Britain's Fake News Inquiry: Old Wine in New Bottles

By Dr. Binoy Kampmark
Global Research, February 02, 2017

Any inquiry into fake news is much like having a Royal Commission into the make up and motivation for Halal food. (The latter absurd proposition has been put forth by a few Australian politicians irritated by the Islamist bogeyman.) Neither mission is particularly helpful, other than to illustrate a mounting ignorance about a phenomenon that always was.

In the United Kingdom, the Culture, Media and Sports Committee has made an announcement that it will investigate claims about the public being persuaded by untruths and the dazzling influence of propaganda. Invited submissions are to consider, among others, such questions as to what fake news is and where "biased but legitimate commentary shade into propaganda and lies"; the impact of such news on "public understanding of the world, and also on the public response to traditional journalism".[1]

In the hyperbolic words of committee chairman Damian Collins MP, the rise of such fabrications constituted "a threat to democracy and undermines the confidence in the media in general". The point is almost prosaic, given that Britain has been labouring under such fabrications and propaganda for a good deal since the seedy reign of tycoon Rupert Murdoch commenced.

A society that actually reads *The Sun* for factual enlightenment is bound to be a victim of the now touted propaganda that is supposedly afflicting the public. It is astonishing that the only reason that "fake news" has renewed currency is because of recent flavourings emanating from the alt-right, or from the Kremlin. In truth, the condition is a pre-existing one in the fourth estate.

Fake news is standard: cereal, wheat and bran, the fibre of the information world. It has been the foodstuff of media for decades, if not centuries. What matters now is the outrage felt by those in news outlets who believe that a tinge of objectivity still remains in the process of news production. It ignores that news that is often not authentic has always been the mainstay of journalism, a case of unchecked sources, careless investigation or, in some cases, pure invention.

Much of journalism, for all its purported merits, supplies an illusion of objectivity. Government spin doctors have capitalised, and some, such as former Prime Minister Tony Blair's terrier-like Alastair Campbell, were formerly of the press. Campbell, as Director of Communications and Strategy, knew exactly how information might gestate and, in time, mutate into "news".

If one was to be rude about it, calculated dissimulation would be far more appropriate. Consider the way a person is interviewed on the arrival of a press crew. The subject

interviewed is placed in an artificial setting pretending to read papers he has never touched, nor is interested in. The camera is trained in such a manner suggesting an open office space with light, when the office is essentially a closet space with a dying plant in the corner. The fake walk is staged, as is the fake reading with shuffling paper.

The Australian watch dog media program, Media Watch, over the course of its history regularly exposed instances of flagrant abuse of the supposed rule of authenticity. Journalists pretended to be in one city when they were evidently in another. Scenes were staged, car chases manufactured. Reports were filed from hotel rooms.Similarly, Evelyn Waugh touches upon this very idea of exaggeration in *Scoop* (1938), the classic novel on Fleet Street journalism in its sensationalist form. Truth is something otherwise left to others. Instead, the herd instinct kicks in and clamours.

Imaginary bodies, tracks of devastation and mutilation, will be conjured up for good copy. Fictional stories will stem from arranged liaisons, much in keeping with Clint Smoker in Martin Amis' *Yellow Dog* (2003). Again, the State will always volunteer its own version to be circulated to the unwitting press corps: in the Vietnam War, it was the infamous body count masking the US inability to win; in Iraq 2003, it was spectral Weapons of Mass Destruction. Fakery all round; fakery through and through even from self-appointed defenders of Freedom's Land.

The death of the credible investigative journalist in the wake of the teeming blogosphere, and the nature of how news is actually crafted, suggests that fake news had a crown well and truly made before it was brought out during the US election campaign in 2016.

Fake news is no longer the preserve of the ruthless press oligarch, disturbed tabloid journalist, or a communications official: it is the democratic preserve of the people. It caters for those who wish to be deceived, since truth is not so much uncomfortable as mind splittingly painful.

Where, then, does the burden lie to combat such material? Where it always did: at the end of the production process (for news is undeniably *produced*, as opposed to discovered). It is the consumer of news who remains judge, the reader, however well informed. All agents have responsibility to oversee it, to question it, but the ultimate point of reception should be the greatest questioner, checking, reading, painstakingly, between the lines. Unfortunately, much in the way of news is merely read to affirm a pre-existing position.

Such inquiries as those proposed by the UK parliament cannot mask a broader purpose, which is to rein in the influence and spread of alternative media. This will be achieved through imposing on social media outlets obligations to stop, in the words of Collins, "the spreading of fake news," a point analogous to tech companies who "have accepted they have a social responsibility to combat piracy online and the illegal sharing of content". The firm, gagging hand of censorship is being readied.[2]

One would have thought that views not connected to the conventional organs of the Mainstream Press add to, rather than spoil, the broth. Percolating through the media networks, some semblance of a picture can be attained. Not so for mainstream stalwarts who believe that their profession is the mainstay of a bright, spoken truth.

*Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar atSelwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMITUniversity, Melbourne. Email:*bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry2/

[2] http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/news-parliament-2015/fake-news-launch-16-17/

Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page

Become a Member of Global Research

Articles by: Dr. Binoy
Kampmark