Conceptualizing Satirical Fakes as a New Media Genre: An Attempt to Legitimize 'Post-Truth Journalism'

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Abstract

Pseudo media sites, such as The Onion, ClickHole, The DailyMash, and Satirewire that publish fabricated "news", most commonly satirical articles, have emerged as a distinct layer of post-truth new media. Despite the possibility that perplexity and difficulty in grasping messages in disinformation based satire is an issue pertaining to genre development, post-truth satire has not yet been examined from a genre analysis perspective. This paper develops a theoretical basis to conceptualize post-truth satire as a new media genre and identify generic conventions for post-truth satire. The paper suggests that readers' understanding of deep meanings embedded in fabricated satire is predicated upon their ability to detect explicitness of fabrication. Explicit display of fabrication can invite interpretation, pushing audience beyond merely taking content from face value. Explicit fabrication, as a stylistic approach, can be used to construct post-fact narratives relating to socio-political phenomena. Post-fact truth can serve as a form of 'constructed truth' based on intentionally fabricated facts relating to real-world phenomena.

Keywords: disinformation, pseudo news, fabricated satire, post-truth, genre

Introduction

Circulation of fabricated stories on the Internet and their outreach beyond local contexts can disrupt democratic discussion and cause democratic decay. Post-truth- a context "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (OxfordDictionaries, 2016) that some researchers call a "self-consciously grand term of epochal shift" (Corner, 2017, p.1100) shows increased attention towards effects of pseudo and deceptive content. The current post-truth discourse pays primary attention to fake news- "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers"-(Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p.4), especially the role they played in political processes. This is problematic as the high emphasis on fake news created for deliberate deception can undermine effects of other types of post-truth content. Purposeful deception is only one aspect of the notion of post-truth as the latter connotes a broader phenomenon that includes the former. Pseudo media sites, such as The Onion, ClickHole, The DailyMash, Satirewire, Duffelblog, The Daily Stooge, and NewsThump that publish fabricated content, most commonly satirical articles, have emerged as a distinct layer of post-truth new media. Despite their relevance in the study of disinformation, only a few studies (e.g., Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016; Fife, 2016; Waisanen, 2011) examines the role these pseudo media outlets play in the contemporary post-truth information landscape.

Pseudo content publishers have begun establishing as a distinct wave of 'post-truth journalism'. Perplexity can be a common audience reaction to content published by these outlets in the initial phase of social institutionalization as they borrow generic characteristics from mainstream news. Fife (2016) points out that those who miss the irony of content published by satirical fake news sites, such as The Onion, are usually horrified or surprised that the events reported in the articles are true. This is caused by the absence of a macro level frame of reference characterized by stylistic consistency that guides audience interpretation

of post-truth narratives. Despite the possibility that perplexity and difficulty in grasping messages in disinformation based satire is an issue pertaining to genre development, post-truth satire has not yet been examined from a genre analysis perspective.

There is increasing interest in genre analysis among new media researchers (e.g., Lomborg, 2011; Lüders, Prøitz, & Rasmussen, 2010; Myers & Hamilton, 2015; Primo, 2010; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). Das (2012) notes that interpreting interactive media genres demands a range of responsibilities, such as expecting, anticipating, disagreeing, rejecting, and accepting. This observation is especially valid to satirical fakes since there is a risk that the audience may not understand the satire in the absence of those responsibilities. Speech genres are "relatively stable, thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterances" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.64), and genre conventions are constituted through several features, such as narrative or plot structure, discursive positions, and stylistic aspects (e.g., layout, design) (Lüders et al., 2010). Pseudo media outlets such as The Onion can be developed into a complex secondary genre of post-truth satire that differs from, yet resembles, compositional forms and styles used by mainstream journalists. In this light, this paper develops a theoretical basis to conceptualize post-truth satire as a new media genre and develop genre conventions for post-truth satire. Such academic work helps eliminate ambiguity in pseudo news stories and transform the practice of 'pseudo journalism' into a socially desirable practice.

Digital Genres

Fabricated media content is hardly a new phenomenon. Traces of fabricated stories can be found throughout the history, such as the use of dubious information by the Bizantine historian Procopius, a version of fake news called "Canard" that was popular in Paris, and semi-false news circulated in the eighteenth-century London (Darnton, 2017). According to

Darnton, the form and medium for circulating disinformation has taken many forms, such as sonnets pasted on a bust of a figure, engraved messages on copper plates, and newspapers. The rise of 'pseudo journalism' is a platform-enabled manifestation of the same phenomenon. The following review of related work covers two aspects of the topic. First, I will discuss the notion of genres to develop a theoretical foundation to conceptualize satirical fakes as a new media genre. Second, I will discuss the need for such work in the context of online fabricated satire.

The notion of genre is a conceptual tool used to classify cultural products, such as film, literature, and music, that describes "a manner of expression that governs artists' work, their peer groups, and the audiences for their work" (Lena & Peterson, 2008, p.697). In his essay *The Problem of Speech Genres*, Bakhtin (1986) noted that speech genres are relatively stable types of oral or written utterances characterized by the choice of thematic content, style, compositional structure, and lexical, phraseological, and grammatical elements of the language. Genres are characterized by the commonality or 'family resemblance' between texts grouped based on similarity in terms of compositional, stylistic, or thematic criteria (Lomborg, 2011), and a shared set of communicative purposes turns a collection of communicative events into a genre (Swales, 1990). Lena and Peterson (2008) describe that the study of genre has been approached mainly from two perspectives. The first perspective pays primary attention on the textual elements of cultural objects and is often used by humanities scholars, musicologists, and sociologists. The second approach focuses on the social context and examines genres from the perspective of consumption (e.g., expression of consumer identity). For Bhatia (2002, p.7), analysing genre means "investigating instances of conventionalised or institutionalized textual artefacts in the context of specific institutional and disciplinary practices, procedures and cultures in order to understand how members of specific discourse communities construct, interpret and use these genres to achieve their

community goals and why they write them the way they do." Genre analysis focuses on generality of flows of text within the context of a social frame of reference in a given time frame (Lüders et al., 2010), and thus serves as a methodological foundation to examine types of media content taking into account their social and cultural contexts.

Lüders et al. (2010, p.949) note that while the 'task' of genres is to "overcome contingency and facilitate communication", their function is to "enhance both composing and understanding of communication." They argue that this is achieved by providing interpretative, recognizable and flexible frames of reference for communication. Not only do these frames of references help producers to improve effectiveness of messages, they also help members of the audience to avoid misinterpretation. This is crucial in developing a post-truth literate society, and it is consistent with Todorov's (1990) conception of genre as the "codification of discursive properties" (p.18). Various types of properties, such as phonetic features, phonology, thematic elements, and plot structure, can be categorized considering several aspects (e.g., semantic, syntactic, or verbal), and genres may differ from each other at any of these levels of discourse. Genres, therefore, are an institution that provides "horizons of expectation" for readers and "models of writing" for authors, and they undergo a process of institutionalization. According to Todorov, society chooses and codifies speech acts that correspond with its ideology. This codification allows certain genres to exist at a given time. Readers' confusion with post-truth content as observed by several scholars (Fife, 2016; Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016; Balmas, 2014) occurs in part due to a lack of horizons of expectation and models of writing, or in general, absence of codification. Setting post-truth new media genres can help address this issue by offering standards that can guide production as well as creating a post-truth savvy audience.

There is a growing body of scholarly work that examines online content from a genre analysis perspective (e.g., Myers & Hamilton, 2015; Primo et.al., 2013; Lomborg, 2011;

Lüders et al., 2010; Primo, 2010). While some scholars view broad categories such as social media as genres (e.g., Myers & Hamilton, 2015), there is increasing attention on identifying (sub)genres within web-based media. Using online diaries and 'camphone self-portraits' as examples, Lüders, Prøitz, and Rasmussen (2010) demonstrate how users internalize genre conventions, and highlight the need for genres for users to make sense of communication and 'become meaningful'. For instance, online diaries, such as blogs, significantly differ from paper diaries, and the users internalize genre conventions through self-writing practices used by the other writers. Primo, Zago, Oikawa, and Consoni (2013) highlight differences between medium and genre, and consider blogs as a medium within which several genres can be identified. Based on a matrix that identifies 16 blog genres, such as professional self-reflective, professional informative, personal informative, and group reflective posts (Primo, 2010), Primo et. al. (2013) show that professional and organizational genres dominate the Brazilian blogosphere and they play a role in attracting and maintaining audiences.

New media genres are not limited to production-intensive aspects, such as blogs. Lomborg (2011) conceptualizes social media as communication genres and identify communicative practices prevalent among those who use blogs, social network sites, online chat, and location-based services as genre norms and conventions in the making. He notes that social media serve the purpose of interpersonal communication and togetherness and are supported by interactive features, and thus, the study of social media should be approached from the perspective of genre enactment and negotiation through social practice. This is consistent with Wiggins and Bowers', (2014, p.1893) observation that, from the perspective of genre, the Internet memes are a "a complex system of social motivations and cultural activity that is both a result of communication and impetus for that communication". According to Wiggins and Bowers, genre development of Internet memes can be described by a memetic transformation that consists of spreadable media, emergent theme, and the

meme. Scholars have examined other forms of interactive digital media, such as video games, using the lens of genre. Harper (2011, p.409), for instance, conceptualizes genre in gaming context as a "hybrid antecedent, an influence on gameplay that is rooted in both in-game (internal) and out-of-game (external) factors." Harper's work shows how *Persona 3*, a PlayStation 2-based role-playing game, utilizes genre conventions and stresses that study of consumption of interactive media needs to consider the ways in which the common narrative and ludic frames are configured.

In general, the above studies (Lomborg, 2011; Lüders et al., 2010; Primo, 2010; Primo et.al., 2013; Myers & Hamilton, 2015) point to the high diversity of new media genres. This is not unique to new media as conventional genres show the same characteristic. Bakhtin (1986) claimed that speech genres are so heterogeneous that there cannot be a single level to study them. He highlighted differences between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) genres where the former represents aspects of unmediated speech as opposed to the latter. Secondary genres include complex, developed, and organized communication (e.g., novels, dramas, research, and commentary). While some new media genres may include elements of communication that are closer to primary genres (e.g., blog posts, vlogs) several others are similar to secondary genres (e.g., organized web pages). The following discussion highlights the need for recognizing satirical fake news as a complex post-truth new media genre.

Post-Truth Satire: The Problem of Perplexity

Scholarly work on satire covers a broad range, such as studies that examine its ability to interrogate power (Harrington, 2012), second-level agenda setting (Littau & Stewart, 2015), and politicians' reactions to their participation in satirical TV shows (Coleman, Kuik, & van Zoonen, 2009). In particular, there is high scholarly attention to popular satirical shows like The Daily Show, The Late Show, and The Cobert Report (eg., Baumgartner,

2006; Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Colletta, 2009; Combe, 2015; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Waisanen, 2009). Except for a few studies that highlight negative effects of humorous presentation (e.g., Young, 2008), the majority of previous studies point to the ability of satire in questioning or ridiculing dominant narratives and figures. For instance, Brewer and Marquardt (2007) show that the mock news provided by The Daily Show can educate viewers, increase awareness on world affairs, and promote critical thinking. Based on Stephen Colbert's political satire, Combe (2015) argues that satire can problematize certainty, stable reality, and absolute truth. Similarly, Harrington (2012) claims that the unconventional approach used by the satirical Australian show *The Chaser's War on Everything* allows interrogating power and present a more authentic image of political figures.

Online satire is more complicated than its mainstream counterpart, particularly due to user engagement in production, commentary, and circulation. Crittenden et al. (2011), who view satire as a genre of the masses, argue that the rise of social media has resulted in changes in the nature of critical inquiry and created a layer of opinion leaders that include traditionalists, creators, rookies, and technologists. While traditionalists and creators are professional satirists, the other two types of opinion leaders (rookies and technologists) are less professional individuals who play unique roles in the creation and dissemination of satire. Rookies are novices who are willing to test their skills and their work may not deliver an underlying message and be limited to basic humour and technologists engage in the delivery of satire via platforms rather than creating satirical content. These individuals have potential to emerge as a layer of non-institutional satirists. In a similar vein, Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016) call new media based contributors, such as bloggers, columnists, and fake news organizations a 'fifth estate' that watches over mainstream media. They argue that fake news sites like *The Onion* have gained credibility by following mainstream media while
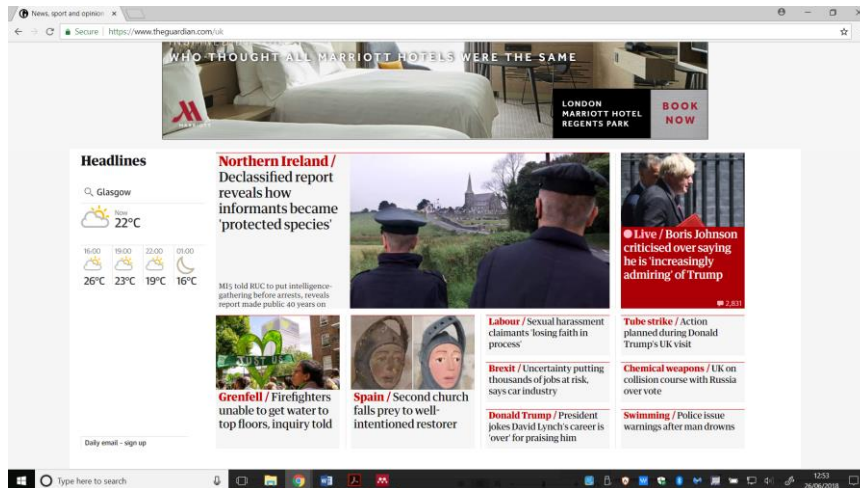
offering a satirical perspective that can bring professional media to within its professional boundaries.

While the actor diversity in online satire can be beneficial, especially in terms of developing 'citizen satirists', involvement of less-professional actors may result in production of content that can cause message ambiguity and confusion. This can undermine the potential of online satire to offer benefits that previous research identified in the context of mainstream satire (e.g., Combe, 2015; Harrington, 2012; Brewer and Marquardt, 2007). Moreover, involvement of new actors as well as the emergence of novel types of content demands more effort from the audience. Das (2012) notes that interpreting interactive media genres demands a range of responsibilities, such as expecting, anticipating, disagreeing, rejecting, and accepting. Although satirical post-truth outlets, such as the Onion News Network (ONN) that display a "distinctive form of hyper-real social critique that uses ironic iconicity" (Waisanen, 2011, p.508), can offer critical insight on media events and politics, readers may miss the irony due to several reasons, such as lack of fact checking, inability to recognize the fake news site as a satirical content publisher, limited knowledge in references used, and reading only part of the article (Fife, 2016). To a great extent, these issues can be attributed to the absence of an institutionalized (or codified) genre that provides audience an interpretive frame of reference (Lüders et al., 2010) for this rather novel type of content.
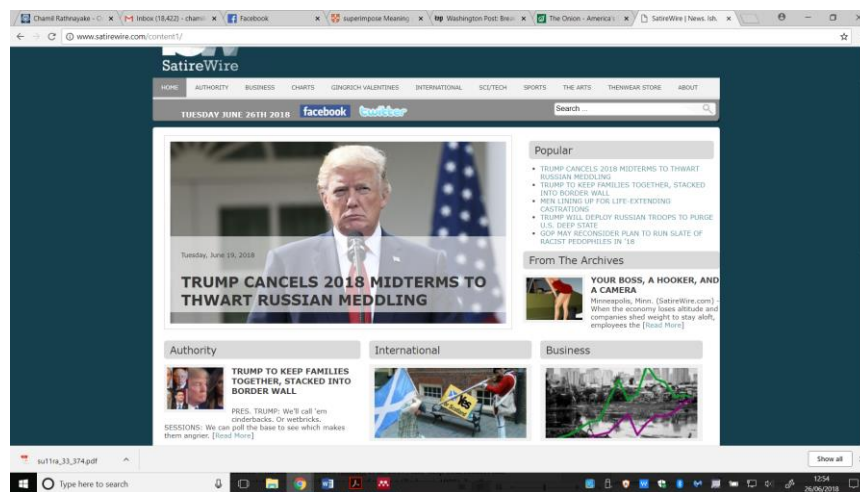
Perplexity arising from exposure to post-truth satire, at least to some extent, results from the use of exisiting frames of reference related to 'a priori' genres, such as news, to interpret fabricated stories. This superimposition is triggered by the similarity in generic conventions used by conventional news outlets and the publishers of fake satire. For instance, as convetional news is expected to report real-phenomena, the audience is supposed to take them at their face value and act upon them. Superimposition of this expectation upon post-truth content results in perplexity. Figure 1 shows the similarity of home pages between The

Guardian, an outlet representing the a-priory genre news and the home page of the post-truth

outlet SatireWire. This shows that the absence to stylistic clues that help delineate the

boundary between news and post-truth satire causes confusion among readers.

Figure 1: Appearance of Home Pages (The Guardian and SatireWire)

(a) The Guardian home page

(b) SatireWire home page

The above issue can be addressed by setting genre conventions for post-truth satire

since genres can help both readers and writers by setting expectations and providing models

of writing (Todorov, 1990). Scholarly work that can help develop genre conventions can help

enable proper reactions among the members of the audience, such as expecting, rejecting and

accepting (Das, 2012). Value of such academic work is high, especially because of the

increasing expansion of post-truth satirical news outlets (e.g., *The Onion*, *ClickHole*, *The Daily Mash, NewsThump*, *Satire Wire*, and *Duffel Blog*) and their outreach across the world. In the following section, I will propose a conceptual foundation to develop stylistic conventions for post-truth new media satire. In particular, I will make two propositions that justify identification of post-truth satire as a genre.

Boundary Delineation: Stylistic Conventions for Post-Truth Satire

Beer's (2013) work stresses three aspects of genre delineation: 1) imagining genres in contexts of cultural fragmentation in which high amount of boundaries are drawn and redrawn, 2) identifying, contextualizing, and drawing boundaries around emerging genres, and 3) boundary delineation around a priori genres. Though Beer treats these three elements separately, post-truth genre development is a blend of all these aspects as fabricated satire is an emergent genre that resembles an 'a priory' genre established in an increasingly dynamic cultural context.

Notions of primary and secondary genres (Bakhtin, 1986) can be seen as either ends of a continuum to understand new media genres. While genres dominated by simple speech acts, such as personal blog posts and vlogs, can be situated close to the primary end, a range of secondary genres (e.g., online novels, news reports, short films) resemble complex secondary genres. Fabricated satire can be situated as a relatively complex secondary genre of post-truth content that resembles compositional forms and styles used by mainstream news outlets. Genres are hybrid in their very nature (Primo et al., 2013), and fabricated satire, as practised by pseudo news outlets, is a hybrid between fake news and conventional journalistic reporting. The 'news' reports published by those outlets include narratives often supported by images- a stylistic convention used in mainstream journalism. At first sight, readers may perceive them as conventional news websites. Believability of fabricated stories in their face
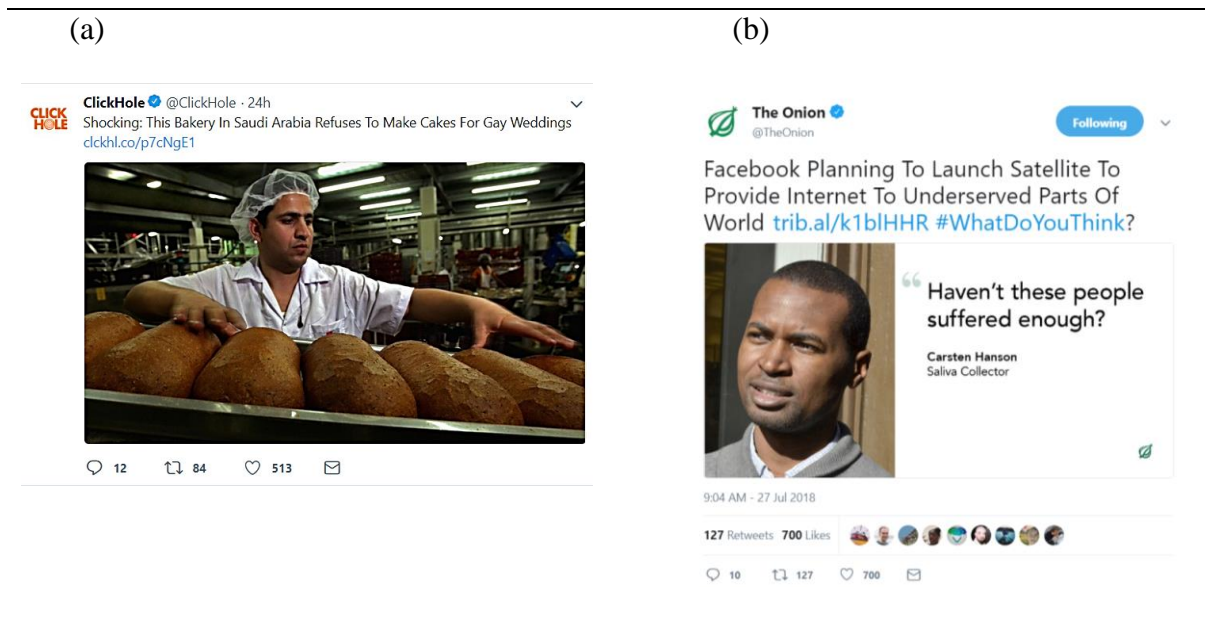
value is a barrier to developing an interpretive frame of reference as it hides the 'fakeness', the core interpretive property that post-truth readers should be aware of. This results in society being unable to codify post-truth information, turning them into nefarious content that can result in deception and perplexity. Viral spreading of fake content through social media can exacerbate the issue since, as Fife (2016) noted, it separates content from its original venue where the satirical style is more explicit. This leads to the following proposition that needs to be established prior to the development of generic conventions.

Proposition 1: Online post-truth satirical "news" and social media paratexts used to distribute such content, such as tweets, can cause perplexity and deception.

Figure 2 shows two tweets that may result in deception and perplexity. Picture (a) on the left that includes the text "Shocking: This Bakery in Saudi Arabia Refuses To Make Cakes For Gay Weddings" may deceive some readers unless they are aware that ClickHole publishes satirical disinformation. Text on the second tweet (Figure 2-b) "Facebook Planning To Launch Satellite To Provide Internet To Undeserved Parts Of World" contains a message that may be easy to believe. This message can also be deceptive unless the reader notices the obviously fake title 'Saliva Collector' that is visible in the tweet.

I suggest two principles (explicit post-truth orientation and post-fact narratives) that can serve as genre conventions that can address this issue. These principles are based on the proposition that explicitness of fabrication invites critical reading of media texts. Table 1 provides definitions of each principle. The main function of these principles is to help producers to model their work as well as readers to form expectations regarding post-truth, thereby minimizing issues of interpretation.

Figure 2: Deception and Perplexity

(a)	(b)

Proposition 2: Readers' understanding of deep meanings embedded in fabricated

satire is predicated upon their ability to detect explicitness of fabrication.

Table 1: Proposed Conventions for Post-Truth Satire

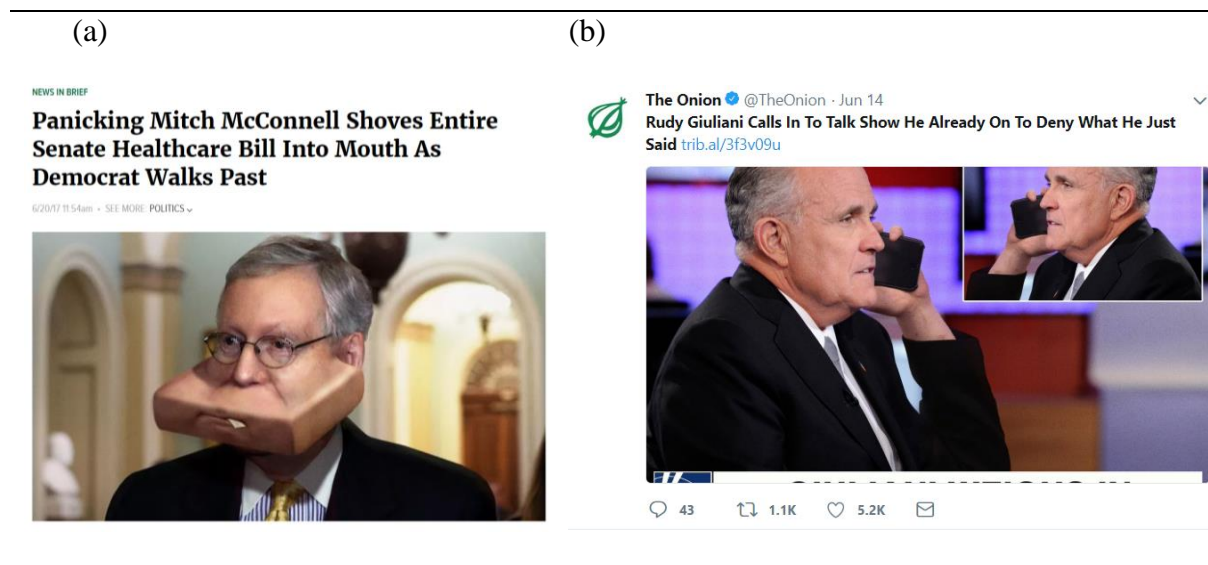| Convention	Definition
Explicit post-truth orientation	Intentional and explicit display of fabrication
Post-fact narratives	Construction of social or political truth using fabricated content related to facts

Explicit Post-Truth Orientation

'Explicit post-truth orientation'- intentional and explicit display of 'fakeness'-, is

based on the premise that readers do not take content from face value when fabrication is

noticeable (proposition 2 above). This does not mean that the content should be designed in a

way that it enables members of the audience to understand the writer's intent. Instead, it

should open the span of interpretation, pushing audience beyond merely taking content from what is on the surface. This situates fabricated content in the realm of post-truth- a form of new media content that is not based on verifiable facts. Figure 2 provides examples for explicit post-truth orientation. The first example (Figure 2-a), an article entitled "panicking Mitch McConnel shoves entire senate healthcare bill into mouth as democrat walks past" shows a fabricated image of the politician with the bill in his mouth. This image is 'photoshopped' enough to detect, or at the very least suspect, fabrication. The second image (Figure 2-b) is also explicit about fabrication as the event describes an individual who calls in to a talk show that he is already participating in.

Fabricated news is the adversary of fact-based objective journalism. However, the explicitness of fabrication, as suggested by explicit post-truth orientation, can address the issue of pseudo journalism turning into a malicious practice that, as Rutenberg (2016) noted, pollutes democracy. Scholars have argued that journalism should be taken as a performative discourse in which the audience is presented with what it claims to be real (e.g., Broersma, 2010) and see journalistic objectivity as a performance (e.g., Boudana, 2011). This argument questions journalism's ability claim absolute truth. Journalism's performative power derives from forms and style, rather than content (Broersma, 2010), and objectivity is characterized by the notions of practice, evaluation based on universal criteria, and openness to external criticism (Boudana, 2011). Accordingly, explicit post-truth content can be situated as part of a performance- a stylistic approach- used to construct a journalistic narrative. From a performative perspective, explicit post-truth orientation allows post-truth media outlets to reach dimensions of journalistic objectivity. This approach resembles, to a certain extent, a personal-ironic interpretation of social reality that Harbers and Broersma (2014) observed in narrative journalism.

Figure 2: Explicit Post-Truth Orientation

(a)

(b)

Post-Fact Narratives

Although post-truth orientation can minimize risks of misinterpretation, it does not answer the question of how fabricated content present narratives that can benefit society. I suggest that fabrication, as a stylistic approach, can be used to construct post-fact narratives relating to socio-political phenomena. Post-fact narratives can be characterized based on three elements: 1) fabrication occurs after fact or socio-political phenomena, 2) narrative exceeds boundaries of fact reporting, and 3) constructs an element of truth. Thus, post-fact truth can be defined as 'constructed truth' based on intentionally fabricated facts relating to real-world phenomena. The hyper-real stylistic approach used by The Onion can serve as a stylistic template for post-fact story development. Figures 3 provide examples for articles that present post-fact truth that critique acts of the current and the previous U.S. presidents. The first article (Figure 3-a) titled "Trump unveils sprawling new presidential retreat where he can escape from stresses of Mar-A-Lago" is a satirical statement, 'finding break from a break', that questions the appropriateness of President Trump's holidays at the Mar-A-Lago resort during the first few months in his tenure as the president. The article titled "departing Obama

tearfully shoos away loyal drone following him out of white house" (Figure 3-b) that portrays drones as White House pets critiques President Obama's use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

From a performative discourse point-of-view (Broersma, 2010), post-fact truth can serve as a powerful genre convention. This concept, however, is not the same as 'truthiness'- media constructed truth regardless of evidence to the contrary (Littau & Stewart, 2015) or a state of being felt to be true- coined by Stephen Colbert, the host of the satirical show *The Daily Show*. The function of post-fact truth constructed with an explicit post-truth orientation is, to a large extent, the reverse of truthiness as the objective of these two stylistic conventions is to ensure that the reader does not perceive the pseudo-facts used in the narratives as true. This is indeed a nuanced aspect of media consumption since the fabrication invites further interpretation, and as Combe (2015, p.306) notes "[n]o matter how Universal-seeming, any verity is a contrivance and a construction fashioned from a particular set of circumstances."

Figure 2: Post-fact Narratives

(a)   (b)

Conclusion

Pseudo news outlets function in a risky terrain in which they use stylistic conventions of the a-priori genre of mainstream news to publish disinformation. ClickHole mentions on its website (www.clickhole.com) that its goal is "to make sure that all of our content panders to and misleads our readers just enough to make it go viral." Duffblog uses the theme "The American Military's Most-Trusted News Source" on its website (www.duffelblog.com). This paper proposed generic conventions to transform the practice of pseudo news into a socially desirable practice that produces post-fact narratives that invite audience interpretation of social and political phenomena. Empirical work can be used to establish the validity of the propositions suggested.

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