Thanks for having me here today and allowing me to step in for my colleague.

I must begin this discussion with a brief disclaimer apologizing and explaining my suitability for this talk. My focus is such that I can only attack the question of so-called fake news from a handful of optics. In the first case, I am not a psychologist so I cannot say exactly why people are motivated to create and share fake news, nor why people believe or don’t believe it. I am not a military strategist so I cannot discuss the geopolitical machinations that most likely are contributing to the proliferation of fake news — but I’m sure we will continue to learn more and more about this as the days, weeks, months, years progress. And I am not a political theorist so I can’t hazard to guess what will be or what should be the response of public officials to the advance of these stories.

However, I can do two things. One, I can outline some observations on social media firms, the essential distribution backbone of fake news, considering how historically their executives have structured them and why this arrangement transformed them into complicit partners in widespread misinformation. And, two, I can try and re-adapt some of the tools of what we call in media studies critical theory, an important methodology that can be used to address some of the unique challenges that fake news presents for institutions, such as the university and journalism, dedicated to the production of useful truths.

In the first case, fake news doesn’t exist without the massive proliferation of social media which has become the place where Americans get half of their news information and which has grown with the concomitant decline of the American newspaper. And these stories move so quickly on these platforms because of these platforms outward promise of complete personalization and their inward economic motivations.

Most people know by now that the primary economic engine of social media is advertising, but advertising
in a manner unique to the present moment. In traditional mass media systems like newspapers and
television it is extra consumption labor that media industries sell to interested clients. These older,
established businesses run on the hope that a consumers’ attention drips over into the margins of the
broadsheet or into the commercial break, which in turn can be packaged and resold to clients.

In new and social media systems, firms base the structure instead on extra production labor, in other words
we actually make and do things online — we snap chat, we text, we post, we share, we email — and it is
those things that we spend our time on that give social media platforms the very stuff to sell ads on and
against. But more importantly, the digital exhaust that we burn off in the process of talking with our friends,
collaborating with peers, or just being your most full self, is aggregated and collated — a very easy thing for
knowledgeable people to do in a post-big-data world — and it is used to increasingly captivate our attention,
giving us content we have been pre-judged to respond to, and to sell this attention the highest bidder in an
automated market of rapidly dissecting demographics. Facebook scans your likes and google dredges your
gmails in order to sell your attention to the highest bidder. And with the hemorrhaging of viewership and
readership for traditional mass media, interest in these hyper-targeted ad buys, cross-sectioned by age,
gender, class, region, hobbies, have grown tremendously. Last year the digital ad market swelled to a $60B
industry and was absolutely dominated by just two firms, Google and Facebook, who accounted for $30B
and $8B of that pie respectively. And the entire financial premise behind these social media firms is based
on the data-driven fragmentation and specification of users as well as the construction of tailored worlds
designed to lock in engagement. This is the sell to interested ad buyers. And the proliferation of fake news
becomes an unintended consequence that the industry is ill-equipped to address — in fact it’s against their
own financial interests to do so.

This gets to the great irony that begins David Fincher’s and Aaron Sorkin’s deeply critical portrait, The Social
Network. The film, ostensibly a biopic about the young man who created the greatest tool for human
connection — remember Facebook now has about 2B users — begins with Mark Zuckerberg pushing away
his current romantic partner because of his own single-minded obsession to gain entry into one of Harvard’s exclusive social clubs. Not only is this unflattering introduction to the flawed character, but it also suggests something even more deep about the so-called “social network,” that it was both built in the spirit of and is economically fueled by isolation, separation and exclusivity. The film’s radical thesis is that Facebook was not created to facilitate open communication, but to foment division.

In the same spirit we can consider Facebook’s famous algorithm, edgerank, which determines what we see on our walls. The order of what any individual user sees is a mixture of time of the post, affinity of the poster to wall and the so-called weight of the post in terms of likes, shares, etc. In other words, Facebook creates a user- personalized vision of the world by isolating interests, building demographic data points, and cordonning off attention. This algorithm became an accelerant in which technologically and economically isolated hyper-niches could ramp up the edgerank of any potentially fake story, no matter how seemingly false or misleading. In fact, the more such a story played into pre-established interests and small group preoccupations, the more likely it would be bounced up the walls of both tightly linked and eventually loosely attached individual users.

Moreover, it is arguable that social media borders on asociality not only in its technical and financial protocols, but also in its role in the larger economy. Certainly a 2/3’s domination of the market of digital advertising by only two firms could not be considered a free and open market in the eyes of most traditional economists. Moreover, social media seems to be a clear example so-called market failure in which competitive markets beget great financial rewards for owners, but lack the residual social benefits, or externalities, that we were all supposed to enjoy per Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” — in fact, a potentially misinformed public could be calculated as a social drain on resources, a sort of mental pollution. And, of course, there are policy correctives to address these perennial problems: we could attack big search, or big data with anti-trust
lawsuits, but the success of such an effort is unlikely in our de-regulatory telecommunications world; we could excite alternatives through public innovation spending, but such an impulse is unlikely thanks to threatened austerity across our government; or we could incite labor reform, insisting on reimbursement for productive work that social media users-laborers do, but such a notion is probably too utopian and strange to gain much traction. Thus, we are left with a dominant and growing industry riddled with false promises and unintended consequences and an industry that because of its very structure has been slow to remedy itself. As long as user base is strong, fake news will likely be a problem on these platforms, from Facebook walls to Google search results.

Further, these trends have only been abetted by a sympathetic weakening of traditional journalism itself, victimized by both the creative destruction of the digital revolution, but even more so by political-economic and market reforms that have scrapped investigative reporting budgets, have drastically reduced the number of news outlets and have removed artificial barriers that traditionally protected news production from entertainment media. It is a strange irony that the Washington Post, one of the few remaining hard news sources in the US, operates from the coffers of Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, a central figure in social media and e-commerce. In many respects, fake news merely fills the news hole that has been widening since the 1980s.

Now, culturally social media firms might also be organizationally hampered in their capacity address the proliferation of fake news because of a philosophical strand that runs through many of these firms. Many new and social media firms espouse a heady mix of a particular blend of neoliberalism that combines market freedom and international trade with Northern Californian information freedom and ostensible meritocracy, along with some other more problematic ingredients. Specifically many of these firms have relied on the best and worst elements of post-Fordist management practices in an effort to address the inherent riskiness and time sensitivity of their work. Post-Fordism dictates that workers make their own schedules and follow their own muses, but as a management practice it also deeply influences hiring
practices. Firms then rely on pre-skilled workers that necessitate no training or on-boarding, docile workers willing to put in extra time and without extraneous financial and familial obligations, and culturally proximate workers who fit right in with the “corporate culture.” As can be expected, and as evidenced in industry reports, post-Fordist hiring engenders an institutional disparity in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age which in turn results in a limited worldview in which difference and different voices are not traditionally heard. And sometimes this resistance to difference is encoded in company bylaws themselves as last week’s $37B IPO of Snapchat was proffered on the condition that new shares shall give no voting rights to investors. And difference is often alienating within the workforce itself, for example, leading several female employees to sue the tech-darling and experimental AR firm, Magic Leap, with a hostile workplace lawsuit last month.

I would argue that a parochial worldview celebrating a lack of oversight as a virtue onto itself has prevented new media companies making video games, computing hardware and social media platforms from taking seriously abuses of free speech including hate speech, doxing and willful misinformation. In this environment, a rare instance of accountability is itself instructive: last year the CEO of Reddit, Ellen Pao, after banning the practice of so-called “revenge porn,” also banned several subreddits for abusive speech, but after a resistant outcry among users, Pao was forced to resign. In other words any attempt to build accountability or responsibility in online communication is resisted, in this case, notably, to the ouster of an Asian American, female executive.

This line of thinking takes on hysterical proportions when considering the current dilemma of twitter. Once a darling of new media theorists and political thinkers, twitter resisted early purchase attempts by bigger fish, but now resides over a stagnating user base with no likely source of new income while all of the suitors for purchase, reportedly everyone from Salesforce to Disney, have rescinded their purchase offers. The immense cool off is the direct result of a sea change in twitter’s users and function and the way in which the platform has become a safe haven for all sorts questionable content, including fake news, which is
encouraged by the format as well as the possible negative brand consequences such a pairing could have — Mickey Mouse can’t be seen with Pepe the Frog. Organizationally twitter is being hoisted on their own petard. Not in the beginning nor in its period of tremendous growth did twitter’s leadership consider the consequences of alienating, offensive, or false speech — mostly likely because they weren’t the ones that were necessarily targeted by these missives nor did they adequately empathize with or even consider the potential victims of such attacks.

And still new media firms feign surprise when their platforms are hijacked by abusive or misleading content, or at the suggestion that something of their own creation could have a negative social consequence, albeit unintended. Last year Microsoft birthed a A.I. profile on twitter named Tay with the concept that by interacting with other users the robot could use machine learning to perfect her humanity and natural speech — to the surprise of no one except those working at Microsoft, Tay was taken down after 16 hours of life after she began to espouse the virtues of Adolf Hitler. She was merely echoing the worst of what the platform threw her way. The same disingenuous shock was mimed by Zuckerberg who in the hours after the 2016 election as he shrugged and told the New York Times that the idea that Facebook influenced the election was “a really crazy idea.”

As a takeaway to all of this, I can only suggest that social media firms have historically been both economically and organizationally blinded from the problem of content like fake news and thoroughly unable to deal with it in any substantial way. Mild correctives have recently been amended.

Both Google and Facebook did make efforts to prevent fake news from becoming partners in their advertising revenue sharing programs, changes which address economic incentives toward misinformation, but not capacity. Reportedly Facebook is also instituting a crowdsourced flagging and paid third-party fact checking protocol to “clean up” their walls — probably more scared of a twitter-like fate than any other motivation. Also both France and Germany have taken steps to force the hands of these platforms and to
partner with state or journalistic actors in advance of their own elections this year, fearful of their own potential Trumps. Whether or not these correctives address the core economic and cultural problems of social media remains to be seen. But what they seem to indicate is that it takes a substantial amount of pressure or criticism to attack the implicit catering if not support of fake news. So, we should probably rely less on institutional fixes to these systems and instead rely on our own critical capacity to analyze them.

So, how do we begin to criticize social media?

Given our understanding of the peculiarity, power and pervasiveness of the social media industry it is essential that we develop and re-develop a set of critical frameworks to address set of protocols and technologies that are dangerously receding into the background of our everyday experience. The outward face of social media is a facilitation of sharing, communicating and expressing oneself. It is the blank slate of social possibility offered to us with nothing perceivable in return. However, this is simply the ideology that occludes the political economic imbalance I’ve already suggested — or as Christian Fuchs put it, while we pursue social and cultural capital online, someone is making economic capital on our collective backs. What needs to be developed is a toolkit to talk about social media and the content that it passes along in critical way. The first step would be to understand the institutional logic of these firms, as I’ve tried to do in the proceeding.

A next good place to start might be to observe that social media is not a social space and it is not the new town center. The German philosopher and critical theorist Jurgen Habermas has spent the better part of his career discussing the essential importance of what he calls the public sphere, a place where individuals can meet and freely speak their mind contributing toward the progressive emancipation of humanity toward ever increasing freedom. For Habermas, places salons, coffeehouses and guild halls, where people could sit and reasonably talk were the incubators of modern democracy. The philosopher, too, cites the vital importance of a free press in this movement, pointing toward the centrality of print and postage breaks for
newspapers and pamphlets in revolutionary America. In essence these documents were material crystallizations of public thought. However, in the modern era Habermas bemoaned a re-feudalization of the public sphere as publicness, that is the ability to be seen and heard in public, was replaced with the power of publicity, the ability of only one person to be seen and heard and public. For example, this can be seen in the transition from deliberation to televised democracy and the cries of passivity and couch-potato-ism that went along with it. In this controversy, social media could have been a corrective, and perhaps often poses itself as one. However, social media probably is closer to what the same thinker later called the colonization of lifeworld with structure, the literal taking over by abstract systems of our social interactions, or the use of the bio political residue of our everyday lives as a way to generate private capital. We talk to one another; Facebook makes a dollar. We send an email; Google makes a dollar. But for Habermas there are two major steering mechanisms of this colonization, one being the reproduction of money, the other being the reproduction of power.

The question is then in what ways does social media in general and its facilitation of fake news specifically reproduce power? In media studies ideological critique has been the technique to mine the surface of media texts, to disclose the ulterior motives, to remove false consciousness, to reveal a deeper truths, and to expose will-to-power.

However, the proliferation of fake news, both the political right and left have jumped on the post-truth bandwagon, casting suspicion on all truth-claims — a clear theft of the intellectual heritage of critical theory — without any of latter’s the commitment toward context, argument or, most importantly, critique of power, or the ethical function of truth-seeking. A new form of critical analysis must come to terms with the specific ways in which ideology functions in a new media space which differentiates it from classical Marxist equations of illusion and emancipation. In other words as we think as scholars and students, perhaps we should keep these themes in mind
In the first case, many ideological critics of the propaganda / Chomskian mold cast so-called propaganda as working by insisting upon the truth, this is the way things are — think Clockwork Orange; however, the claims of fake news maintain power working ironically by pointing out the lies of others, or perhaps the big lie itself, which in the advertising world is simply that “it is all a lie.” Perhaps the most instruction model is one of “creative advertising” — where ironic anti-commercials became the most effective new form of advertising.

In the second case, purposeful lying is not new to politics, nor is it even that surprising, but lying in the face of obvious mistruth sufficiently complicates the business of ideology critique (think the apparent perjury of Sec. Sessions, or the evidence-less claims by Pres. Trump of wire taps). In other words, what is the value of critical theory if truth itself is so devalued. Perhaps the Slovenian philosopher Zizek described it best in his own conception of ideology it is not the lie, but the pretense of believing a lie, which was more important.

In the third case, while we know or at least suspect much of the work of fake news was mostly likely coordinated by powerful state or non-state actors, a lot of the labor of propagating fake news has been taken on by productive users themselves, which can and should be investigated through academic big data and network analysis. Much like economic exploitation, which in social media is predicated on our own self-surveillance, that is willingly giving up more and more information about ourself, the expansion of fake news and misinformation on social media is predicated on the self-propagandizing. In the contemporary moment, even ideology itself is bio political!

And lastly, we can point out for as much as ideology has functionally changed in moving from old media to new media, its victimization of the vulnerable, which is in Marx’s original formulation, remains consistent. Think of the typical examples: the travel ban is logical, immigrants are dangerous, belt-tightening is the only way out of economic turmoil, climate change is an international plot — all of that it supposedly self-evident
damages those most unable to contest. This constitutes the ethical basis of truth seeking that is at the heart of critical theory and ideology critique.

I would add, too, that news or even fake news isn’t simply about information. In his very famous book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argued that the newspaper as shared record, worked just as much as to create a sense of a common nation and community as it did inform a public. Thus, the last two centuries have engendered the sympathetic growth of mass media and the modern nation-state. If this then is the case, then what happens in an era of fake news is more than a so-called echo chamber, but the propagation of a collection co-habitants literally occupying different “communities.”

But perhaps there is a technological fix to many of these problems, perhaps there is a zone of social media outside of the pure reproduction of capital or power, perhaps there is new idealized form of community that comes closer to Habermas’s ideal, perhaps there is a place dedicated toward truth-production for its own sake, that models collaboration and consensus in a way that surpasses even representational democracy. This model may exist in the place that professors would least like to admit; namely, in the unique non-profit Wikipedia which relies on self-organized participants dedicated to truth generation...a situation remarkably close to Habermas’s ideal speech act. Maybe then there is a technological solution to all that social media has wrought...

As a takeaway for the this second half, I can only suggest that unanswered questions of ideology and community are essential ones when we consider our contemporary media sphere.