Fake News, Conceptual Engineering, and Linguistic Resistance: Reply to Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken and Brown

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Abstract

In Habgood-Coote (2019 "Stop Talking about Fake News!" *Inquiry: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 62(9-10): 1033-1065) I argued that we should abandon 'fake news' and 'post-truth', on the grounds that these terms do not have stable public meanings, are unnecessary, and function as vehicles for propaganda. Jessica Pepp, Eliot Michaelson, and Rachel Sterken (2019 "Why we should keep talking about fake news" *Inquiry: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*) and Étienne Brown (2019 "'Fake News' and Conceptual Ethics", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy,* 16(2): 144-154) have raised worries about my case for abandonment, recommending that we continue using 'fake news'. In this paper, I respond to these worries. I distinguish more clearly between theoretical and political reasons for abandoning a term, assemble more evidence that 'fake news' is a nonsense term, and respond to the worries raised by Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken, and Brown. I close by considering the prospects for anti-fascist and anti-authoritarian conceptual engineering.

Introduction

Language can be a tool for building and maintaining oppressive and violent social orders. The use of particular expressions can undermine democracy (Stanley 2015), build and maintain fascist political regimes (Klemperer 2006, Stanley 2018), subordinate and objectify marginalised groups (Langton 2009) and lay the groundwork for genocidal violence (Tirell 2012, 2017). How should users and theorists of language respond to these facts? Is it enough to identify the mechanisms of linguistic oppression? Do we also have a responsibility to resist linguistic oppression? What forms might this resistance take?

In Habgood-Coote (2019), I argued that we ought to abandon the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. This paper responded to a number of attempts to define 'fake news' (Dentith 2017, Levy 2017, Rini 2017, Gelfert 2018), and drew on arguments from other proponents of abandonment (most notably Claire Wardle).[1] Around the

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[1] (Oremus 2016), (boyd 2017), (Jack 2017), (Sullivan 2017), (Staines 2017), (Wardle 2017),

same time, a number of other philosophers made the case for abandoning these terms: Lorna Finlayson (2019) argued that 'post-truth' has worrying anti-democratic effects, Frieder Vogelmann (2018) argued that 'post-truth' is associated with mistaken views about the role of truth in politics, Robert Talisse (2018) argued that political polarisation precludes an analysis of 'fake news', and David Coady (2019a, 2019b) argued that 'post-truth' and 'fake news' are both part of an epistemic panic discourse that masks the real epistemic problems faced by democracy. Philosophers and other academics have responded to these concerns both directly, by offering rejoinders to the arguments for abandonment (Brown 2019), (de Ridder 2019), (Read 2019), (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2019a), and indirectly, by offering analyses of 'fake news' (Mukerji 2018), (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2019b), (Fallis and Mathieson 2019). And, an increasing number of media scholars have expressed animadversions about 'fake news' (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018 p.9, Wardle and Derakhasan 2017, Wardle 2019, Freelon and Wells 2020 p.146, Engelhofer et al 2020)

In this paper, I want to respond to some worries raised about the case for abandoning 'fake news'.[2] In doing so, I hope to open up general questions about how abandonment fits into wider projects of linguistic resistance (Komska, Boyd, Gramling 2019), and ideological critique (Haslanger 2017), the limitations of abandonment, and alternative strategies of linguistic resistance. Part of my interest in these questions comes from the sense that the majority of politically-motivated proposals in conceptual engineering are concerned with building conceptual tools for *good* political projects.[3] We ought also to be interested in *taking away* conceptual tools from bad political projects, and in kinds of conceptual engineering that facilitate resistance to linguistic (and non-linguistic) oppression.[4] Abandoning 'fake news', can be an act of political resistance: it challenges the normalisation of the term, gives us a tool for blocking its use to introduce bad ideology, and makes it easier to decode political language.

A couple of clarificatory points.

Our focus on 'fake news' means we will be focusing on anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist[5] conceptual engineering. There are important questions to be asked about

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Wardle and Derakhasan 2017), (Zuckerman 2017)

[2] My advice would also be for speakers of languages other than English to abandon both the use of 'fake news' as a loan word, as well as cognate terms, such as 'Lügenpresse' (German), 'infox', 'fausses informations' (French), 'fopnuus' (Afrikaans), 'naught bréige' (Gaelige), 'Nepnieuws' (Dutch), and 'false nyheter' (Norweigan).

[3] An incomplete list: Sally Haslanger's work on gender and race concepts (Haslanger 2000), Katharine Jenkins' work on trans-inclusive gender concepts (Jenkins 2016, 2018), Kate Manne's work on misogyny (Manne 2017), Elizabeth Barnes' work on disability (Barnes 2016), and Robin Dembroff's work on genderqueer (Dembroff 2019)

[4] Some examples of conceptual engineering projects focused on resistance: Sarah-Jane Leslie's work on racist generics (Leslie 2018), David Coady's proposal to drop 'conspiracy theory' (Coady 2003, 2007, 2012), and work advocating eliminating race concepts (Appiah 1995,1996, Zack 1993, 2002, Haslanger 2000, 2004). See (Mallon 2006) for a treatment of the debate about the meaning of race terms as a normative and metalinguistic one.

[5] 'Fascist' is an infamously contested and messy term, but given its connection to *anti*-fascist

anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-homophobic, anti-trans, and anti-classist conceptual engineering, as well as about the interaction between different linguistic resistance projects.

Proposals for changing the way we use language can easily morph into pedantry, language policing and the enforcement of linguistic hygiene. It is perhaps unsurprising that proposals to give up using certain words and often framed as proposals to *ban* them.[6] This framing is misleading. In (Habgood-Coote 2019) I wasn't making the case for banning any words.[7] It is true that the paper made a prescription – *stop talking about fake news!* – but the normative stance I intended to occupy was *advising* rather than *commanding.* Although both speech acts are associated with imperatival sentences, they have striking differences.[8] Commanding presupposes authority, is motivated by the commander's interest, and is an expression of a speaker's will (not a hearer's interests). Advising presupposes knowledge, is motivated by concern for the advisee, and expresses knowledge of what she should do. The proposal to abandon 'fake news' is part of a project of *language care* (Komska, Mood, and Gramling 2019).[9]

Languages are complicated and contested social tools, and making general claims about which terms we ought or ought not to use in particular languages is both epistemically and politically risky. Although I am suspicious of a slew of the vocabulary used to describe our current epistemic situation—'echo chamber' (see Nguyen forthcoming), 'polarisation', 'deep fake', and 'alternative facts'—I am not in the game of coming up with a definitive list of which words to use. I will point toward some general arguments in section 1. but the most part, I will focus on the case for abandoning 'fake news'. I will set 'post-truth' to one side, as its defenders

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organising, it's not one I'm prepared to give up. Part of the problem with the term seems to be that it is often defined demonstratively by pointing at fascist-era Italy and Nazi-era Germany, leaving open which features of these regimes are supposed to be central to the definition of 'fascism'. In the interests of avoiding these disputes, as well as of making sense of wider applications of the term by resistance movements, I will be stipulative defining 'fascist' as the subscription to any political ideology that is both authoritarian and racist. How authoritarian and racist? Like 'tall', 'fascist' is a gradable adjective, so plausibly the standards are set by context (this may contribute to explaining the disagreement around the term). This definition will be much too general for some purposes, but it will work for mine.

[6] For example, proponents of abandoning 'Anglo-Saxon' have been frequently been misrepresented in the right-wing press as proposing a ban. (Montgomery 2019).

[7] For a discussion of the potentially salutary role of word bans, see (Tirrell 2015)

[8] "For the words "Doe this," are the words not onely of him that Commandeth; but also of him that giveth Counsell; and of him that Exhorteth; and yet there are but few, that see not, that these are very different things; or that cannot distinguish between them, when they perceive who it is that speaketh, and to whom the Speech is directed, and upon what occasion." (Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter XXV)

[9] Even if a self-imposed restriction on what words were to count as a restriction of freedom, the threat that continuing to use 'fake news' poses to freedom of expression is much more serious than the loss of linguistic expression. Across the world, there is a slew of censorship legislation motivated by appeals to 'fake news' (Coady 2019a), (Farkas and Schou 2020: 87-99, 135-7). The Corona virus pandemic has initiated another round of censorship laws, see (Simon 2020).

have – thus far – not sprung into action.

1. The Case for Abandonment

In Habgood-Coote (2019), I argued for three claims in support of abandoning 'fake news':

> SEMANTICALLY DEFECTIVE: 'fake news' is a *semantically* defective term, it lacks a stable public meaning, and it is unclear what is expressed by sentences that use it;

> UNNECESSARY: 'fake news' does not add any useful descriptive resources to our language which are not provided by established terminology

> PROPAGANDA: 'fake news' has been weaponised for political ends, and has a number of politically bad *pragmatic* features.

In the background were two styles of argument for abandoning 'fake news': a theoretical argument focusing on the communicative problems caused by semantically defective terms, and a political argument focusing on the bad effects of propaganda terms. Here is a schematic version of both arguments

> **Theoretical argument for abandoning 'fake news'**

> P1: When terms have *serious* semantic problems (such as being massively context-sensitive, essentially contested, or nonsense), they should not be used in serious discourse, unless those terms are necessary;

> P2: At present (in 2019), 'fake news' has serious semantic problems;

> P3: 'Fake news' is not a necessary term - there are lots of other terms that we can us to do the descriptive work associated with it;

> C: 'Fake news' should not be used in serious discourse.

> **Political argument for abandoning 'fake news'**

> P1: When terms have politically bad semantic or pragmatic features (such as: derogating marginalised groups, cuing up bad ideology, functioning as anti-democratic undermining propaganda, and functioning as epistemic slur terms), these terms should not be used unless they are necessary;

P2: 'Fake news' has a number of semantic and pragmatic features which are bad from the point of view of an anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic political view;

P3: 'Fake news' is not a necessary term - there are lots of other terms that we can us to do the descriptive work associated with it;

C: 'Fake news' should never be used.

A couple of points about these arguments:

The conclusions of both arguments make claims about what we should do - stop using certain lexical items. The 'should' is pro tanto, and not an all-things-considered. There are cases in which there are reasons to use these terms that outweigh their linguistic and political problems. Maybe someone will pay you a thousand pounds for using 'fake news', or maybe using 'fake news' is the only way to communicate a point in a high-pressure media situation. I think that these cases are marginal, but it would be possible to accept the bad consequences of using 'fake news', and maintain that there are general over-riding reasons which mandate their use.

Both arguments rely on the claim that 'fake news' is not *necessary,* in the sense that English already has terms that can be used to refer to the phenomena which people try to use 'fake news' to refer to. In Habgood-Coote (2019), I suggested that we ought to abandoning unnecessary terms. I now think that this isn't quite right. Any term that has a cognitive synonym or has been reductively defined (Quine 1951) is not strictly speaking necessary, but this seems at best a weak reason to abandon it. The efficiency gains from dropping one of a pair of synonyms would not justify the effort of co-ordinating speakers to abandon it. Considerations of usefulness become important when deciding whether to add a new term to a language, to give a nonsense a clear sense, or to reclaim a politically problematic term by stripping it of problematic features. If the language in question already has a term that describes this phenomenon, then—excepting special cases—there is no sufficient reason to add terms, fix nonsense, or reclaim problematic terms.[10]

In the background of the theoretical argument is a kind of linguistic cost-benefit analysis. We might think about linguistic utility as encompassing the epistemic, communicative, and social goods associated with language. The positive linguistic utility of using a term might include greater expressive power, more clarity, improved communication, and an increased ability to co-ordinate. The negative

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[10] Brown raises the worry that if 'fake news' is a nonsense term, it will be difficult to determine whether it is unnecessary because we won't be able to compare its meaning to other terms. (2019: 148-9). Even if a term doesn't have semantic content, we can still compare it to other terms by considering what speakers *try* to use it to mean. My contention is the content that speakers intend by 'fake news' can easily be expressed using other terms.

utility of using a term might include greater confusion, less clarity, more miscommunication, and failures of co-ordination. If the costs of operating with a term outweigh its benefits – and the costs of dropping the term don't outweigh the potential gains – then we should drop that term (see Machery 2009 for a similar argument). Perhaps we shouldn't be strict maximisers about linguistic utility, but we should certainly address features of language that significantly undermine linguistic utility.

We can employ these styles of argument separately. Scientific terms that are not properly defined should be rejected, even if they don't have politically bad effects. Slur terms for social groups should be rejected because of their politically bad effects, even if they have a clear semantics (i.e. the content of their neutral counterparts).[11] The opprobrium against social slur terms was in the background when I claimed that 'fake news' functions as an epistemic slur term,[12] but I will employ both styles of argument together. .

There are many reasons to use language. We care about communication, but also about building friendships, the poetic and aesthetic features of language, and collective action and political solidarity. The theoretical argument appeals to our interest in successful communication, meaning that it is primarily concerned with what words we use in serious discourses that are structured by our interest in communication. In discourse structured by other interests it can be perfectly fine to use semantically defective terms. We shouldn't be worried about poetry that uses nonsense terms. Does that mean it's ok to use 'fake news' in non-serious discourse, say as a joke? I think not: the political problems with 'fake news' affect our interests in non-serious discourse. Using the term as a joke normalises it, and makes bad ideology conversationally salient, so the term ought to be avoided in all kinds of discourse.[13]

2. 'Fake News' is Nonsense

There is a pretty good case for thinking that 'fake news' is nonsense: an empty term. That isn't to say that it *couldn't* have a determinate meaning – one of the striking features of the term is the number of important phenomena that people have tried to use the term to talk about. We shouldn't abandon 'fake news' because it has no candidate meanings, but because it has *too many* possible meanings.

Semantic internalists and semantic externalists will have differing views about what makes a term nonsense, but ought to agree that 'fake news' is nonsense.[14] Semantic *internalists*—who think that the meaning of a term is determined by speakers' beliefs—will point to the fact that speakers have wildly divergent beliefs

[11] But see (Richard 2008) for an argument that slurs have no semantic content.
[12] On this claim see also (Finlayson 2019: 79) on 'post-truth', and (Coady 2019a) on 'fake news'.
[13] This issue is closely related to issues in the morality of humour, see (Anderson 2015).
[14] See (Appiah 1996: 32-42) for a similar case that race concepts fail to refer appealing to ideational and referential theories of meaning.

about what the phrase 'fake news' is associated with. Things are a little more complicated for semantic *externalists*—who think that the meaning of a term is determined by factors outside speakers' heads. Cappelen (2013) suggests three externalist diagnostics for nonsense terms: failed introductions, failed transmissions, and failed deference. 'Fake news' meets all of these diagnostics.

2.1. Failed Introduction

'Fake news' has been around for a while, but neither the early uses of the term (Montgomery-Govern 1898), nor its more recent use—popularised by the journalist Craig Silverman—involves a successful dubbing event. Silverman states that one of his first uses was in a tweet from 2014 about a story on the satirical site nationalreview.net that the town of Purdon, Texas had been quarantined after an Ebola outbreak:
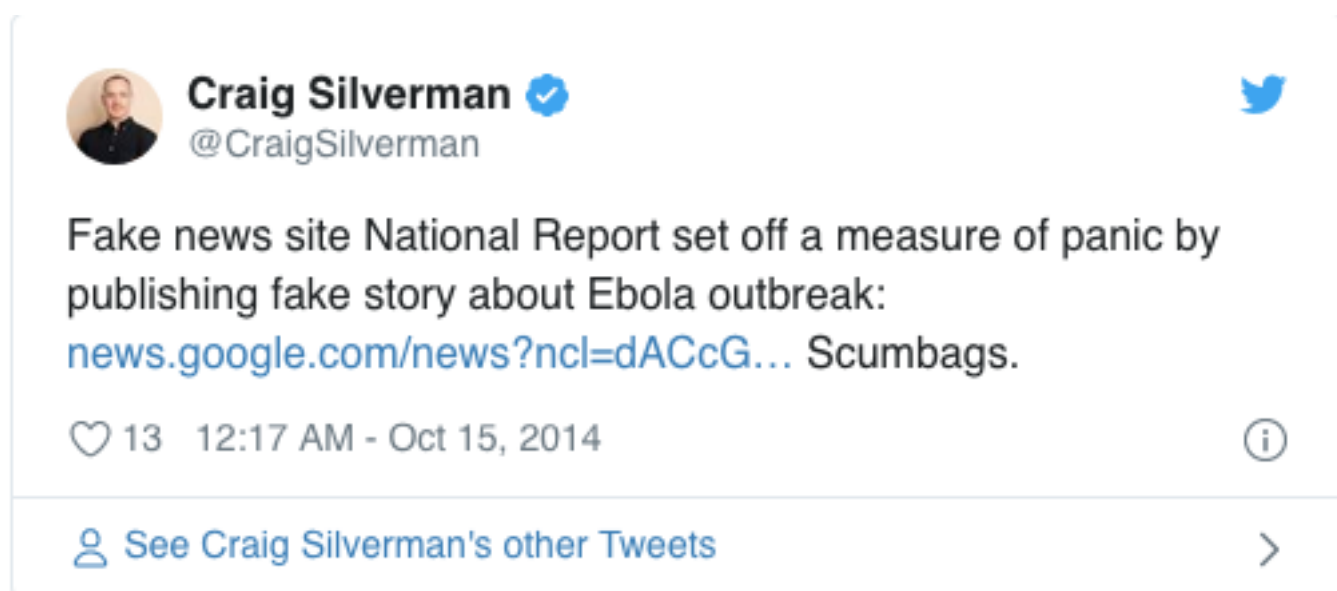
This tweet is not a successful baptism for 'fake news' as a property of stories. First of all, Silverman doesn't apply 'fake news' to a story, instead referring to nationalreview.net as a 'fake news site' (it's unclear whether he means to be baptising 'fake news' or 'fake news site'). It is also unclear which feature of Nationalreview.net Silverman means to be referring to. The fact that it is a (poorly flagged) satirical site? (satirical news programmes were for a while the dominant meaning of 'fake news' (Tandoc et al. 2018)). The fact that the site is causing its readers to believe false stories? The fact that the site is spreading false stories *for profit*? Both the site and story instantiates a number of news categories, and it is not obvious which Silverman has in mind.[15]

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[15] For a discussion of a related general worry about externalist accounts of natural kind terms, see (Brown 1998).

In an article published in 2017 Silverman suggests that he was intending to use 'fake news' to refer to a story which was completely false, and spread for profit (Silverman 2017). This clarifies his intentions, but causes problems because this description simply doesn't apply to this story. The second sentence in the article in question is "Purdon is located just 70 miles from Dallas Texas, and the hospital that cared for both American Ebola patients, Thomas Eric Duncan, and Texas nurse Nina Pham." This sentence isn't quite completely true—Duncan is a Liberian citizen—but Purdon *is* around 70 miles from Dallas, Duncan and Pham were infected with Ebola (along with Amber Vinson), and they were cared for in a hospital in Dallas.[16] Either this is a failed baptism—in which case 'fake news' means nothing—or this is a baptism gone askew, and 'fake news' means something different to what Silverman intended (exactly what is unclear).

2.2. Failed Transmission

Even if 'fake news' had been successfully baptised, over time the term has been used to talk about a bunch of different phenomena, including (but not limited to!): faking news stories, news satire, news parody, sites spreading false stories for profit, photo manipulation, epistemic problems with digital capitalism, and bias in news stories (Tandoc et al. 2018), (Farkas and Schou 2018, 2020 C3). Even if the term initially had a clear meaning, something seems to have gone wrong in the chain of communication from the initial users, so that we now are trying to use it to refer to a whole host of phenomena distinct from those which were initially referred to. Words can change meaning over time, and externalists should be able to make sense of this (this is one of the lessons of Gareth Evan's Madagascar case (Burgess 2014)). But when a term ends up being used to refer to a bunch of different phenomena, this seems like good (but defeasible) evidence either i) that the term has shifted so that it has *lost* its meaning, or ii) that it never had a clear meaning, which is what allowed it to develop in such an unconstrained manner.

2.3. Failed deference

Ordinary speakers use many terms successfully without being in a position to distinguish their referents from closely related phenomena. I can meaningfully use 'elm' and 'beech', even though I cannot distinguish elms from beeches (Putnam 1975). Perhaps the meaning of 'fake news' is similarly determined by the experts who are in a position to distinguish the phenomenon it refers to from other closely related phenomena. I have yet to find community of experts who use 'fake news' in a clear and consistent manner (see Farkas and Schou 2020: 53-55). Many simply use it as a catch-all for all *bad* information. Media and communication scholars are concerned about semantic confusion around 'fake news' (Benkler, Faris, Roberts 2020 p.9), (Caplan, Hanson, and Donovan 2019) (Freelon and Wells 2020), (Engelhofer et

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[16] https://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/08/health/thomas-eric-duncan-ebola/index.html
https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ebola-virus-outbreak/who-nina-pham-meet-nurse-who-contracted-ebola-n224726

al 2020) and recent agenda-setting papers propose either abandoning 'fake news' (Wardle 2017, 2019), or supplementing it with a raft of clearly defined terms (Jack 2017). Finland is frequently held up as an example of how to address false stories and propaganda via education, but educational resources in Finnish are extremely sceptical about the term 'fake news', and offer a number of alternatives (FactBar EDU 2018). When experts are self-conscious or outright sceptical about a term, ordinary speakers cannot successfully defer to them to determine the meaning of the term.

Let's turn to Brown and Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken's worries about the case for abandonment, taking the theoretical and practical arguments in turn.

3. Concerns about the Theoretical Argument for Abandonment

Brown and Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken raise three concerns about the theoretical argument for abandonment:

1. The theoretical argument for abandoning 'fake news' overgenerates, claiming that we should abandon too many terms;
2. The theoretical argument neglects the fact that the development of neologisms inevitably involves semantic defects;
3. The theoretical argument fails to take account of the legitimate uses of 'fake news'.

3.1. Overgeneration

Brown (2019: 145-7) and Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken (2019a) both raise concerns about the theoretical argument for abandoning 'fake news' overgenerating. The concern is that a great many of the words we currently employ in English have no agreed definition, are semantically defective, and are the subject of public contestation. Brown cites 'neoliberal', 'socialist', 'manipulative' and 'sexual harassment', and Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken cite 'combatant', 'spousal abuse', 'intellectual property', and 'insider trading'. Is someone who proposes abandoning 'fake news' also committed to abandoning these terms?

I am happy to accept the defects of natural language. Many terms of English are non-obviously ambiguous, polysemous, vague, underdetermined, open-textured, and subject to metalinguistic negotiation. We don't live in the (linguistic) Good Place.[17] Nonetheless, there seems something distinctively defective about 'fake news' and other nonsense terms. These terms are not just vague around the edges; they don't have a stable set of core cases. These terms are not just ambiguous; their full range of meaning is up for grabs. It's not just that some users are contesting their meaning; nearly every use of the term seems to be an attempt to influence its

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[17] Spoilers, I guess.

meaning. If I'm right, the semantic defects with 'fake news' are serious.[18] Many of the terms cited seem to have milder semantic defects: we can agree that 'socialist' is a person with some set of political beliefs (although we may not know exactly which), and we can agree that spousal abuse takes place between intimate partners (even if we don't know exactly which behaviour is required).[19]

We should be careful not to fall into a slippery slope argument here. In the absence of a clear cut-off point for serious semantic defects, the defects of English words will be on a continuous scale. But this doesn't mean that someone who argues for abandoning the terms with the worst problems is committed to abandoning any terms with a semantic defects. We should abandon a term when the linguistic costs of continuing to use it outweigh the benefits, and the costs of organising to abandon the term do not out outweigh the potential gains in linguistic utility. This response might be a little unsatisfying, but it underlines the fact that judgements about abandonment rely on specific features

3.2. Be Kind to Neologisms

A related concern is that the theoretical case for abandonment will forbid us from generating any new terms, since neologisms will often go through a period of growing pains as they settle into place (Brown 2019: 147), (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2019a), (Sterken 2019).

It might be right that many neologisms have semantic problems, but I don't think that this means that we have to default to allowing new terms into our language, no matter their semantic defects. This issue again boils down to cost-benefit analysis. To be worthwhile, neologisms need to stand a good chance of adding sufficiently useful descriptive resources to justify the faff of remembering another word. My contention (in 3.3.) is that 'fake news' does not add useful descriptive resources to English.

3.3. 'Fake News' is useful

In Habgood-Coote (2019), I contended that 'fake news' was not a useful theoretical tool, because we already had plenty of terms for talking about epistemic trouble: 'lie', 'misleading statement', 'false statement', 'bullshit' (in its Frankurtian sense), 'false implicature', 'unreliablity', and so on.

Brown (2019: 3-5), Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken (2019b: 35), and (Fallis and Mathieson 2019:12-16) contend that there is a useful sense of 'fake news' connected

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[18] Lots of academic uses of 'fake news' are associated with some kind of mimicry of real news (see 3.3.), but I remain unconvinced that this is part of the core meaning of the term. It doesn't seem analytically false to say "the BBC is a real news institution, but they keep on putting out fake news stories!"

[19] Even if they have serious semantic defects, some of these terms are necessary, and hence not covered by the theoretical argument for abandonment. We would lose important descriptive resources if we abandoned 'sexual harassment', or 'spousal abuse' (Fricker 2007: C7).

to mimicking *real news stories.*[20] If there is an important function that 'fake news' might play that is not currently met by our language, we might try to reclaim 'fake news' by proposing an *ameliorative definition* reflecting its useful descriptive function, and trying to regiment the term to rid it of semantic defects. We can think of this project as the converse of projects to reclaim social slur terms (Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken 2019a: 6). In reclaiming a slur, we take a term with a clear referent, and rid it of negative evaluative content. In reclaiming 'fake news', we take a term without a clear referent, and give it one in order to properly target its negative evaluative content.

We should distinguish two questions about this proposal:

1.   Is it useful to have a term for stories that mimic news sources?

2.   Should we try to reclaim 'fake news' so that it means *stories that mimic real news sources*?

I am sympathetic to the thought that we need new terms for the distinctive ways sites can present themselves in misleading ways online, just as we need terms like 'sockpuppeting' for the distinctive ways that individuals can take on misleading identities in online contexts. However, in this case it seems pretty clear that one new term isn't going to cut it. In literature that associates 'fake news' with mimicry, we find three distinct kinds of mimicry: *sites* that mimic real news sites (Lazer et al. 2018), stories which *readers* mistakenly treat as if they are real news (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2019b), or stories that are *falsely presented* as real news with the intention and propensity to deceive (Fallis and Mathieson 2019).[21] There seems to be no decisive reason to associate 'fake news' with any of these kinds of mimicry, so if we are interested in talking about all of these kinds of mimicry we need a bundle of new terms (maybe we should be talking about 'fake news1', 'fake news2' and so on).

Where I differ from these authors is on question 2). We shouldn't try to reclaim 'fake news' (subscripted or not). The term is so confused in current discourse that reclaiming it would be a costly and lengthy project. Coming up with new terms is just cheaper than reclaiming dog-whistles tied up with problematic ideology.

'Fake news' also contributes to discourse-level problems in the way we talk about kinds of problematic information. In the current situation where so much public concern and attention has been associated with 'fake news' the term has an important role in specifying the proper subject-matter for academic research, public debate, and research funding. I contend that in this situation, proffering any definition of 'fake news' carries the implicature that the proposed referent is the

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[20] This sense is an important theme in (Gelfert 2017), (Rini 2017), and (Lazer et al 2018).
[21] In section 4 of their paper, Fallis and Mathieson point out some more choice points that suggest further kinds of mimicry to distinguish.

proper subject-matter for public concern about the epistemic state of democracy, regardless of whether the author(s) intended it. The problem is that *none* of the candidate meanings of 'fake news' has a legitimate monopoly on the appropriate targets of academic research, public concern, or funding about the epistemic situation of democracy. Claire Wardle nicely makes this point. After giving a list of problematic kinds of content, she says:

> The term 'fake news' doesn't begin to cover all of this. Most of this content isn't even fake; it's often genuine, used out of context and weaponized by people who know that falsehoods based on a kernel of truth are more likely to be believed and shared. And most of this can't be described as 'news'. It's good old-fashioned rumors, it's memes, it's manipulated videos and hyper-targeted 'dark ads' and old photos re-shared as new. (Wardle 2019: 6) (see also Freelon and Wells 2020)

In order to get a proper grip on the epistemic challenges we face, we need to think about our situation at the appropriate level of generality. The epistemic problem we face isn't a particular kind of troublesome content, the rise of social media, or public disregard for the truth. The problem is the that designing and maintaining democratic societies that function well from an epistemic point of view is difficult, and we haven't been doing a good job of it (see also Farkas and Schou 2020 C 7). This is emphatically not a new problem, and using a new term to try to address it creates a discontinuity in subject-matter, and distorts the topic. This is not to say that there is nothing new about our current situation – novel technologies certainly present *some* novel epistemic issues – but that focusing on novelty distracts us from structural continuities.

Some writers use alternative terms to specify the subject-matter: we see references to 'information disorder' (Wardle 2019), 'problematic information' (Jack 2018), and 'misinformation' (Weatherall and O'Connor 2019). These are a step in the right direction, but none of them addresses the problem in full generality. Others appeal to metaphors: twitter talks about 'healthy conversation', and we hear frequent dietary, disease, hygiene, and pollution metaphors for problematic information (for examples, see Farkas and Schou 2020: 46-9, 95-7, 99-100). These metaphors have a number of problems (on the ethics and epistemology of metaphor, see Fraser 2018). Hygiene metaphors operate in a history of racial oppression that associates purity with whiteness, and privilege individualising over structural explanations (Bergmann 2019). Disease metaphors depoliticise misinformation, transforming it into a self-perpetuating entity, unconnected with human agency.

Borrowing a metaphor from the sociologist John Heritage (via Jennifer Nagel (forthcoming)), we might think of the terms that we use to specify our epistemic predicament as providing the *epistemic territory* in which the debate about what to do takes place. Extending this metaphor, we might think of the use of particular questions, terms, narratives, or metaphors to circumscribe the epistemic territory of a

debate in an overly narrow or exclusionary way as a kind of *epistemic enclosure.*[22] I worry that any use of 'fake news' will lead to a kind of epistemic enclosure. There are huge amounts of work from media studies, communication, philosophy, critical theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory that we can bring to bear on the epistemic design and maintenance of democratic societies, but specifying the subject matter of the debate as 'fake news', or even 'misinformation' cuts us off from these theoretical resources, and offers an oversimplified picture of the problems we face.[23] This specification of the subject-matter has important consequences for who counts as an expert, centring computer scientists, and designers of social media platforms, and excluding social scientists, critical race theorists, and feminist epistemologists.[24] In order to avoid an enclosed and problematically exclusionary discourse, we need to talk and think about our problems in a sufficiently general way. Refusing to play the game of trying to define 'fake news' is a step toward that goal.

Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken make it sound like reclaiming 'fake news' is a matter of fixing the descriptive content of the term, allowing us to direct the slurring evaluative and emotional content toward more appropriate targets. I think things are more complicated: even if we think that epistemic slurs can be a valuable part of democratic discourse (and I have my doubts), to use 'fake news' legitimately we would also need to disassociate it from both a number of ideological bundles connected to media manipulation, and ensure that our use of the term didn't end up legitimating authoritarian and fascist propaganda. We would also need focus the slurring force of 'fake news', enabling its use to slur particular sources, rather than the media in general.[25] I'm sure that these things could be done, but I suspect they would take considerable time and effort, and I doubt whether this effort would be worthwhile. It's not clear how this reclamation would work: the most prominent strategy for reclaiming slur terms is collective self-reference – "we're here, we're queer, we aren't going away". This strategy seems unlikely to succeed in the case of 'fake news', since newspapers self-describing as 'fake news' reads as surrender, not resistance.[26]

4. Worries about the political argument

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[22] Here I'm thinking of the process of the enclosure of common land in England that began in the 13th century.

[23] See (Noble 2018: 183-6) on the failure to recognize that her work on false information targeted at minorities is continuous with concern about misinformation. See also

[24] See the witness list for the UK Digital Culture Media and Sport committee (DCMS 2019:101), and the experts invited to the European Commission's High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (which, to be fair, does include a couple of social scientists) (European Commission 2018: 39).

[25] (Engelhofer et al 2020) found that 44.1% of mentions of 'fake news' in a sample of Austrian newspapers from 2015 to 2018 attacked the media in general, and (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017) provides preliminary evidence that mentions of 'fake news' can decrease general trust towards the media in Trump supporters.

[26] See (Denner and Peter 2017) on German press self-describing as Lügenpresse.

Even when terms have clear semantic content, there might be good political reasons to abandon them. In Habgood-Coote (2019) I drew on work in politically engaged philosophy of language to argue that 'fake news' had some pretty bad political effects. I tried to situate 'fake news' is a wider authoritarian anti-media discourse (alongside 'mainstream media', 'MSM, 'corrupt media', 'and left-wing bias') that functions both to manipulate public trust, and to legitimate authoritarian media practices (Coady 2019a), (Farkas and Schou 2020: 131-7). I argued for a number of claims about the politically bad effects of using 'fake news':

1. 'Fake news' can function as an epistemic slur term that insults the epistemic character of the target, and directs its audience to distrust them (see also Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019 on 'fake news' as a label);
2. The use of 'fake news' by authoritarian political figures involves anti-democratic undermining propaganda (Stanley 2015) that appeals to the values of democratic society, whilst undermining their realisation;
3. The use of 'fake news' can legitimate authoritarian and far-right discourse by extending permission to use a term which is central to right-wing anti-media discourse.

To understand the function of 'fake news' in authoritarian discourse, we need to do some history of fascist anti-media discourse. The German word 'Lügenpresse'—literally 'lying press'—was used systematically in Nazi anti-media discourse, both before the second world war to attack newspapers which weren't owned by the Nazi party, and later to attack the foreign press (Koliska and Assmann 2019). This term goes back to at least 1835, and was used in the 1850s by conservatives to attack liberal and democratic newspapers, but in Nazi discourse it acquired a specifically anti-semantic associations (Heine 2015), (Speigel 2016). In 2014, the term re-entered public discourse via the far-right Pegida movement, and it has come to be important in *Alternative für Deutschland's* attacks on the media.

Authoritarian and fascist anti-media discourse in English both alludes to and is informed by the history of 'Lügenpresse'. Here's the white nationalist Richard Spencer making the connection explicit:

> "The Mainstream Media — or perhaps we should refer to them in the original German. "Lügenpresse" […] It's not just that they are leftist and cucks, it is not just that many are genuinely stupid, indeed one wonders if these people are people at all, or instead soulless Gollem, animated by some dark power to repeat whatever talking point John Oliver stated the night before." (Richard Spencer, speech at National Policy Institute 21ˢᵗ November 2016)

Although 'fake news' does not have the same fascist history, it is sometimes used as a stand-in for 'Lügenpresse', with the same historical allusions.[27] There was a

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[27] (Snyder 2018), (Frankel 2019)
This isn't to say that there is no history: in 1939, at a speech in Earl's Court, Oswald Mosely lambasted the British press for being influenced by money (presumably an anti-semitic

period in 2016 when reporters at Trump rallies would have 'Lügenpresse' chanted at them.[28] Setting aside historical allusions, the function of 'fake news' as an epistemic slur term is strikingly similar to the authoritarian uses of 'Lügenpresse'. The use of 'fake news' by authoritarians seeds a general in media institutions, creates confusion around specific stories, and replaces factual disputes with trades of insults.

Despite the similar functions of these terms, mainstream attitudes to 'fake news' and 'Lügenpresse' are very different. In 2017 Collins dictionary declared 'fake news' their word of the year. In 2014, the Association for the German Language declared 'Lügenpresse' their non-word of the year, citing its role in slandering the media and endangering the freedom of the press.[29] 'Lügenpresse' is widely used in the German and Austrian press—often in connection with 'fake news'—but some journalists refuse to use it for fear of legitimising it (Koliska and Assmann 2019: 9).

Brown and Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken raise two connected worries about the political argument for abandoning 'fake news':

1. There is a lack of evidence that problematic ideology is automatically cued up when speakers use 'fake news' (Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2019a: 7), (Brown 2019: 151);
2. The political reasons for abandoning 'fake news' overgenerate, claiming that we should abandon too many terms (Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken 2019a: 9-10), (Brown 2019: 151)

4.1. Does 'Fake News' Cue up Ideology?

Both Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken and Brown put the burden of proof on me to demonstrate that 'fake news' cues up problematic ideological content when used. A couple of clarificatory points:

i) 'Fake news' doesn't need to always cue up ideological content to be problematic. It would be bad if a significant number of its uses cued up problematic content.
ii) Cuing up ideological content is not always intentional: speakers may introduce a whole raft of claims about media manipulation without being aware of so doing.
iii) The ideological content of 'fake news' can differ depending on the political context. There are three key bundles of ideological beliefs: a right-wing ideology positing a grand left-wing (possibly anti-Semitic) media conspiracy, a centrist ideology which uses catastrophic predictions about the death of enlightenment values to motivate defence of established media institutions,

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dogwhistle) and spreading 'false news'.
[28] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/us-election-donald-trump-supporters-nazi-term-lugenpresse-gettysburg-rally-republican-party-a7376176.html
[29] http://www.unwortdesjahres.net/index.php?id=112

and a left-wing ideology that centres around failures in legacy media.[30]

In Habgood-Coote (2019) I focused on establishing that the authoritarian ideology of manipulation could be cued up by 'fake news', and I didn't distinguish the different ideologies of media manipulation associated with the right, centre and left. I think we should be concerned about all of these ideologies. They each smuggle in controversial claims about media manipulation (are Enlightenment values *really* under unprecedented threat?), they can pull us toward radical solutions (stop funding the BBC!, don't believe the MSM!), they offer over-simplified pictures of our epistemic trouble, and each of them has a potential to slide into authoritarian responses.[31] Even uses of 'fake news' that don't cue up bad ideology can function to normalise uses of the term as an authoritarian dog-whistle (see Egelhofer 2020).

A full account of the ideological function of 'fake news' would be a massive empirical project (see Farkas and Schou 2020 for a start), so in support of this contention that a significant number of well-intentioned uses of 'fake news' cue up an ideology of media manipulation I will consider two representative examples where bad ideology seems to be playing an important role.

The recent agenda-setting essay *The Science of Fake News* (Lazer et al. 2018) starts as follows:

> "The rise of fake news highlights the erasing of long-standing institutional bulwarks against misinformation in the internet age. Concern over the problem is global. However, much remains unknown regarding the vulnerabilities of individuals, institutions, and society to manipulations by malicious actors." (Lazer et al. 2018: 1094).

This opening raises a number of tropes from the establishment media manipulation narrative:

1. Traditional media is a 'bulwark' against the threat of misinformation;
2. The internet age raises new problems of misinformation;
3. There are malicious actors who aim to exploit our vulnerabilities;
4. Individuals, institutions, and (democratic) societies are vulnerable to misinformation.

They go to discuss empirical research about misinformation, before considering potential policy interventions to alleviate the threat of misinformation.

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[30] Some examples of each ideology:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOZ0irgLwxU
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/24/bbc-post-truth-dystopia-facts
https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/bbc-fight-fake-news-part-problem/
[31] (Coady 2019a) raises worries about censorship connected to the UK, France, and Germany's 'fake news' legislation, and President Maduro of Venezuela has used 'fake news' as an epistemic slur https://sputniknews.com/latam/201707271055924853-maduro-media-fake-news/.

Given that Lazer et al. think that "much remains unknown" about online information, we would expect them to cite evidence in favour of claims 1-4. They cite research claiming that: i) Americans on average encountered between one and three fake stories in the month before the 2016 election, ii) that false information spreads more quickly and widely on Twitter than true information (Vosoughi et al 2018), and iii) that manipulations by malicious actors was less than 0.01% of the civic content shared on Facebook, and iv) that there are a large number of bots on both Facebook and Twitter. This research does not provide much support for 1-4. One to three fake stories is a pretty low range, and the prevalence of malicious actors similarly seems pretty low. The Vosoughi et al research on the spread of false claims on twitter is striking, but Lazer et al. point out that research about the prevalence of false stories and bots doesn't directly establish that either are threats, because people might not believe false content, and be adept at identifying bots.

Why do Lazer et al. consider policy interventions without establishing that bots and false stories are a significant problem? It is as if merely mentioning the term 'fake news' is enough to establish that online misinformation is a clear and present danger. I do think there are reasons to worry about epistemic features of social media platforms, but to identify those problems, we need research and systematic evidence.

For our second example, consider the first couple of sentences from an NPR article from December 5th 2016 entitled *Fake Or Real? How To Self-Check The News And Get The Facts*

> Fake news stories can have real-life consequences. On Sunday, police said a man with a rifle who claimed to be "self-investigating" a baseless online conspiracy theory entered a Washington, D.C., pizzeria and fired the weapon inside the restaurant. So, yes, fake news is a big problem.

This passage makes something like the following argument:

1. Edgar Maddison Welch was sufficiently worried about the Pizzagate conspiracy he read online to investigate it by going to Comet Ping Pong in Washington D.C..
2. So, fake news is a big problem.

This is a pretty common, and very bad, argument. One case of someone having sufficient credence in a theory to think it worth investigating does not establish any general conclusions about the problem posed by some category of information. One report about the destruction wrought by feral hogs does not establish that feral hogs are a big problem: we need systematic evidence about the chaos they cause.[32] To establish a general conclusion from this argument, we would either need more cases of the phenomenon causing a problem, or a generalising premise that suggests that

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[32] It turns out that feral hogs *are* a big problem. See, (Reply-all 2019)

the single case is representative. For our purposes, the question isn't whether there is a better argument in the offing, but why this bad argument is so tempting. My suspicion is that writers get away with this argument because as soon as we mention 'fake news', we cue up an ideology of media manipulation that includes the conclusion of the argument: that fake news is in fact a big problem.[33]

Two examples of 'fake news' cuing up ideological content do not conclusively demonstrate that this ideological cuing is a significant problem, and a proper investigation of the role of the ideology of media manipulation in academic writing and journalism would be a much bigger project (see Farkas and Schou 2020). My hope is that these examples provide evidence that motivates taking the contention that 'fake news' cues up bad ideology seriously.

4.2. Overgeneration

Much as they think that the theoretical argument overgenerates because too many terms have semantic defects, both Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken (2019a: 8) and Brown (2019: 151) worry that the political argument overgenerates, committing us to abandoning an unreasonable amount of our vocabulary.

One version of this objection contends that since almost any term of our epistemic and political vocabulary *could* be co-opted by authoritarians, the proponent of abandonment is committed to abandoning all of our epistemic and political terms (see Brown 2019: 151). This objection misses the point. The argument for abandoning 'fake news' doesn't rest on the principle that we should pre-emptively abandon any term that *could* be used by bad political projects – that would leave us with basically no nouns or adjectives left – but rather on the principle that we should abandon terms *when* they have been successfully co-opted by bad political projects.[34]

A better version of the overgeneration objection contends that even the more restricted principle that we abandon terms when they *have* been successfully co-opted overgenerates. There are a couple of versions of this objection to consider:

i) Abandoning co-opted words commits us to a cycle of abandonment, innovation, and weaponization (Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken 2019: 13);
ii) Abandoning co-opted words commits us to abandoning huge amounts of English.

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[33] This isn't the only possibility - maybe it's common knowledge that we believe that 'fake news' is a serious problem, so we can all assert it without evidence.
[34] The proposal also doesn't claim that historical oppression is sufficient for abandonment. The fact that 'rationality' and 'reason' have been systematically used to portray colonised peoples as subhuman and thereby justify their slavery and oppression (Mills 1999), doesn't entail that these terms are currently being used by bad political projects (although it is evidence that they are).

In *The Rooster's Egg*, Patricia Williams describes the experience of being a Black Woman in academia:

> It seems that I am running out of words these days. I feel if I am on a linguistic treadmill that has gradually but unmistakably increased in speed, so that no word I use to positively describe myself or my scholarly projects lasts for more than five seconds. I can no longer justify my presence in academia, for example, with words that exist in the English language. The moment I find some symbol of my presence in the rarefied halls of elite institutions, it gets stolen, co-opted, filled with negative meaning. (Williams 1995 p. 27)

One might worry that the proponent of abandonment is equally vulnerable to the linguistic treadmill. Even if they are successful in encouraging their fellows to give up a term that has been co-opted by a bad political project, they will still need a term to do the relevant descriptive work, and this term will also be vulnerable to being co-opted by the bad political project. A proponent of abandonment may end up in a cycle of abandonment, innovation, and weaponization, as their opponents respond to innovation by stealing each new term in turn.

A couple of points about this worry. If we abandoned 'fake news' to the right-wing ideologues, it's misleading to say that we'd need to invent a new term to do the descriptive work of 'fake news'. Part of the problem is that speakers are trying to use 'fake news' to do a bunch of different bits of descriptive work, and lots of this work can be done by established words (like 'lie', 'false', and 'bullshit'). More importantly, it isn't obvious that the cycle of abandonment and innovation is bad strategy. Sometimes successful political resistance just requires fighting over the same territory again and again.

Another concern is that abandoning words that are used for bad political projects commits us to giving up huge swathes of English. Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken contend that a great deal of our *epistemic* terminology has been weaponized (2019a: 13). Think of the use of 'biased' and 'lying' in authoritarian anti-media narratives. Brown contends that weaponization is endemic to our *political* vocabulary, pointing out the use of 'feminist' and 'socialist' as attack words (Brown 2019: 151). This objection is a refrain of the slippery slope objection we considered 3.1., and my response is similar. Some words contribute enormously to bad political projects, and other words contribute more marginally. We should only abandon words that make significant bad contributions. Working out whether the line of significant contribution lies is a difficult project, and working out whether 'feminist', 'socialist', 'lying' and 'biased' are on balance politically helpful or not would require looking at these cases in considerable detail.

I don't want to downplay the radical character of the political argument for abandonment, rather to get clear on why it is radical. It isn't radical because it claims that we should abandon any term that *could* be used for authoritarian propaganda, or are used in some cases for bad political purposes. It is radical because lots of

terms of the English language are currently being used to systematically introduce bad ideology, contributing significantly to bad political projects (in the UK context, consider: 'striver', 'hardworking', 'immigrant'). When we find ourselves in a bad place, we need a radical response.[35]

5. Towards an Anti-Fascist Conceptual Ethics

The kind of politically motivated and negative project of conceptual engineering I've been making the case for has a long history in analytic philosophy. Carnap's discussion of explication is often taken to be one of the earliest examples of conceptual engineering, motivated by his desire to replace ordinary messy terms with sharply defined terms. This history plays down the political—and plausibly anti-fascist—motivations of (parts of) the Vienna Circle (Galison 1990, Uebel 2005). The circle's manifesto made explicit the connection between the scientific world conception and work towards "a new organisation of economic and social relations." (Carnap, Hahn, and Neurath 1929). Before WW2, their anti-metaphysical approach to philosophy was aimed at both conservative views, and the *Völkisch* metaphysics associated with the Nazi party (Galison 1990). We might also want to read this attitude into Carnap's later criticism of Heidegger (Carnap 1959). It is plausible that there was a shared commitment to a voluntaristic racial eliminitivism, according to which racial categories—although meaningful—ought to be rejected on political grounds (Bright 2019). This project was not prescriptivist: Carnap's principle of tolerance can be read as a commitment radical linguistic freedom (albeit given pretty stringent semantic and syntactic constraints) (Carnap 1934/7).

In closing, I want to comment on the limitations of abandonment projects. German after the second world war is an instructive example of the widespread capture of language by bad ideology, and of abandonment as a tactic of resistance (Komska 2019). The Nazi political project involved investing huge amounts of everyday vocabulary with fascist ideology (Klemperer 2006), leaving German speakers post-war in a difficult situation, unsure of which words carried unwitting baggage. In response, compilations of problematic words were produced—such as the Dictionary of the Inhuman (1945)—a tradition that continues today with the non-word of the year. The literary collective *Group 47* called for a project of *clearcutting* that led to them producing bizarre plays and poetry, utilising a radically frugal vocabulary. These grand abandonment projects were arguably unsuccessful. Yuliya Komska argues that by committing to a project of linguistic prescriptivism focused on the evils done by fascist language, this large-scale abandonment project became an obsessional search for linguistic purity that forgot the positive social role of language and neglected the role of innovation and disruption in resisting the fascist tendencies of language. Ultimately the product wasn't a vibrant language of resistance but what Wolfgang Fritz Haug called a *helpless anti-fascism.*

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[35] Here I'm echoing Finlayson on overgeneration worries about the claim that pornography silences women (Finlayson 2015: 786).

What lesson should we draw from the failure of abandonment to counteract Nazi ideology? I don't think that the lesson is that abandonment is futile: there are plenty of cases where abandoning problematic terms was politically effective (slur terms provide us with abundant examples). And, the kind of radical abandonment practiced by groups like *Group 47* disregards the necessity considerations that I built into the political argument for abandonment, leaving a language stripped of descriptive resources. The lesson is that linguistic resistance projects need to embrace a bundle of different strategies, including contestation, correction, and disruption (Komska, Moyd, and Gramling 2019), as well as discourse-level interventions (Tirrell 2018), (Langton 2019), metalinguistic negation (Haslanger 2012 C4), communicative disruptions (Sterken 2019), and positive propaganda (Stanley 2015). Linguistic resistance projects also need to work together with positive ameliorative projects to cultivate terms that are suitable for better political projects. If we are going to oppose oppression in its manifest forms, we will need all the linguistic tools we can get. But first, let's please stop talking about fake news.

Acknowledgements

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