distinct from, and far less worrisome than, their use of the *powers of office to shut down or coerce* those entities. The “undercutting” thesis is different. It pertains to Trump and other authoritarians' efforts to *discredit* certain media entities in the eyes of the people. This is clearly an issue of *persuasion*, not of *law* or *coercion*. So, the “undercutting” thesis is neither an argument about *legal* action that might be taken by the executive branch curtailing the publication and dissemination rights of the media nor a (credible) argument about the immanent (or even distant) threat of his intimidating the press into silence. But if neither legal nor extra-legal coercion is involved now or seems to loom on the horizon, then why are commentators so anxious to interpret Trump's attempts to delegitimize the professional news media – i.e. to *undermine* the *credibility* of that media – as an *assault* on press *freedom*?

The answer, I think, lies in a certain view of the relationship between civic informedness, accountability, the professional news media, and freedom of the press. This view is familiar to any

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61 Coll (2017). Note, yet again, the ubiquity of our contemporary worries over legitimacy.
American and is evident in both the slogans of major news periodicals, prominently *The Washington Post's* “Democracy dies in darkness,” and in the way the term “the press” is taken today as a direct synonym of “the professional news media.”63 *The Post's* slogan illustrates the prevailing idea that professional news institutions like *The Post* are society's guardians, or “watchdogs,” who play an integral role in holding power accountable, an idea that is so widely shared by elites in both the academy and the mainstream pundit sphere that, although frequently invoked, it is seldom, if ever, defended. This equation of “the press” with “the professional64 news media,” combined with the idea that the latter are society's guardians or “watchdogs,” seems to have created the impression that the primary reason we have a constitutionally enshrined guarantee of freedom of the press is to make sure that *professional news organizations* can keep on doing their (exclusive and indispensable) job of providing the rest of us with “the facts” by which we are to hold political leaders accountable. This easy jump between the *freedom of the press* and the (implicitly exclusive and indispensable) guardian/watchdog role played by the *professional news organizations* is exemplified in all three of the quotes offered above, which were taken from *The Atlantic, The New Yorker* and *The Boston Globe*, respectively, and is quite evident in the commentary provided by the vast majority of editorials articulating the “undercutting” thesis in the public commentary sphere more generally.

Once one understands the interconnection between these ideas in the minds of many public commentators, one begins to understand why commentators so often tend to interpret president Trump's attempts to *undermine* professional news organizations' *credibility* as constitutive of an *assault* on the *freedom* of the press. After all, once you have accepted the idea that professional news services are society's bearer of “the facts,” or at least the “facts” necessary to hold power accountable, attempts to

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63 Ladd (2012) found that people's open-ended responses to the question of what “things went through your mind” when answering questions about either (a) “the news,” (b) “the news media” or (c) “the press” were nearly identical across question wordings. p. 96-99

64 Due to the peculiarities of American communications history (see Schudson 2001, p. 149), in American culture, perhaps until very recently, “the news media” in colloquial speech meant “the *professional* news media,” and has long been regarded as distinct from alternatives such as “tabloids,” “soft news” and “talk shows.”
undermine its credibility, especially by those in power, start to look like threats to institutions that are absolutely integral to the epistemic well-being of democracy. Since the professional news media is held in this canonical view as uncontroversially beneficial to and indeed indispensable for a well-functioning democracy, public figures who dispute its credibility, like so many other phenomena in this bewildering era, come to be seen as a “threat to democracy.”

As understandable as this line of thinking is given our culture's widely shared understandings about the role of the professional news media in democracy, and as intuitive as it seems to nearly many Americans concerned with public affairs, I believe both its defenders' tendency to equate “the press” with “the professional news media” and their views about the latter's salutariness to and indispensability for democracy are contestable. The sort of “press” whose protection was seen by the writers of the Constitution was not originally conceived as having anything to do with anything even remotely resembling professional journalism. It couldn't have, because there was no professional news media, nor anything remotely like it, in that era. On the contrary, the press at the time of the Revolution was a hodge-podge of rumors about foreign affairs, fiction, anonymously published borderline slander, gossip, and reasoned commentary on public affairs, and it was up to the reader to tell which was which. Moreover, publishers regularly put in print whatever practically any paying person would like to get published, so long as it met their (highly variable and often none too selective) standards. Our conceptions of “the news” and “journalism” are distinctly modern; the people of the time had no conception of either.

Neither did they worry much about, nor certainly expect the press to give them, anything like “objective facts.” Indeed, the common sentiment at the time was that it was up to each individual to

65 Other popular candidates for “threats to democracy” that will be contested in this dissertation include rumors (Sunstein 2014), conspiracy theories (Sunstein 2009), the internet (Deb, Donahue and Roy 2018), social media (Jackson 2017), sorting algorithms on Facebook and Google (Pariser 2011, Nyhan 2017), and the emergence of a “post-truth” mentality (Lewandowski et al 2017).
67 Schudson (1990)
decide what the “facts” were for himself. When the American founding fathers wrote protection of press freedoms into the Constitution, they were trying to guarantee protection of something far less professional, far more fluid and, frankly, far more scandalous and often even noxious than the professional journalism we enjoy today, something that had nothing obvious to do with “objectivity” or “the facts.” On the contrary, what they were protecting seems better defined as the free flow of opinions among lay citizens. Later on, I will argue in favor of the recovery of at least part of this attitude of valuing the free-flowing opinions and indifference toward the idea of “objective facts,” but even without an exhaustive defense of that position it should be obvious that the free flow of opinions is at least a vital part of the value of a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press. My point is simply that “freedom of the press” did not originally mean “freedom of the professionally produced news,” nor should it hold such a restrictive interpretation for those who wish to protect the free flow of more than just such a narrow range of publications – as I presume many of us do.

At least as contestable is the idea that the public ought, as a rule, to view the professional news media as its legitimate guardian over “the facts” about the state of society and the doings of those in power. In more conventional language, it is debatable whether widespread trust in the professional news media is indispensable or even beneficial to democracy. As voluminous as are apologies for the mainstream media today in the publications of the academy and the pundit sphere, nearly as voluminous have been the democratic criticisms of its performance of the purportedly vital democratic duties imputed to it by these and other apologists throughout the latter half of the 20th century and the early part of the 21st. Indeed, for the entire century in which something akin to what we Americans colloquially call “the news media” and what I in this dissertation call “the professional news media” has existed, critics have not only argued that the entities described by that name do in fact fail to benefit

68 See Andie Tucher's fascinating analysis of Americans' delighted, bullish attitude toward the possibility of being tricked by newswriters' and traveling performers' “humbugs” in the early 1800s, an attitude that is a far cry from our horrified, moralistic and, I would (and will) argue, epistemically naive attitude toward “fake news” today (Tucher 1994, chs. 5-6).
democracy in the ways their defendants claim, but even that that are, on the whole, actively harmful to democracy.

While not all frame their arguments explicitly in terms of legitimacy and trust, many scholars and commentators have argued that the professional news media is harmful to democracy. Such arguments come in many forms. Though the professional news media's defenders generally paint it as the watchdog of public officials, many have argued that journalists are more akin to lapdogs in their service whose real-world function is to serve as the mouthpiece of those in power. Others have accused it of relentlessly distracting the public with “pseudo-events” that distort people's views of reality rather than giving democratic citizens an “objective” view of the world. Others have noted the news' excessive negativity and noted correlations between news viewership and an excessively fearful, pessimistic and inaccurate views about crime rates. Some have accused the news of fostering racist misconceptions about minorities' propensity to commit crimes. By no means does this exhaust the list of criticisms about the actual performance of the news in democracy.

69 Though contemporary media skeptics are often painted as conspiracy theorists, the “lapdog” thesis is quite well respected among communications scholars. Some have argued that the media's complicity with politicians comes from journalists coming to identify with the politicians they cover, while others have accused journalists of believing their job to be helping govern, rather than simply help inform. For book-length arguments covering these and other theses, see Cook (1998) and Sparrow (1999).

70 Not only is this premise not obviously true, but there would seem to be at least some recent evidence in favor of the latter thesis in the form of the Clinton campaign's ability to successfully collude with a (now former) CNN employee to unfairly receive debate questions in advance during the most recent Democratic primary. Though I personally do not think that incident proves the sort of widespread media conspiracy some seem to believe to be at work in the shadowy corners of our society, is it really unreasonable for people to suppose that, given what we know of the tendencies of people who command much wealth and power, and the influence they are often able to procure with these means, such collusion might not be an isolated incident?

71 Boorstin (1961)
72 (Geer 2012)
73 Graber (1980)
74 Dixon (2008)
75 The criticisms of the professional news media are far too numerous even to list in the abstract, but some additional prominent criticisms would include its role in capitalizing on and therefore perpetuating simplistic and harmful narratives about the state of society in the minds of news consumers (Iyengar 1991), its tendency to reify the status quo by presenting issues exclusively in conventional frames (Signorielli 1989, Taylor 2000), the way “objectivity” interferes with the social objective of discovering the truth (Coady 2013), and the prioritization of uncontroversial topics such as the political “horse-race” rather than more substantively important but controversial issues (Patterson 2016).
Nor is the theoretical importance of the professional news media to democracy immune from criticism. I will save an extended examination of this topic for a future chapter, but the gist of two arguments can be presented here. The first is an argument about perspectival diversity. Scholars in epistemology and democratic theory have put forth compelling arguments that perspectival diversity plays a central role in the acquisition of knowledge. Professionalization homogenizes journalists' and editors' and citizens' perspectives about what the news is, how it should be gathered, and how it ought to be reported. Thus, to the extent that professionalized news dominates the information sphere, a democratic society's perspective on the world will be monocular rather than multi-ocular, which is undesirable from the standpoint of social epistemology. The second is a republican argument about complacency, or the decline of virtue. As I mentioned above, and as defenders of professional journalism are often themselves keen to remind us, institutions are fragile and require oversight. That includes the institution of the professional news media. The idea that the job of finding out and disseminating “the facts” is the province of a group of professionals fosters complacency by encouraging citizens to outsource their investigative and critical capacities to a group of “professionals.” This invites the possibility of collusion between those purported guardians and the people over whom they are supposed to keep watch. In this way, the idea that there is a “professional” news media that is there to do the public's accountability-keeping job for it is dangerous to democracy.

I mention these critiques, and commentators' tendency to overlook them, for two reasons. The first is that I strongly suspect that their view that the professional news media is uncontroversially beneficial to and indispensable for democracy tends to heighten commentators' sensitivity to any challenge to the professional news media. This explains their tendency, in language used earlier in this

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77 I use the singular “institution” not because I subscribe to the idea that all the news is part of a monolithic cadre of power brokers, but because I conceive of institutions as “recognized patterns of practice around which expectations converge” (Young 1980). Thus, it is the professionalization of the news, rather than all journalists' employment and/or fealty to a single explicit organization, that makes the professional news media an institution.
chapter, to quickly escalate into a state of *alarm* in the face of criticism of the professional news media. In addition to inviting the kinds of general problems, described above, that are entailed by opting for *alarm* in situations in which a more appropriate posture is one of *vigilance*, this heightened sensitivity also prevents those who hold a one-sided view of the value of the professional news media from recognizing as reasonable at least some of the criticism leveled toward the professional news media by much of the public, particularly by the much-maligned millions with whom Trump's adversarial pose toward the professional news media resonates.

The second reason I mention this spate of critiques of the professional news media and its relation to democracy is that I believe a failure or unwillingness to take seriously these critiques also encourages defenders to not only interpret constitutionally guaranteed press freedom as primarily intended to ensure that democracy is provisioned with a professionalized news service, but additionally interpret not just the freedom of but also widespread trust in the professional news media as beneficial to or indispensable for democracy. It is this belief in the importance of widespread trust in the professional news media which, I believe, explains these commentators' tendency to see the president's attempts to undermine people's trust in the professional news media as a threat to press freedom. The logic is straightforward:

**Premise 1:** The purpose of a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press is to facilitate the continued epistemic well-being of the public by keeping citizens informed.

**Premise 2:** The professional news media is society's sole or most important means of keeping informed in the ways important to democracy's continued epistemic well-being.
**Premise 3:** If the people do not trust the professional news media, its efforts at keeping them informed in the ways important to democracy's continued epistemic well-being will be ineffective.

**Sub-Conclusion 1:** Attempting to undermine the people's trust in the professional news media is a threat to the type of informedness necessary for the continued epistemic well-being of democracy.

**Sub-Conclusion 2:** Since, per Premise 1, the purpose of a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press is to facilitate the type of informedness necessary for the continued epistemic well-being of democracy, attempting to undermine the people's trust in the professional news media undermines the purpose of a constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press.

**Conclusion:** Attempting to undermine the public's trust in the professional news media is morally equivalent to an attack on the freedom of the press.

The validity of the conclusion depends critically upon the acceptance of Premise 2, that the professional news media is society's sole or most important means of remaining informed. But I have shown that there are many plausible reasons people to reject this premise, and indeed many do. Accordingly, it is perfectly reasonable to reject the argument's conclusion that attempting to undermine the public's trust in the professional news media is *morally* equivalent to an attack on press freedom.

There are even stronger reasons to reject any argument that criticism of the professional news media not only undermines the *purpose* for which constitutionally guaranteed press freedoms are
intended but on press freedom itself. The term “freedom” in “freedom of the press” is shorthand for “the civil right of.” Now, it may be bad for democracy if the public comes to hold erroneous beliefs about who is or is not to be trusted. Unjust in the grand scheme of things it may be if the president attempts to convince the public to mistrust an institution that is in fact trustworthy. But no individual or institution’s civil rights are put under threat by those attempts. This is because nobody has, or ought to have, a prima facie right to the public’s trust. In fact, so far from being a threat to press freedoms is the president's use of rhetoric to try to persuade the public not to trust the professional news media that such efforts are closer to a sign of the security of those freedoms. If political leaders feel obligated to use words to persuade the public to mistrust the media, it is a good bet that they do not feel comfortable using force to guarantee its silence, nor even using using persuasion to try to justify the immanent use of such force. No one, president or otherwise, is attacking anyone else's civil rights by using rhetoric to try to persuade someone else not to trust them. It is therefore a mistake to accuse them of threatening press freedoms through such efforts.

In sum, I argue that neither the “legal” nor the “undercutting” version of the charge that Trump's delegitimizing use of “fake news” constitutes a threat to the freedom of the press can be sustained. As regards the former, there is no legal movement toward stifling press freedoms, nor would such movement in any case constitute grounds for raising alarm at the rhetoric of the president even if there were. Neither is there any sign of an increasingly hostile and intimidating atmosphere for journalists in the United States, as the booming market for criticism of the current president and his political allies attests. Not only is there no extant legal threat to press freedoms, then, but there is no reason for democratic citizens to leave what ought to be their standing posture of vigilance toward those in power with regard to the protection of their rights and assume one of alarm about those rights being in immanent danger. As for the “undercutting” thesis, I have argued that we ought first of all not to follow its apologists’ tendency to assume that (a) the primary purpose of freedom of the press is to protect the
publication rights of the professional news media and (b) the professional news media is necessarily beneficial for, or indispensable to, democracy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have critiqued the response that has played out in the mainstream political commentary sphere to Donald Trump's and other leaders' use of “fake news” to depict adversarial news media as untrustworthy. I rejected the idea that the provision of the delegitimizing sense of “fake news” empowers authoritarians either by giving them a new “weapon” or emboldening them by failing to try and intimidate them into docility with pro-press rhetorical barrages by Western leaders. I also rejected the argument that we ought to leave the posture of vigilance appropriate to take toward all executive leaders with regard to the continued maintenance of our civil rights in favor of one of alarm over the precarity of those rights in the present moment. Finally, I argued that there is nothing obviously wrong with the president using speech to try to persuade the public not to trust the professional news media.

The problems I have identified in public commentators' criticisms of Trump's delegitimizing use of “fake news” are, I think, far from unique to that issue. Instead, I think they are instances of deeper problems in the ways we think and talk about civic epistemology. One of these problems is the excessive power we impute to, and accordingly our excessive sensitivity to, the rhetoric of political leaders. Another is the conflation of “the press” with “the professional news media,” which is intimately tied up in our tendency to view the purpose of the freedom of the press as primarily meant to guarantee the freedom of professional news organizations. Still another is the idea that the professional news media is beneficial to and indispensable for democracy, which is connected to the prevailing idea among many elites that undermining trust in the professional news media is destructive to democracy. I have used the subject of “fake news” according to Trump to introduce and give examples of these tendencies in contemporary discourse. I will use the remaining chapters in this dissertation to pursue
these and other issues with the way we think and talk about civic epistemology in a more thoroughgoing and theoretically informed way and, hopefully, to offer a preferable alternative.