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From Urban Legends to Political Fact-Checking

Online Scrutiny in America, 1990-2015

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Preface

Comment is free, but facts are sacred.[1]

Many people understand that Donald Trump is interested in being the center of attention. Not only President Trump himself but also the objective viewer would say that he has succeeded with his heavy use of fake facts. As one journalist observed, "Trump showed himself to be an attentive student of disinformation and its operative principle: Reality is what you can get away with" (Rauch 2018). Many of his false pronouncements are believed by his core supporters – especially when they reinforce beliefs that the supporters already hold. But even those journalists and academics who are largely critical of Trump's fake facts provide him with satisfaction, in the spirit of all publicity (even bad publicity) being good. There are thousands of journalists and hundreds of academics who are carefully monitoring the utterances of President Trump and those of many other politicians and fact-checking these claims for their veracity. But most of these journalists and academics have two shortcomings: they do not recognize there is a long history of fake facts in America, that this Trump phenomenon is not something that only recently began and they do not understand that political fact-checking is a part of a larger phenomenon of online scrutiny that manifests itself in multiple forms.

In another book, *Fake News Nation: The Long History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America* (Rowman and Littlefield 2019), we address the first of these shortcomings. We identified eight important case studies from American history, ranging from the early nineteenth century to the near present, in which lies and misrepresentations were an important part of the unfolding of these events and their aftermaths. The events included presidential elections, assassinations, wars, business advertising, and policy debates over science and medicine.

This book continues our historical treatment by examining in detail some important developments in the period, starting in 1990 as the public Internet was about to emerge and ending around 2015 as the Trump-Clinton presidential election was

[1] This quotation is taken from a famous essay written on the 100th anniversary of the *Manchester Guardian* by C.P. Scott, who had served for almost 50 years as the editor of the newspaper. The article is reprinted at https://www.theguardian.com/sustainability/cp-scott-centenary-essay.

beginning to take shape. None of these historical issues were addressed in detail in the previous book.

This book also addresses the second shortcoming found in many of the existing journalistic and academic accounts of fact-checking. There is a clear evidence that some of the major players in political fact-checking – most notably snopes.com – began with a different purpose in life. snopes, and the Usenet newsgroup alt.folklore.urban from which snopes emerged, were principally about the scrutiny and possible debunking of urban legends. Some other events also occurred during this quarter century (1990–2015) that, on first glance, do not seem to have anything to do with political fact-checking: a fad for B-grade horror movies about urban legends, the popularity of truth-or-fiction television shows, the creation of a new subdiscipline of folklore studies called contemporary legends studies, and the rise of groups to educate the public about the dangers of computer viruses and other computer security risks. But we argue that these developments are all connected to one another and the connections are that they all involve determining how to act in a complex, dangerous world and that they all address this concern by adopting one kind or another of scrutiny. Thus, political fact-checking is a kind of scrutiny just as is learning how not to be duped into downloading a computer virus. These connections have scarcely been examined in the published literature. By understanding this larger domain of scrutiny, we believe we can understand better this Trumpian era of fake facts.

Who are the authors of this book, and why are we qualified to write this book? Each of us holds a doctorate in history, and each has written extensively on both the history of computing and the history of information. Each is a seasoned author, having written more than 20 books for leading academic publishers such as Princeton, Oxford, and MIT. One of us (James Cortada) is the author of *All the Facts: A History of Information in the United States Since 1870* (Oxford University Press, 2016). The other (William Aspray) was the editor in chief of the journal *Information & Culture: A Journal of History*, which is the leading journal studying the history of information. Chapter 2 (on alt.folklore.urban and snopes) and Chap. 3 (on rumors and legends surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks) are based on a close reading of the archives of alt.folklore.urban and snopes. The organizational histories that appear (such as alt.folklore.urban and snopes in Chap. 2, VMyths in Chap. 4, and PolitiFact and the *Washington* Post Fact Checker in Chap. 5) are stronger because of the long involvement of both authors with the study of business history, particularly when those histories involve information institutions.

How is this book organized? Chapter 1 reflects on the concept of scrutiny. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide detailed case studies from the period 1990 to 2015. Chapter 2 examines how scrutiny happened online prior to the emergence of the public Internet and how the Internet rapidly replaced these other technologies once it became widely available. Thus, this chapter discusses not only the Usenet newsgroup alt.folklore.urban and snopes but also their predecessors such as discussion sites offered by the Internet service providers such as AOL, Prodigy, CompuServe, and The Source, as well as through electronic bulletin boards, mailing lists, and fax. Chapter 3 provides a detailed analysis of the rumors and urban legends surrounding

the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. This analysis enables us to examine the various types of rumors and legends, their dissemination, their debunking (when false or misleading), and their cultural meaning. Chapter 4 broadens the discussion of online scrutiny by showing how B-grade horror movies, truth-or-fiction television programming, public service activities meant to reduce the threat of computer viruses, and the rise of an academic discipline of contemporary legends all are connected to this theme of online scrutiny. Chapter 5 examines the rise of the most familiar and perhaps most important today of these efforts at online scrutiny, namely, political fact-checking. Chapter 6 briefly summarizes the material we have covered in this text and suggests opportunities for further scholarship.

We appreciate the pointers to relevant material and answers to inquiries from a number of our academic colleagues: David Bordwell on film history, Michael McDevitt on political communication, Burton St. John on advertising and public relations, and Thomas Yulsman on environmental journalism. These colleagues are, of course, not responsible for the small and large errors that we made as we tread on their turf. We also appreciate the support from the University of Colorado Boulder for William Aspray's summer research time spent on this project.

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Reference

Rauch, Jonathan. 2018. The Constitution of Knowledge. *National Affairs* 37 (Fall). https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-constitution-of-knowledge. Accessed 28 Dec 2018.

Contents

Chapter 1
The Concept of Scrutiny

The magic words 'on the Internet,' if inserted into nearly any sentence, seem to protect it from normal critical scrutiny.
-Nathan Myhrvold (https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/nathan_myhrvold_541336?src=t_scrutiny)

This is a book about scrutiny in America in the quarter century leading up to the 2016 presidential election, as one way to better understand the routine use of fake facts by Donald Trump (and other politicians) and the emergence of the political fact-checking industry. While fake facts are an important part of the story, scrutiny is a broader concept that is sometimes about determining whether facts are true or false, but at other times does not particularly concern the veracity of uttered claims. Thus, checking for fake facts is sometimes the point of online scrutiny, sometimes a tool of online scrutiny, and sometimes irrelevant to the scrutiny.

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the concept of scrutiny, which we use in our analysis later in the book. Our major focus is about scrutiny online because of the common use of the Internet to spread lies and misrepresentations. However, we will also discuss scrutiny in other circumstances, such as scrutiny in film and television.

1.1 Online Scrutiny

Let us begin with the concept of scrutiny. It is, according to a standard dictionary definition, "the careful and detailed examination of something in order to get information about it."[1] We can get at some of the different meanings and uses of 'scrutiny' by considering various quotations about it. Sometimes, scrutiny is the means for determining the beliefs of an individual, organization, or society. As astronomer Carl Sagan notes, scrutiny is a methodological basis for the production of scientific

[1] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/scrutiny

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knowledge, and it is also important to the determination of one's philosophical or religious beliefs: "Skeptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep thoughts can be winnowed from deep nonsense."[2] However, scrutiny extends beyond science and religion; it is an important attribute of the aware consumer in today's everyday life in which one is bombarded with advertising messages, as author and social media influencer Bryant McGill advocates: "Become a very cautious consumer scrutinizing everything that you allow into your mind and body."[3] Or as life coach and author Laurie Buchanan states: "Any belief worth embracing will stand up to the litmus test of scrutiny. If we have to qualify, rationalize, make exceptions for, or turn a blind eye to maintain a belief, then it may well be time to release that belief."[4]

The politics of honest election and fair governance is also a sphere in which scrutiny plays an important role, as former Senator Jacob Javits (R – NY) notes: "When scrutiny is lacking, tyranny, corruption and man's baser qualities have a better chance of entering into the public business of any government."[5] Former CIA employee and massive leaker of classified data, Edward Snowden, makes a similar point to Javits, that transparency – the ability to examine the record in detail because the details are open to outsiders – is an essential part of the political process; so that scrutiny of the documentary record of government is essential: "There can be no faith in government if our highest offices are excused from scrutiny – they should be setting the example of transparency."[6]

Another aspect of scrutiny is captured in the statement of the actress and movie producer Halle Berry: "Anytime you put a movie out it's subject to such scrutiny and such criticism."[7] The media theorist Neil Postman's report of author Ernest Hemingway's belief also speaks to this issue: "For those of you who do not know, it may be worth saying that the phrase, *crap-detecting*, originated with Ernest Hemingway who when asked if there were one quality needed, above all others, to be a good writer, replied, 'Yes, a built-in, shock-proof, crap detector.'"[8] Both of

[2] Brainy quotes, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/carl_sagan_141359?src=t_scrutiny

[3] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/scrutiny

[4] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/scrutiny

[5] https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/jacob_k_javits_546651?src=t_scrutiny

[6] https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/edward_snowden_551869?src=t_scrutiny

[7] https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/halle_berry_340532?src=t_scrutiny

[8] Ernest Hemingway has famously been variously quoted and paraphrased on his comment. Raised in Michigan in the early twentieth century, exposed to the horrors of war during the First World War in Italy as an ambulance driver, living in Paris as a young writer in the 1920s, visiting battlefields during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, reporting for American newspapers during the Second World War, and then living in Cuba in the 1950s, Hemingway had ample opportunity to hear falsehoods and to be flooded with much misinformation. No wonder he said that everyone needed a built-in "crap detector." Neil Postman, a long-time commentator on media and other American cultural issues, heard this comment while interviewing Hemingway at the start of the 1960s, and that he repeated in well circulated speech, "Bullshit and the Art of Crap-Detection," which he delivered on November 28, 1969 at the National Convention for Teachers of English (NCTE), http://www.smirkingchimp.com/thread/8863; Kompf (2004); reported on by Postman and Weingartner (1969).

these quotations relate to the demand for authenticity in our films and other cultural artifacts such as books, plays, and dance. Authenticity is a kind of truth to self. There is an expectation that our cultural artifacts will not only square with factual information in our world, but also be internally consistent and display a kind of emotional intelligence.

Urban legends provide an interesting case in order to understand the place of scrutiny in modern society. Folklorists and sociologists created a new field of study, the study of contemporary legends, in order to understand the meaning of urban legends in contemporary American culture. These scholars noted that urban legends are sometimes true, sometimes false, and sometimes a mixture of truth and falsity; but this is not their primary concern. Instead, these scholars are interested in why urban legends are present in modern society, and explain them in part as being cautionary tales about a complex, dangerous world.

Hobbyists, such as the long-standing members of the Usenet newsgroup alt.folklore.urban, have also been interested in urban legends, not so much to determine the truth or falsity of particular urban legends – although they worked at doing so – but primarily to achieve two goals: to enact their believed importance of having a critical, practical mindset, together with the enjoyment derived from applying this mindset to stories that arose in an uncritical fashion on the Internet or in the press. This enjoyment – or entertainment – aspect of urban legends also showed up in various television shows such as *Fact or Fiction*, in which the audience gains entertainment value by trying to determine which of the presented stories are true and which are false. Neither the audience nor the television producers care particularly about the truth value of these stories, only about the entertainment value. This entertainment value is derived by the television viewer flexing his or her abilities to scrutinize (Fig. 1.1).

Another place where the truth or falsity of a story is secondary to another goal is with those people and organizations, such as CIAC or VMyths, that try to help the public – both individuals and institutions – to avoid falling prey to computer viruses or online mailing lists. The basic message from these organizations is that the public needs to have more online savvy, to scrutinize what they see in emails and on websites.

Scrutiny involves having a certain skepticism about messages that are received, whether in oral communication, online, or in other media broadcasts; but we do not want this skepticism to be taken too far to a point of nihilism. This skepticism must be balanced by an openness to new ideas, as Carl Sagan notes about science, but which is also true of the ordinary citizen in his or her everyday life: "At the heart of science is an essential balance between two seemingly contradictory attitudes – an openness to new ideas, no matter how bizarre or counterintuitive they may be, and the most ruthless skeptical scrutiny of all ideas, old and new. This is how deep truths are winnowed from deep nonsense."[9] Scrutiny requires thorough examination, as artist David Hockney suggests: "Photographs aren't accounts of scrutiny. The shut-

[9] Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* as quoted in Scrutiny Quotes on Goodreads, https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/scrutiny

Fig. 1.1 If properly educated, Americans begin to scrutinize at a young age. (Photo courtesy of James W. Cortada)

ter is open [only] for a fraction of a second."[10] Scrutiny must also be balanced against other social goods, including privacy, as author and speaker Molly Bloom suggests: "I don't think anyone's private life stands up to public scrutiny."[11]

One problem of scrutiny is known as the *backfire effect*. This effect is increasingly evident among President Trump's hard-core supporters and similarly amongst American political far-left activists. The backfire effect occurs when a message – say an accurate statement or other well-grounded effort to scrutinize some belief – has the reverse effect from what was intended, causing the recipient to dig in and embrace even more resolutely the opposite (often inaccurate) fact. Media experts, political operatives, and historians are just beginning to understand this phenomenon (Silverman 2011). However, psychologists have known about it for some time, calling it *belief perseverance*.[12] For example, if a Confederate veteran of the American Civil War believed it was better for the South that President Lincoln died – even though in the 1870s and 1880s historians began detailing how Lincoln wanted to reintegrate the Old Confederacy back into the Union in a gentle fashion – all those new facts cause the old soldier to hold faster to his belief that Lincoln was a bad person. As we showed in our earlier book on fake facts, the backfire effect occurred in every historical case we studied (Cortada and Aspray 2019). In the past

[10] https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/david_hockney_470319?src=t_scrutiny

[11] https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/molly_bloom_943563?src=t_scrutiny

[12] Baumeister et al. (2007), but known for decades, Beveridge (1950).

several decades, those who were manipulating information knew about the phenomenon and leveraged it for their purposes, helping to disseminate false information more effectively. The availability of the Internet and the concomitant extensive dumping of false and true facts has reinforced this behavior (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Lord et al. 1979). But the main point to keep in mind is that a bias toward reinforcing earlier perceptions about an issue has long served human thinking as a general filter through which to cautiously judge alternative (newly created) "facts".

When scrutiny is avoided or its results ignored, there can be devastating consequences, as two political examples show. The first involves America's war with Vietnam. The Tonkin Resolution of 1964 gave President Lyndon Johnson the legal permission to send extra troops to Vietnam, and resulted in an additional 58,000 US military deaths and over 100,000 more wounded. Before the Tonkin Resolution, "only" 400 soldiers had died.[13] Over 2.7 million military personnel served in Vietnam., and Vietnam veterans comprised nearly 10% of their generation. Historians have concluded that the factual basis leading to the Tonkin Resolution, in response to a North Vietnamese attack on US naval forces, was largely a lie.

The second example appeared more recently, in the early 2000s, when once again a president wanted war – this time George W. Bush, who promoted the idea that weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq and that these weapons could be used to attack other Arab oil-producing nations, NATO allies in Europe, or even Americans. Between 2003 and late 2018, nearly 4500 Americans died in the resulting war and 32,000 were wounded.[14] President Bush was called out for lying about weapons of mass destruction nearly one thousand times. United Nations inspectors went to Iraq, did not find any of these weapons, and so informed the world (Corn 2003). In this case, the fact-checkers were ignored. Historians have concluded that the premise presented to the American public for why the United States went to war with Iraq was based in false facts.

Let us next turn to the other operative word in our book subtitle: *online*. The most obvious comment to make is that the Internet provides a means with low or no cost barriers to disseminate messages that are partly or entirely lies or misrepresentations. On the other hand, the Internet also provides places such as alt.folklore.urban or snopes where people can read debunkers or even participate in the debunking process themselves. Let us look into this issue a bit more deeply by considering what we can learn about our topic from the following table (Table 1.1), which summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of online communication.

We will focus here primarily on the left-hand column, which lists the advantages of online communication, and consider how this material applies to two online scrutiny communities that we discuss in detail in Chap. 2: alt.folklore.urban and snopes.com. The right-hand column is provided mainly for better understanding of the table, as a contrast to the online communication advantages listed in the left-hand

[13] "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," U.S. National Archives, accessed December 26, 2018, https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics

[14] "Number of U.S. Soldiers Killed in the Iraq War from 2003 to 2018," *Statistica,* https://www.statista.com/statistics/263798/american-soldiers-killed-in-iraq/

Table 1.1 The advantages and disadvantages of online communication[a]

Advantages	Disadvantages
Flexibility: accessible 24 × 7, any place as long as you have an internet connection	**Text-based**: Predominantly relies on inputting text which can be challenging for those who don't like to write or have poor keyboard skills, but with the advance of broadband connectivity and voice and video conference technology – this will be less of an issue.
Levelling: reserved people who usually don't speak up can say as much as they like while "loud" people are just another voice and can't interrupt	**No physical cues**: without facial expressions and gestures or the ability to retract immediately there's a big risk of misunderstanding
Documented: unlike verbal conversation, online discussion is lasting and can be revisited	**Information overload**: a large volume of messages can be overwhelming and hard to follow, even stress-inducing
Encourages reflection: participants don't have to contribute until they've thought about the issue and feel ready	**Threads**: logical sequence of discussion is often broken by users not sticking to the topic (thread)
Relevance: provides a place for real life examples and experience to be exchanged	**Time lag**: even if you log on daily, 24 h can seem like a long time if you're waiting for a reply; and then the discussion could have moved on and left you behind
Choice: a quick question or comment, or a long reflective account are equally possible	**Inefficient**: it takes longer than verbal conversation and so it's hard to reply to all the points in a message, easily leaving questions unanswered
Community: over time can develop into a supportive, stimulating community which participants come to regard as the high point of their course	**Isolation**: some learners prefer to learn on their own and don't participate in the discussions
Limitless: you can never predict where the discussion will go; the unexpected often results in increased incidental learning	**Directionless**: participants used to having a teacher or instructor telling them what to do can find it a leaderless environment (and that's where tutors come in)

[a]"Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Communication", *Bang The Table*, Community Engagement Blog, 2 November 2008, last updated 9 October 2018, https://www.bangthetable.com/blog/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-online-communication-2/ (accessed 26 December 2018). The authors noted that they had drawn heavily from a blog posting on Wikipedia concerning online education, but the authors do not provide the exact citation. There is a follow-up article to this one: Crispin Butteriss, "Eight Advantages of Online Communication for Citizen Engagement," *Bang The Table*, 14 April 2010, last revised 25 October 2018, https://www.bangthetable.com/blog/eight-advantages-of-online-communication-for-citizen-engagement/ (accessed 26 December 2018). The content in our table is taken verbatim from the earlier *Bang The Table* blog posting; only the formatting is changed

column. While we do not dispute that any of these features listed in the left-hand column can be advantages of online communication, the blog post from which this chart is drawn is considerably more optimistic than we are about online practice as it is applies to scrutiny. *Flexibility* certainly is an advantage for both spreaders and debunkers of false or misleading statements. *Levelling* is also possible for both