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A catastrophic media failure? Russiagate, Trump and the illusion of truth: The dangers of innuendo and narrative repetition

Graham Majin
University of Kent, UK

Abstract

The journalistic coverage of Russiagate, between 2017 and March 2019, has been described as 'a catastrophic media failure'. Drawing on political and social psychology, this article seeks to enrich, and refresh, the familiar journalistic concepts of agenda-setting, framing and priming by combining them under the heading of the 'news narrative'. Using this interdisciplinary approach to media effects theory, Russiagate is considered in terms of the Illusory Truth Effect and the Innuendo Effect. These effects hypothesise that the more audiences are exposed to information, the more likely they are to believe it – even when they are told that the information is unreliable. As a specific example, we focus on the stance taken by BBC News – which has an obligation to journalistic impartiality. We ask what implications arise from this analysis with regard to audience trust.

Keywords

Agenda-setting, BBC, fake news, framing, illusory truth effect, innuendo, media effects, news narrative, priming, pseudo-facts, psychology, Russiagate, Trump

> It was Napoleon, I believe, who said that there is only one figure in rhetoric of serious importance, namely, repetition. The thing affirmed comes by repetition to fix itself in the mind in such a way that it is accepted in the end as a demonstrated truth.
>
> Gustave Le Bon, The Crowd. 1896, 2001.

Corresponding author:
Graham Majin, Centre for Journalism, University of Kent, Chatham Maritime, Gillingham, Kent ME4 4AG, UK.
Email: glm30@kent.ac.uk

Introduction

We live in extraordinary times. For the past 2 years the President of the United States has been the subject of an enquiry which sought to establish whether or not he was an agent of the Russian state – whether or not he colluded with Russia in order to win the 2016 election. Each development, twist and turn of Robert Mueller's investigation was breathlessly reported by journalists around the world, as citizens waited for the verdict. In March this year came the denouement: there had been no collusion. In the Special Counsel's own words (Mueller, 2019): 'The evidence was not sufficient to charge that any member of the Trump Campaign conspired with representatives of the Russian government to interfere in the 2016 election' (p. 9). On a secondary matter, to what extent Trump had assisted, or obstructed, the enquiry, Mueller felt there was insufficient evidence to make a judgement. Thus Mueller (2019) 'did not draw ultimate conclusions about the President's conduct' (p. 182).

For scholars of journalism, the phenomenon of Russiagate poses a number of interesting questions. Some relate to the quality of the journalism we have witnessed, and the editorial decision-making processes of news organisations. For example, to what extent was coverage journalistically justified, salacious or politically partisan? In addition, what will the consequences of Russiagate be to audience trust? What are the mechanisms of media effects we have been witnessing? It is these latter questions that we will address here.

The chronology of Russiagate and the use of pseudo-facts

How many thousands of hours of airtime, how many printed articles, journalistic books, blogs and social media posts have been devoted to Russiagate? They are probably beyond counting, which makes accurate quantitative analysis difficult. Searching Google for 'Trump Russia Collusion' on 31 March 2019 throws up 82,900 results in the news category alone, and more than 1.4 million results on a web-wide search, but this is a crude imprecise measure.

The allegation that Trump had an improper relationship with the Russian state began circulating among journalists in late 2016, shortly after Trump won the presidential election. The allegations were contained in a dossier compiled by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele, and funded by the Democrat party. However, although a number of details contained in the dossier were leaked to the mainstream media, little was initially published because the allegations were unsubstantiated, and professional journalists recognised them as hearsay. The situation changed explosively on 10 January 2017 when the news website Buzzfeed published pages from the dossier which had been leaked to them. Buzzfeed (Bensinger et al., 2017) admitted that the allegations were 'unverified, and potentially unverifiable' but explained that they were

> Publishing the full document so that Americans can make up their own minds about allegations about the president-elect that have circulated at the highest levels of the US government.

How Americans were supposed to make up their own mind regarding 'unverifiable' accusations was not explained. Buzzfeed (Bensinger et al., 2017) placed the dossier online and quoted from it that

> Former top Russian intelligence officer claims FSB has compromised TRUMP through his activities in Moscow sufficiently to be able to blackmail him. According to several knowledgeable sources, his conduct in Moscow has included perverted sexual acts which have been arranged/monitored by the FSB.

After 11 January, with the story now in the public domain, the mainstream media felt increasingly justified in reporting allegations which they knew were unsupported by any confirmatory evidence. Often reports would come in the form of reporting the 'fact' that other news organisations had reported an unsubstantiated allegation. I will refer to this journalistic technique as generating 'pseudo-facts'. Pseudo-facts therefore allow a news organisation to circumvent journalistic norms of checking and objectivity. This technique enables a news organisation to report something for which they lack any evidence, because they can claim they are only reporting someone else's report. Thus, for example, in the United Kingdom, the *Daily Mirror* reported (Robson and Sassoon, 2017):

> Donald Trump arranged for a group of prostitutes to urinate on the Moscow hotel bed where the Obamas had slept, according to sensational reports in the US. The President-elect engaged in 'perverted conduct' because he 'hates Barack and Michelle Obama, it is claimed. The lurid detail is contained in a dossier allegedly written by a retired British MI6 spy for Trump's political opponents.

The Mirror added the qualifier, 'None of the claims have been independently verified'.

The danger with pseudo-facts is that the audience tends only to hear the allegation. The audience also notes that the allegation is being reported by a trustworthy, reputable news source as if it were fact. The qualification is not heard. This is because, as we will see, the way audiences read (decode) media messages is largely determined by powerful psychological mechanisms. What journalists say, is neither the same as what audiences hear, nor what they understand.

Mainstream news organisations, such as the BBC, now felt the story was fair game. For example, BBC's Paul Wood (2017), on 12 January, revealed that he had known about the dossier allegations in late 2016, but the BBC had refused to report them. However, now that Buzzfeed had published the material, the BBC felt it could. Why it was now judged editorially acceptable to publish the accusations, when only hours before they had been viewed as dangerously unreliable, was not explained:

> The Washington political research company that commissioned his report showed it to me during the final week of the election campaign. The BBC decided not to use it then, for the very good reason that without seeing the tape – if it exists – we could not know if the claims were true. The detail of the allegations were certainly lurid. The entire series of reports has now been posted by BuzzFeed.

Publication of the allegations opened the floodgates to a deluge of comment, opinion and speculation. If the allegations were true, then what, journalists wondered, might also be true? For example, *The New York Times*, in an op ed entitled 'Donald Trump: Kremlin Employee of the Month?', speculated that Trump might be a Russian agent and asked its readers (Kristof, 2017a), 'Is our new president a Russian poodle?'

While, a few weeks later, the paper was grimly opining (Kristof, 2017b), 'There's a Smell of Treason in the Air'. Nicholas Kristof told readers that if it was true that Trump had

> Colluded with a foreign power so as to win an election. To me that would amount to treason.

The next significant development was the appointment, on 17 May, of Special Counsel Robert Mueller to investigate the allegations. In a wide-ranging brief, Mueller was authorised, by the acting Attorney General Rod Rosenstein (2017) to investigate

> Any links and/or coordination between the Russian government and individuals associated with the campaign of President Donald Trump; and (ii) any matters that arose or may arise directly from the investigation.

The appointment of Mueller brought much needed legitimacy to the reportage. The media could henceforth justify repeating the accusations of Russian-Trump collusion in the context of genuine facts arising from the enquiry. For example, a number of individuals with links to Trump were arrested and prosecuted during the course of the enquiry. One of them, Michael Cohen, Trump's former personal lawyer, was sentenced to 3 years in prison for tax evasion, making false statements to financial institutions, illegal campaign contributions and making false statements to Congress. However Cohen's crimes, however reprehensible, were peripheral to the central issue of Trump and Russia. Cohen was prosecuted because his misdeeds arose incidentally from the investigation. What is noteworthy to scholars of journalism is that the media reporting frequently obscured this distinction. For example, BBC News reported that (Zurcher, 2018a)

> Cohen is the first member of Mr Trump's inner circle to be jailed over the special counsel's inquiry into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

Because of the way the BBC's story is written, the audience is likely to hear something quite different, namely that 'Cohen is the first member of Trump's circle to be jailed *for* Russian meddling'. Having sketched the factual landscape, let us consider how these psychological processes function.

The theoretical framework

Media effects, how journalistic messages are processed by the 'black box of the human mind' are central to, and underpin, any discussion of journalism. Despite this, it may be argued that the psychological mechanisms involved are poorly understood. As journalism scholars Seth Geiger and John Newhagen observed in 1993,

> Understanding how individuals process messages is central to any comprehensive theory of Communication. As self-evident as the statement may seem, the conceptualization and measurement of mass media effects have generally ignored message processing issues. (p. 42)

Geiger and Newhagen's call to arms prompted a boom in research into how audiences read the messages of journalism. By 2003, Annie Lang (2003) could note that

> A number of new theories have developed recently that attempt to explain media and their impacts through psychological models and processes.

This process continues to evolve. For example, contemporary Journalism Studies has begun to embrace elements of cognitive psychology under the soubriquet of the emotional, or affective turn. This move, which is rapidly gaining traction through the work of scholars such as Zizi Papacharissi (2015) and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2018), borrows from the work of psychologists who, in the past decade, have become more focused on the role of emotion in human cognition. Thus, as the psychologist Susanna Stone (2014: 374) observes, the emotional turn in the social sciences is, in reality, a cognitive turn, because it reflects a pre-existing trend in psychology. There is therefore a rich academic literature in cognitive, social and political psychology which is available to scholars of journalism.

An ambiguous triptych – Agenda-setting, framing and priming

Let us begin by recognising a familiar triptych of theoretical concepts: agenda-setting, framing and priming. I shall argue that, although this family of ideas is well established it suffers from conceptual overlap. In other words the concepts, though entirely sound, have become victims of their own success. Consequently, I shall argue for a simpler, umbrella concept – the news narrative.

Agenda-setting theory was pioneered by the journalists and academics, Maxwell McCoombs and Donald Shaw. McCombs and Shaw studied US presidential campaigns during the 1960s and 1970s and noted the relationship between the issues most discussed by the media, and the issues voters said were most important. McCombs and Shaw concluded that journalism has the power to define the boundaries of the conversations by setting the agenda. As McCombs (2003) explains,

> The power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. (p. 1)

As the American political academic Bernard Cohen (1963) famously summarised,

> The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. (p. 13)

There is a large body of academic literature dealing with agenda-setting theory. For example, Wayne Wanta and Mariam Alkazemi (Wanta, 2017: 1) describe how agenda-setting theory has 'been the focus of hundreds of studies over the years', has evolved into six distinct branches of academic enquiry and remains extremely influential.

The concept of journalistic framing is identified with the work of the social psychologist Erving Goffman and his 1974 book *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization*

of Experience. Goffman saw frames and frameworks as cognitive tools which have evolved to help people deal with the 'astoundingly complex' world. Thus, complex events are simplified into easy-to-understand 'schemata of interpretation' and into easy-to-understand frames of reference.

The influential journalism scholar Gaye Tuchman (1978: ix) borrowed from Goffman and argued that journalists construct reality for audiences by controlling, or setting, 'The frame in which citizens discuss public events'. The success and popularity of media framing theory was such that by 1993 the media scholar Robert Entman (1993) could note with dismay that framing theory had become an ambiguous and 'scattered conceptualization':

> A literature review suggests that framing is often defined casually, with much left to an assumed tacit understanding of reader and researcher. (p. 52)

Ten years later, framing theory had evolved in complexity, such that the theorist Bertram Scheufele (2004: 402) could summarise,

> Several definitions of 'frame' and 'framing' share a number of assumptions. Frames are seen as patterns of interpretation through which people classify information in order to handle it efficiently.

Priming, the third concept in the triptych, was formulated in a 1982 paper by the political scientist Shanto Iyengar and his colleagues. Iyengar et al. (1982) admitted that the concept of priming was 'very close' to that of agenda-setting:

> By attending to some problems and ignoring others, media may also alter the standards by which people evaluate government. We call this 'priming'. (p. 849)

During the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of priming stimulated an extensive body of academic literature. For example, the journalist and academic David Domke and his colleagues, saw priming effects as functioning like a modern morality play. They argued that priming creates heroes and villains, and influences audience perception of the moral and ethical qualities of political actors. Thus, journalism (Domke, 1998: 55) primes audiences to idolise or demonise:

> Primarily conceived in terms of morals and rights, [priming] is likely among certain voters to activate thoughts which then may be applied in evaluating components of a candidate's integrity such as morality, decency, and compassion.

The problem with this triptych of concepts is then, not that they are flawed, but rather that they overlap in confusing ways. Each label refers to a large body of ideas, some of which complement one another and some of which do not. The communications scholar Dietram Scheufele (1999: 103) summarises the conceptual confusion wrought by differences in labelling and categorisation:

> Studies have operationalized framing in combination with other concepts such as agenda setting or priming. More recently, McCombs et al. (1997, 2009) suggested that not only are

> agenda setting and framing effects related, framing is, in fact, an extension of agenda setting . . . other studies have referred to agenda setting, priming, and framing without differentiation.

Because of the conceptual confusion and denseness that surrounds the triptych and its component ideas, I propose a simpler formula which I will refer to as the news narrative.

The news narrative

The concept of the news narrative is curiously understudied in academic journalism. This is partly because of the historic dominance of the triptych, and also perhaps because of a historic aversion to the concept of the 'grand narrative' or meta-narrative (Lyotard, 1979). It is unsurprising that scholars have recently attempted to escape the conceptual maze by seeking a simpler, streamlined concept. For example, attempts have been made by Buozis and Creech (2018) and Mihelj et al. (2009) to re-establish the news narrative in academic journalism. So far these attempts have been bedevilled by conceptual ambiguities of their own. Typically the phrase 'narrative' carries intellectual baggage from the genre of narrative journalism, and thus from literary theory (which unhelpfully erases the distinction between fiction and non-fiction). Hence, Mihelj and her colleagues understand the word as having literary theoretical inflections:

> Although the presence of narrative structures outside of fiction continues to arouse suspicion, few would disagree with the description of journalists as 'professional story-tellers of our age'.

However, although the news narrative may be unfamiliar to scholars of journalism, the concept is well established in other disciplines. For example, the political scientist Andrei Tsygankov sees the news narrative as transforming complex reality into an easy-to-understand pantomime with a cast of heroes and villains. Tsygankov (2017) argues that Russia is frequently portrayed by Western journalists as a sinister 'neo-Soviet autocracy', noting (p. 21) it has been 'long established' that 'the media play important social functions validating, developing, or challenging various collectively held myths, prejudices and stereotypes'.

The scholar of international relations, Alister Miskimmon and his colleagues see narratives, not simply as stories, but as nested, complex structures of explanation; a 'spectrum of persuasion'. Thus, individual narratives are convincing in so far as they fit the pre-existing, bigger picture. Contesting a strategic narrative successfully involves offering an alternative, plausible world view which exposes the opponent's narratives as mistaken, dishonest or fraudulent. Actors are therefore playing a game of power for high stakes. The battle of the narratives is, ultimately, a clash of views about how the world works, and about our many, long-held, comfortable assumptions. As Miskimmon (2014) puts it,

> Strategic narrative contestation may not simply be a matter of the elimination or subjugation of a rival's narrative, but the destruction of the conditions that make alternative narratives plausible, communicable, and intelligible. (p. 103)

I propose therefore that the concept of the news narrative referred to here will be intentionally flexible and non-technical. It does not replace, nor make obsolete, the

triptych. In the taxonomy of media effects, it sits above them; just as the word 'primate' it is a label for a taxon. Hence, in zoology, one may refer to the inclusive group of 'primates', without having to deal, for example, with the molecular differences between Sumatran and Bornean orangutans.

An essential feature of the news narrative is that it refers to a process of cause and effect. It may not be explicitly stated, but is always implied. This chain of causation is implied when we ask *why* has something happened, or when we ask what will the consequences of certain events be. The news narrative is therefore always essentially explanatory. Thus a news narrative is a one-stop shop, an epistemic shortcut, which conveys a bundle of different things. Typically a news narrative tells us, 'These are the facts, this is what they mean (how they fit together), this is why things are happening, this is what will probably happen next, and this is what you should think or do (the conclusion you should draw from the facts and the process of cause and effect)'.

The attraction of this formulation is that it allows us to disengage from the technical peculiarities of the triptych, and allows us to view the whole, emergent phenomena. This methodological approach is not dissimilar to that of the communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi, who sees media narratives as, 'a way for citizens to feel their way into a story'. Thus, Papacharissi (2015) refers to the 'chant' of the narrative – a cognitive brew made out of many complex, interacting ingredients. The chant

> Resembled the chorus in a Greek tragedy, typically tasked with repeating the same word or phrase over and over again, for emphasis, and to drive the main point home. The collective chorus . . . produced a narrative that blended news, fact, drama and opinion into one, to the point where telling one from the other was impossible and doing so missed the point.

Having established this broad concept of a media narrative, I want to (cautiously) flavour it with two important psychological concepts.

The illusory truth effect and the innuendo effect

The illusory truth effect is associated with the work of the psychologist Lynn Hasher and her colleagues. Hasher's research noted that people remember things that are often repeated, to which she added the insight that people also *believe* what is repeated to them. There is a relationship to the number of times a statement is repeated and how true it is perceived to be. Surprisingly, according to experimenters, even when people are told that their beliefs are founded on unreliable information, this does not alter the strength of their belief. As Hasher (1977) explained,

> Humans are profoundly sensitive to frequency . . . That is, the more often you hear that 50,000 people live in Greenland, even if you do so in contexts that are explicitly ambiguous or equivocal, the more certain you will become that indeed they do. (p. 108)

Following Hasher, the psychologists Lena Nadarevics and Edgar Erdfelder (Nadarevic, 2014) point out that the effect has 'important practical implications', not just for journalism, but also for 'political campaigns and marketing strategies' (p. 75).

According to the psychologist Lisa Fazio and her colleagues (2015), the illusory truth effect is best understood as a cognitive shortcut, an evolved heuristic response to uncertainty and complexity. In other words, it is easier and less effortful for us to trust the wisdom of the crowd (what is often heard), than to attempt to research something ourselves independently:

> Inferring truth from fluency often proves to be an accurate and cognitively inexpensive strategy, making it reasonable that people sometimes apply this heuristic without searching for knowledge. (p. 1000)

In a paper entitled *Fake news – Incorrect, but Hard to Correct*, the psychologists, Jonas De Keersmaecker and Arne Roets (2017: 110) note that 'the influence of incorrect information cannot simply be undone by pointing out that this information was incorrect'. It is the epistemic weight of repetition that tips the scales in its favour.

No smoke without fire – The innuendo effect

The final piece of the cognitive jigsaw we will consider is referred to by psychologists as the innuendo effect. The innuendo effect is particularly relevant to journalism. Indeed, much of the original research on innuendo focused on reputational damage produced by journalism.

The social psychologist Daniel Wegner (1984) defines innuendo as 'A statement about something combined with a qualifier about the statement' (p. 694). Wenger's research discovered that the innuendo effect is very powerful, and that 'people are remarkably insensitive to innuendo qualifiers'.

The use of innuendo by journalists is widespread. In tabloid journalism it might take the form of a sensational headline (say about a celebrity), followed by gossip and speculation, and then, at the end of the story, a brief denial or qualifier. The example (above) of the *Daily Mirror's* report on Trump cavorting with Russian prostitutes might be considered a good example. The innuendo effect means that audiences will often believe the allegation and ignore the qualifier. However, the news organisation can plead that it has treated the subject of the innuendo fairly (and protect itself from libel) because it added a qualifier.

In another paper, Wenger and his colleagues (1981: 823) hypothesised that the qualifier, on certain occasions, can even *add* to the power of the innuendo. This is because audiences might interpret the qualifier as an act of generosity, as if the journalist was trying to find something nice to say about an irredeemable villain:

> A qualifier seen as an act of benevolence on the part of the reporter, for example, should lead to greater innuendo effects than one seen as an act of self-protection against charges of libel.

The psychologist Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues argue that the innuendo effect should be seen in terms of the manipulation of audience belief. They argue (Gilbert et al., 1993: 231) that the mere act of reading and understanding an allegation necessarily involves also believing it. It is impossible therefore to read an allegation without triggering mental processes of belief:

> A denial is both an assertion and its negation, and the act of understanding the assertion includes a belief in the very thing that is being negated or denied.

The psychologist David Bell (1997) refers to 'venomous innuendo' in which the motive is to 'smear the target of the innuendo' while disguising the intention behind a mask of truth-seeking, while other studies, such as Kervyn et al. (2012), stress the importance of context, that is, *how* information is presented. In other words, it is the totality of how a media message is constructed that counts, not merely the literal meaning of the words used. The effect is like talking to a friend about a mutual acquaintance, and accompanying a seemingly positive statement with a knowing look. In such a case, a comment like 'I think Jane is a really genuine, kind person' can convey precisely the opposite meaning. It is the context in which language is used (the look and tone of voice) that expresses irony and insincerity. As the British linguist Deirdre Wilson (2017) explains,

> A conclusion [is] deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone.

In the same way, a news report describing how Donald Trump cavorted with Russian prostitutes, followed by the qualifier 'this is unverified' will often lead audiences to understand that the qualifier is not sincerely meant. Just as if it has been delivered with a knowing look, a nod and a wink. This becomes clearer if we consider the fact that no news organisation would ever publish a headline stating, 'The following story is unverified gossip and probably not true'. The implication being that audiences will assume the news organisation *believes* the story to be true, and intends it to be believed. Consequently, the audience will infer that the qualifier is meant to be ignored. Let us now climb back over the interdisciplinary fence from social and political psychology, to Journalism Studies.

Russiagate – Power without responsibility?

Two days after news broke that Trump was not guilty of collusion with Russia, *The Wall Street Journal's* Sean Davis (2019) reflected, under the headline 'A Catastrophic Media Failure':

> Robert Mueller's investigation is over, but questions still abound. Not about collusion, Russian interference or obstruction of justice, but about the leading lights of journalism who managed to get the story so wrong, and for so long.

In terms of the analysis offered here, Davis is arguing that, between January 2017 and March 2019, the media promoted the narrative that President Trump was an agent of the Russian state. Audiences were led to believe that most of the world's journalists genuinely believed this narrative to be true. And yet they were wrong. This analysis suggests two corollaries:

1. Audiences will conclude that journalists misled them accidentally and were thus incompetent. In which case, audiences will conclude that they should trust journalists less.

2. Audiences will conclude that journalists deliberately misled them. In which case, audiences will also conclude that they should trust journalists less.

Journalist Matt Taibbi, author of the anti-Trump book *Insane Clown President*, shares Davis' analysis that Russiagate has done serious damage to journalism. Taibbi (2019a) compares the way the media uncritically accepted the credibility of the Steele dossier, with the way journalists accepted Tony Blair's 2003 'dodgy dossier', which was used to justify the Iraq War:

> Either Trump is a compromised foreign agent, or he isn't. If he isn't, news outlets once again swallowed a massive disinformation campaign, only this error is many orders of magnitude more stupid than any in the recent past, WMD included. Honest reporters like ABC's Terry Moran understand: Mueller coming back empty-handed on collusion means a 'reckoning for the media'.

Taibbi argues that for some news organisations, Russiagate was an irresistible temptation to boost circulation or ratings by offering a diet of innuendo and partisan political narrative. Taibbi (2019b) singles out Rachel Maddow whose MSNBC show 'transformed into the "Trump is a Russian Agent" show, in which each night a new piece of the conspiracy would be stitched into view for audiences':

> The Russia story helped make Rachel Maddow the #1 cable news host in the country in 2017, smashing her Obama-era ratings. Her ascent continued through early 2019, when she eclipsed 3 million viewers for the first time.

Journalist Caitlin Johnstone (2019) also argues that the world's media were reckless in uncritically promoting a narrative which proved to be little more than a false conspiracy theory:

> You can understand, then, how a populace who is consuming repetitive assertions, innuendo, and incriminating questions on a daily basis through the screens that they look at many times a day could be manipulated into believing that Robert Mueller would one day reveal evidence which will lead to the destruction of the Trump administration. The repetition leads to belief, the belief leads to trust.

Donald Trump meanwhile lost no time in rubbing salt in journalism's wounds. In a series of Tweets he attacked the fake news to which he claimed he had been subjected. He called, for example, for Pulitzer Prizes to be returned (Trump, 2019b):

> So funny that The New York Times & The Washington Post got a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage (100% NEGATIVE and FAKE!) of Collusion with Russia – And there was No Collusion! So, they were either duped or corrupt? In any event, their prizes should be taken away by the Committee!

While at a rally at Grand Rapids Michigan (Trump, 2019c) he told supporters, 'the collusion delusion is over' and accused the media of conspiring against him to manipulate public opinion:

> The crazy attempt by the Democrat Party, and the fake news media right back there [points], and the deep state to overturn the results of the 2016 election have failed . . . This was nothing more than a sinister effort to undermine our historic election victory and sabotage the will of the American people . . . The Russia witch-hunt was a plan by those who lost the election to try and illegally regain power . . . with an elaborate hoax.

This pro-Trump counternarrative was taken up by Lou Dobbs, on Fox News. Dobbs explained that (Trump, 2019a)

> They tried to overthrow the Trump presidency and our republic in what has amounted to now the biggest political scandal in American history. It's about to get larger.

A more measured analysis came from Tim Murtaugh, the Whitehouse's Director of Communications. In a letter sent to TV producers, Murtaugh called for 'introspection':

> The American people have been bombarded by these accusations, through the media, for two long years. They have been told that their legitimately elected president had colluded with Russia – a claim proven to be false. At this point, there must be introspection from the media who facilitated the reckless statements.

News organisations responded by pleading innocence and arguing that they were simply doing their job. For example, CNN president Jeff Zucker explained (Chozick, 2019),

> We are not investigators. We are journalists, and our role is to report the facts as we know them, which is exactly what we did, Mr. Zucker said in an email. A sitting president's own Justice Department investigated his campaign for collusion with a hostile nation. That's not enormous because the media says so. That's enormous because it's unprecedented.

The difficulty with this defence is that it offers a false dichotomy. It disingenuously suggests that the choice was either to ignore the story completely, or to promote a single narrative over a 2-year period. It suggests there was no middle road which could have been taken – for example, making greater use of the journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality. Such a middle road, it may be argued, would have placed more emphasis to the truth-telling role of journalism. In this model journalism is a process of evidence-based, critical investigation. Its purpose is to supply reliable information on which citizens can base their decisions and opinions. To be useful, this information should be accurate and impartial – in a word 'true'. Underpinning this endeavour therefore is the motive to be truthful. As Jackie Harrison (2005) observes, 'News has an orientation towards truth through a truthful account of contemporary events' (p. 3). Or, to borrow from the philosopher Bernard Williams (2004), the authority of journalists 'must be rooted in their truthfulness' (p. 14).[1]

Journalistic impartiality: Russiagate and the BBC

It is difficult to assess these issues because different news organisations will have different commercial and ideological goals, while at the same time insisting that their 'real goal' is the truth-telling function of journalism. For example, Fox News and MSNBC

may be motivated to supply pro-Trump and anti-Trump narratives to their respective audiences. It may be helpful, therefore, to focus on the journalism of a single news organisation – one which unambiguously positions itself as non-partisan and apolitical. In this context, the BBC may be considered an appropriate choice. This is not to naively claim that BBC journalists possess supernatural gifts of objectivity, merely that it should be easier to reflect on the use of narrative repetition and innuendo in the journalism of a public service broadcaster which claims to be non-partisan.

Let us first note the regulatory framework. In the United States, journalists are not under any formal obligation to report news impartially. The First Amendment protects free speech, freedom of the press and consequently the right to report the news partially. In the United Kingdom the situation is different. While newspapers are free to produce partial, partisan news, TV and radio news are not. OFCOM's (2017) Broadcasting Code states that

> News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.

The BBC, which is publicly funded via the license fee, states that it aspires to the highest standards of journalistic impartiality. For example, speaking just 3 days before the Mueller verdict, Lord Hall (2019), the Director General of the BBC, described impartiality as a 'core value' and vowed to report all sides of news stories, 'without fear or favour – no matter how inconvenient they might prove to be':

> It's fundamental to our mission to make sure all views and voices are heard . . . It's too easy today to listen to just one side of the debate, and not test ourselves against where others are coming from. It's too easy to end up insulating ourselves from the experience of those we feel distant from.

The BBC's coverage of Russiagate was extensive. For example, during July 2018 alone, BBC Online published 183 stories which included the words 'Trump' and 'Russia'.[2] That's an average of almost six stories per day, which of course excludes all broadcast output (TV and radio). A search of the BBC website for the word 'Trump' returns 886,000 results, whereas a search for 'Trump AND Russia' returns 228,000 results – a ratio of 25 per cent. A similar search, restricted to September 2018, returns 96 and 24 results, respectively.[3] This is also a 25 per cent ratio – suggesting that approximately a quarter of all BBC online stories which referred to President Trump, also mentioned Russia – at least during certain months. While this may not be fully representative of all BBC output, it is a useful indicative sample. In sum, as the corporation itself admitted (Vaidyanathan, 2019),

> It was more gripping than any box set we could get our hands on. Over two years, the investigations into Russian interference in the US election, and whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Kremlin, delivered daily developments and drama worthy of anything seen in House of Cards.

Is it possible to detect whether the BBC's coverage was coloured by a particular narrative? Specifically, is there evidence of journalistic innuendo and illusion of truth effect?

I will argue that there is ample *prima facie* evidence to suggest the BBC did fall into the trap of narrative repetition, along with the frequent reporting of pseudo-fact, and opinion presented as fact. For example, in an article entitled *Russia: The 'cloud' over the Trump White House* (BBC, 2018), audiences were reminded that

> Buzzfeed published a dossier compiled by Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence official and Russia expert, which alleged that Moscow had compromising material on the then-president-elect, making him liable to blackmail. Among the various memos in the dossier was an allegation that Mr Trump had been recorded by Russian security services consorting with prostitutes at a Moscow hotel.

The article contained brief qualifiers such as 'Mr Trump dismissed the claims as fake news' (BBC, 2018). This example, because it repeats allegations at length, can be considered innuendo-laden reporting, which triggers the illusion of truth effect. As we have seen, the presence of very short qualifiers does nothing to disrupt this effect.

Elsewhere, for example in January 2019, the prestigious BBC TV *Newsnight* programme reported that Donald Trump had instructed his former lawyer 'to lie' on his behalf. The story was based entirely on repeating allegations from the Buzzfeed website. This enabled the BBC to report pseudo-fact. *Newsnight* reported (Unger, 2019),

> The inquiry into possible collusion with Russia by the Trump campaign has yielded an allegation which has been called 'one of the most serious to date'. Online news magazine Buzzfeed has reported that Donald Trump asked his former lawyer Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about plans to build a Trump Tower in Moscow.

Newsnight then ran a video report, followed by a studio interview to 'assess these latest allegations'. The interviewee was Craig Unger, author of *House of Trump, House of Putin: The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia.* Unger's assessment did not question the allegations, but instead amplified them. At the very bottom of the link the BBC added the brief qualifier (Unger, 2019):

> Mr Mueller's office said the report by Buzzfeed was 'not accurate'.

This is a noteworthy qualifier because it undermines the legitimacy of the entire story, and exposes the Buzzfeed allegation as lacking credibility. It begs the question of why the BBC chose to run a story it knew, from official sources, to be 'not accurate'?

In another example the BBC reported a series of 'explosive' allegations contained in a new book, Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House.* The BBC provided analysis from its North American reporter Anthony Zurcher (2018b) to accompany the book's claims, the first of which was that

> According to the book, former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon thought a meeting between Donald Trump Jr and a group of Russians was 'treasonous'.

This reduces to pseudo-fact because what the BBC is reporting is that the opinion of an author, and the opinion of a former Trump advisor, is that Donald Trump was 'treasonous'. To this hearsay, Zurcher provides a third layer of opinion. For example (Zurcher, 2018b),

> In just a few sentences, Bannon manages to detonate a bomb under the White House's efforts to downplay the significance of that fateful June meeting in Trump Tower and their attempt to dismiss Robert Mueller's inquiry as a partisan witchhunt.

The lengthy article is accompanied by a single qualifier: The White House said the book was full of 'false and misleading accounts'.

This sort of journalism makes it very difficult for the BBC to avoid the charge that it is guilty of promoting the narrative that Trump was guilty of Russian collusion. As we have noted, the psychological mechanisms at work, when audiences are presented with a persistent journalistic narrative, is to ignore the qualifiers.

Finally, let us reflect on how the BBC responded to the news that the Mueller enquiry had found no evidence of Russian collusion. The BBC's flagship radio news programme *Today* carried the story in its prestigious 7.50 a.m. slot. BBC presenter Justin Webb interviewed the corporation's North America Editor John Sopel who told listeners that the affair was now concluded. In Sopel and Webb's (2019) words, 'I think America is going to move on'.

Webb, referring to Taibbi's WMD analysis, asked Sopel,

> Is this a reckoning, a moment of reckoning, for the media as well? I've seen it described as a 'weapons of mass destruction' moment, in other words that they bought into a narrative that they really shouldn't have done?

To which Sopel replied using Zucker's argument that the media were simply reporting facts:

> I think it would have been very difficult for any section of the media not to report on the fact that a special counsel had been appointed, that some people had been charged and put in prison as a result of things that they did. That is the media doing its job and holding power to account.

What is noteworthy here is the absence of any reference to the 'other half' of the story; that is, the pro-Trump counternarrative that Russiagate was a Mccarthyesque witch-hunt based on a hoaxical dossier. The BBC's approach is to frame this out. In Sopel's words (Sopel and Webb, 2019), 'There's nothing to see here, let's move on'. A second observation is how the BBC distances itself from 'the media'. Webb's use of the third-person, as in, '*They* bought into a narrative that *they* really shouldn't', frames out the BBC's own role in promoting the Russiagate narrative, and absolves the corporation from the necessity of reflecting on its own reportage.

Discussion – A circular firing squad

Media effects, that is, how audiences read journalism, are complex, dynamic and imperfectly understood. This article has sought to streamline a familiar triptych of ideas to create a more user-friendly concept; the news narrative. This concept has then been enriched with insights from cognitive psychology relating to the innuendo and illusion of truth effects. Doing this, however, creates its own methodological questions, such as how news

narratives can be identified, and issues arising from subjective qualitative analysis.[4] Nonetheless, the analysis presented here is offered as a useful tool for future researchers.

Speaking shortly after the Mueller verdict (though not about it), former president Barack Obama gave a speech in which he warned that intolerance of uncomfortable views is to retreat from democracy and harm ourselves. Obama (2019) described the process as self-defeating in the long term because it creates a 'circular firing squad':

> One of the biggest challenges we all have . . . is how do we remain true to our values and our principles while recognising that . . . you never get 100% of what you want. Because somebody else is going to have a slightly different set of interests, or a slightly different set of values.

Applying Obama's metaphor to journalism, we might ask: Did media coverage of Russiagate amount to a circular firing squad? Were the world's journalists seduced by the easy charms of reporting pseudo-fact and innuendo? Did doing so generate an illusion of truth which consumed journalists as well as their audiences? Most importantly, what will the long-term cost be to audience trust, of the sustained repetition of a news narrative which turned out to be untrue?

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ORCID iD

Graham Majin https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8151-5134

Notes

1. Given space constraints, I am not able to discuss the philosophical issues involved here.
2. Google search term: site: bbc.co.uk 'Trump AND Russia' 1–31 July 2018. Search conducted on 14 July 2019.
3. Bing search terms: site: bbc.co.uk 'Trump' and 'Trump AND Russia'. Searches conducted on 14 July 2019.
4. For a discussion, see Altheide (2013).

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Author biography

Graham Majin was a broadcast journalist and senior producer for more than 20 years – 14 at BBC News. After leaving the BBC he set up his own media production company. His research explores how the concept of journalistic truth is understood differently by audiences, practitioners and theorists. Graham's approach crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries and draws on media theory, cognitive psychology, philosophy and intellectual history. His research aspires to cast new light on the current debate surrounding fake news and, more generally, on issues of media literacy. He lectures at Bournemouth University.