

# Not all items fit under ‘fake news’ umbrella

By CALLUM BORCHERS

*The Washington Post*

Once upon a time — it was November 2015 — “fake news” had a precise meaning. It referred to total fabrications — made-up stories about Donald Trump suffering a heart attack or earning the pope’s endorsement — and the phrase burst into the political lexicon as Facebook and Google vowed to clean up some of the garbage that had polluted the internet during the presidential election.

Since then, conservatives — led by President Donald Trump — have hijacked the term and sought to redefine it as, basically, any reporting they don’t like. At the extreme end of absurdity, Trump actually asserted on Monday that “any negative polls are fake news.”

Tweet: “Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting.”

All but Trump’s most lemming-like followers will recognize the logical fallacy of such a statement. The risk that voters, on the whole, will accept the idea that “negative equals fake” is probably very low.

More insidious is the notion that a report qualifies as fake news if it requires a correction. Such an overly broad definition unfairly attaches malicious intent to the kinds of mistakes that inevitably appear in good-faith journalism.

Trump seemed to endorse this definition on Wednesday when he tweeted a link to a Federalist article that purports to identify 16 fake news stories.

“16 Fake News Stories Reporters Have Run Since Trump Won’ Journalists, media

types, reporters, you have two choices: you can fix these problems, or you can watch your profession go down in ... thefederalist.com”

Some of the reports named by Federalist contributor Daniel Payne were indeed plagued by errors, but only a few could plausibly be called fabrications, and only one originated with a journalist.

That singular case involved a tweet by Dana Schwartz, who (ironically) covers arts and entertainment for the Observer newspaper that was owned by Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, before he became a White House adviser. Schwartz tweeted on Jan. 27 that “Trump 100% photoshopped his hand bigger” in an Inauguration Day photograph. There was no reporting to back up the claim. Other journalists, including The Washington Post’s Philip Bump, quickly debunked it.

On Jan. 29, the Daily Beast sloppily published a fictional news report on the Quebec City shooting by a parody Twitter account that was styled to resemble that of Reuters. The phony report that originated with the now-suspended Twitter account @ReutersBrk falsely claimed to have identified two shooters.

In another fact-checking failure, a Fox affiliate in Detroit failed to corroborate the story of an Iraqi immigrant, who lied in an interview about the date of his mother’s death. The man blamed Trump’s travel ban for keeping his mother, who he said needed medical treatment, in Iraq. In fact, his mother died five days before Trump ordered the ban.

Other reports cited by Payne were not made up; they were simply wrong. The best-known example is an erroneous White House pool report that originated

with Time writer Zeke Miller, who emailed fellow journalists on the night of Trump’s inauguration to say that a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. was no longer on display in the Oval Office. It turned out that the bust had been obscured by a door and a Secret Service agent while Miller was in the Oval.

The King bust had replaced a Winston Churchill bust during Barack Obama’s presidency. Trump told The New York Times shortly after his election that he was thinking about returning the Churchill bust to the Oval Office, which naturally put the King bust’s status in doubt. The idea that the King bust might be removed was not a media invention; it originated with Trump himself.

When Miller saw the Churchill bust on Inauguration Day but did not see the King bust, he thought one had replaced the other. He was incorrect, but that does not mean he was spreading fake news.

Still other reports were not wrong at all; it’s just that their framing irked conservatives. Payne objected to the way some left-leaning outlets, such as Slate, Vox, BuzzFeed and ThinkProgress, covered Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’ remark during a confirmation hearing that a school in Wyoming probably had a gun “to protect from potential grizzlies.”

The coverage by these outlets was full of mockery, no doubt. And perhaps, as Payne wrote, it missed DeVos’ broader point about the need to empower local school districts to set their own policies on guns and other issues. But snarky and off-the-mark are not the same as factually inaccurate and certainly not the same as fake news.

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Callum Borchers covers the intersection of politics and media.