Fake News about 'Fake News' – The Media Performance Pyramid

In the wake of Brexit and Trump, 'mainstream' media have done the formerly unthinkable by focusing on media bias. The intensity of focus has been such that the Oxford Dictionaries have announced that 'post-truth' is their 'Word of the Year 2016'.

'Post-truth' refers to 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.

Students of 'brainwashing under freedom' will notice that this bears a striking resemblance to 20th century US policy advisor Reinhold Niebuhr's insistence on the use of 'emotionally potent over-simplifications' to control the public mind. It's nothing new, in other words.

We learn from a lengthy article on Wikipedia that 'post-truth politics' is driven by 'fake news':

> 'Fake news websites publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation to drive web traffic inflamed by social media.'

This 'fake news' is being harvested by social media that seal unwitting users in airtight 'filter bubbles':

> 'A filter bubble is a result of a personalized search in which a website algorithm selectively guesses what information a user would like to see based on information about the user (such as location, past click behavior and search history) and, as a result, users become separated from information that disagrees with their viewpoints, effectively isolating them in their own cultural or ideological bubbles.'

The results are terrifying indeed. Author Andrew Smith argued in the Guardian that, post-Trump and Brexit, future historians will decide 'whether this will go down as the year democracy revealed itself unworkable in the age of the internet'. The forecast is grim:

> 'One day, I suspect, we will look back in disbelief that we let the net-induced friction on civil society reach this pitch, because if we didn't know before, we know now that our stark choice is between social networks' bottom line and democracy. I know which I prefer.'

These words appeared less than two years after the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo massacre,

when a Guardian editorial had [opined](#):

> 'Any society that's serious about liberty has to defend the free flow of ugly words, even ugly sentiments.'

Now, it seems, anyone 'serious about liberty' has to *resist* the free flow of ugly words for fear of 'net-induced friction on civil society'. Whatever that means.

Smith was reacting to 'the accidental or deliberate propagation of misinformation via social media'. Many millions of people 'saw and believed fake reports that the pope had endorsed Trump; Democrats had paid and bussed anti-Trump protesters...'; and so on.

Curiously, Smith made no mention of the relentless 'mainstream' and social media efforts to link Trump with Putin seen by many millions of people around the globe. Nor did Smith mention the upside of social media – the democratisation of outreach, the related growth in popular support for Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, and for left-wing movements like Spain's Podemos.

Like the rest of 'mainstream' journalism, Smith had nothing to say about the leading role played by traditional corporate media in the 'deliberate propagation of misinformation'. A remarkable omission, given the unprecedented ferocity of the [smear campaign](#) against Jeremy Corbyn.

In one news report, seven different Guardian journalists [discussed](#) the rise of 'fake news' around the world without mentioning the key role of 'mainstream' media. This led to conclusions such as:

> 'Fake news is not a problem of any scale in Australia: the media market, dominated by a handful of key players serving a population of just over 21 million people, does not seem fragmented enough.'

Some perspective was [provided](#) by former CIA counterterrorism official Philip Giraldi in 2009:

> 'The Rupert Murdoch chain has been used extensively to publish false intelligence from the Israelis and occasionally from the British government.'

Another Guardian piece was titled:

> 'Bursting the Facebook bubble: we asked voters on the left and right to swap feeds – Social media has made it easy to live in filter bubbles, sheltered from opposing viewpoints. So what happens when liberals and conservatives trade realities?'

The problem being:

> 'Facebook users are increasingly sheltered from opposing viewpoints – and reliable news sources [sic] – and the viciously polarized state of our national politics appears to be one of the results.'

Facebook readers, then, are sheltered from the giant, global corporate media that dominate our newspapers, magazines, publishing companies, cinema, TVs, radios and computer screens – even though social media are themselves corporate media. And presumably we are to believe that readers of 'reliable news sources' – the BBC, Guardian, The Times, Telegraph and other traditional outlets – are forever being exposed to 'opposing viewpoints' by these media.

If we beg to differ, having studied the media intensively for two decades, it may be because we belong on a list of 200 websites that 'are at the very least acting as bona-fide "useful idiots" of the Russian intelligence services, and are worthy of further scrutiny', according to the PropOrNot group. The Washington Post reports:

> 'PropOrNot's monitoring report, which was provided to The Washington Post in advance of its public release, identifies more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season, with combined audiences of at least 15 million Americans. On Facebook, PropOrNot estimates that stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.'

Matt Taibbi notes in Rolling Stone that outlets as diverse as AntiWar.com, LewRockwell.com and the Ron Paul Institute are on the list, although the Washington Post offered no information about the PropOrNot group, 'which offered zero concrete evidence of coordination with Russian intelligence agencies'. Chris Hedges of Truthdig, which is on the list, describes the Post's report as an 'updated form of Red-Baiting.' He added:

> 'This attack signals an open war on the independent press. Those who do not spew the official line will be increasingly demonized in corporate echo chambers such as the Post or CNN as useful idiots or fifth columnists.'

Significantly, the Guardian experiment in swapping social media concluded with this extraordinary comment from one of the participants, again just two years after Charlie Hebdo:

> 'Maybe we should stop having social media. For all the things that social media has done in terms of making it easier for me to stay in touch with someone that I was vaguely friends with in college, maybe the ability with social media for people to construct their own reality to create a mob is not worth it.'

A LIBERAL BREAKS BAD

Reporting from the 'fake news' frontline, a Guardian piece titled, '"Alt-right'" online poison nearly turned me into a racist', described the experience of an anonymous commentator: outwardly, a normal, sane liberal:

> 'I am a happily married, young white man. I grew up in a happy, Conservative household. I've spent my entire life – save the last four months – as a progressive liberal. All of my friends are very liberal or left-leaning centrists.'

It sounds idyllic – presumably he was a Guardian reader and helped the elderly cross the road. But then things started to go wrong:

> 'This, I think, is where YouTube's "suggested videos" can lead you down a rabbit hole... I unlocked the Pandora's box of "It's not racist to criticise Islam!" content.'

Despite his virtuous liberal heart, 'Anonymous' started to drift to the dark side:

> 'I'd started to roll my eyes when my friends talked about liberal, progressive things. What was wrong with them?'

Eventually, realising he was becoming an intolerant racist, he confronted himself:

> 'What you're doing is turning you into a terrible, hateful person.'

This is a close copy of material that appeared during the original version of McCarthyite hysteria. Between 1948 and 1954, Hollywood made more than forty propaganda films with titles like, 'I Married A Communist', and 'I Was A Communist For The FBI'. Large-circulation magazines were titled, 'How Communists Get That Way' and 'Communists Are After Your Child.' (Quoted, Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, Harper Colophon, 1990, pp.427-8)

With perfect irony, this attack on 'fake news' may itself have been faked. Satirist Godfrey Elfwick has since [claimed](#)authorship of the Guardian story. Elfwick certainly has form, having previously [hoaxed](#) several national news organisations on related issues.

Elsewhere, The Sun newspaper, no less, warned against 'fake news' in an article titled, 'Don't believe the hyperlink':

> 'Fake news is on the rise. In the past three months of the White House race the top 20 false stories about it were bigger on Facebook than the top 20 from the world's most reputable news outlets.' (Robert Colvile, The Sun, November 19, 2016)

The key word here is 'reputable'. In 2012, The Sun [wrote](#) of the Hillsborough football disaster:

> 'Nothing can excuse The Sun's Page One presentation, under the headline The Truth.
>
> 'It was inaccurate, grossly insensitive and offensive. This version of events was NOT the truth.'

Fake news, in other words.

In the Mirror, Pat Flanagan helped clarify the meaning of 'reputable': 'the top 20 fake news stories during the presidential campaign collectively outperformed the top 20 legitimate stories'. (Flanagan, 'Web of lies shows net is strangling democracy', Mirror, November 25, 2016)

So the 'reputable' outlets (the BBC [calls](#) them 'legitimate news outlets') were those producing 'legitimate stories'.

In May 2004, the BBC [reported](#) of Flanagan's newspaper:

> 'Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan has been sacked after the newspaper conceded photos of British soldiers abusing an Iraqi were fake.
>
> 'In a statement the Mirror said it had fallen victim to a "calculated and malicious hoax" and that it would be "inappropriate" for Morgan to continue.'

As John Hilley [notes](#) on his Zenpolitics blog, the most fantastic moment of post-real irony was reached when the BBC hosted Tony Blair's Iraq spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, defending the term 'post-truth'. Campbell said:

> 'It's acknowledging that politics, which has always been rough, has moved to a different phase where politicians who lie now appear to get rewarded for it.'
> (BBC2 Jeremy Vine Show, November 16, 2016)

THE PERFORMANCE PYRAMID – CONFORMITY WITHOUT DESIGN

To reiterate, 'fake news' is said to refer to 'websites [that] publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation to drive web traffic'. A simple, table-top experiment can help us understand why this definition can be generalised to all corporate media, not just social media.

Place a square wooden framework on a flat surface and pour into it a stream of ball bearings, marbles, or other round objects. Some of the balls may bounce out, but many will form a layer within the wooden framework; others will then find a place atop this first layer. In this way, the flow of ball bearings steadily builds new layers that inevitably produce a pyramid-style shape.

This experiment is used to demonstrate how near-perfect crystalline structures such as snowflakes arise in nature without conscious design. We will use it here as a way of understanding Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's '[propaganda model](#)' of 'mainstream' performance.

Imagine now that the four sides of the wooden framework are labelled to indicate the framing conditions shaping the corporate media:

> 1) Corporate nature, elite/parent company ownership and profit-maximising orientation
> 2) Dependence on allied corporate advertisers for 50% or more of revenues
> 3) Dependence on cheap, subsidised news supplied by state-corporate allies
> 4) Political, economic, legal carrots and sticks rewarding corporate media conformity and punishing dissent

When facts, ideas, journalists and managers are poured into this framework, the result is a highly filtered, power-friendly 'pyramid' of media performance. Every aspect of corporate media output is shaped by these framing conditions. Consider media coverage of the recent death of Fidel Castro. In his book, 'Inventing Reality' (1993), political analyst Michael Parenti wrote:

'References may occasionally appear in the press about the great disparities of wealth and poverty in Third World nations, but US corporate imperialism is never treated as one of the causes of such poverty. Indeed, it seems the US press has never heard of US imperialism. Imperialism, the process by which the dominant interests of one country expropriate the land, labor, markets, capital, and natural resources of another, and neo-imperialism, the process of expropriation that occurs without direct colonization, are both unmentionables. Anyone who might try to introduce the subject would be quickly dismissed as "ideological". Media people, like mainstream academics and others, might recognize that the US went through a brief imperialist period around the Spanish-American War. And they would probably acknowledge that there once existed ancient Roman imperialism and nineteenth-century British imperialism and certainly twentieth-century "Soviet imperialism." But not many, if any, mainstream editors and commentators would consider the existence of US imperialism (or neo-imperialism), let alone entertain criticisms of it.

'Media commentators, like political leaders, treat corporate investment as a solution to Third World poverty and indebtedness rather than as a cause. What US corporations do in the Third World is a story largely untold...

'What capitalism as a transnational system does to impoverish people throughout the world is simply not a fit subject for the US news media. Instead, poverty is treated as its own cause. We are asked to believe that Third World people are poor because that has long been their condition; they live in countries that are overpopulated, or there is something about their land, culture, or temperament that makes them unable to cope. Subsistence wages, forced displacement from homesteads, the plunder of natural resources, the lack of public education and public health programs, the suppression of independent labor unions and other democratic forces by US-supported police states, such things – if we were to believe the way they remain untreated in the media – have nothing much to do with poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.' (Parenti, 'Inventing Reality,' 2nd edition, St. Martin's Press, 1993, pp.175-6)

Given the four framing conditions described above, it is easy to understand why Parenti's facts and arguments find no place in the corporate media performance 'pyramid'. This means that everything that appears in the 'pyramid' about the West's relations with the Third World is either fake news, or half-truth presented in a fake context.

Thus a leading article after the death of Fidel Castro in The Times blamed 'the clumsiness of American diplomacy that, in trying to rid the world of an opportunistic agitator, built up his global image as a plucky opponent of Yankee imperialism'. (Leading article, 'Cuba Libre; For half a century Fidel Castro's country has stagnated under his repressive rule. Now the island has a chance to free itself from his malign shadow,' The Times, November 28, 2016)

Parenti's accurate analysis of US imperial violence is replaced by a mocking, fake reference to US 'clumsiness'. The fakery is such that The Times actually reverses the truth of history:

'Washington now has a chance to coax Cuba down the road to liberty.'

In a Guardian leader, Parenti's version of truth was replaced by another fake take:

'Castro's international reputation was built partly on a foreign policy of supporting other third world struggles that, while not perfect, has certainly been far more impressive than most of the west.'

Cuba's foreign policy is thus compared to that of the less 'impressive' West, rather than presented as a desperate attempt to escape and survive Western imperialism. When the Guardian says that, in Castro, some 'see a dictator who trampled human rights', it fails to mention how the British government curtailed democratic freedoms at home when threatened by a far more evenly matched enemy from 1939-1945.

With the truth nowhere in sight, an Independent leader can deliver fake news of fake hope:

> 'Cuba has no reason to fear a free media, free-trade unions and free trade with her neighbours (assuming her neighbours want it).'

The superpower's long, terrible history of subordinating Latin American people to US profit and power – most recently helping to overthrow democracy in Haiti and Honduras, and supporting a failed coup attempt in Venezuela – is replaced by a faked discussion of Cuba's 'uneasy relationship with its powerful superpower neighbour'. The editors added:

> 'It would be tragic if misunderstandings and diplomatic blunders wrecked what would be a transformative rebuilding of relations between two nations who have more in common than they care to admit.'

A comment from Noam Chomsky puts all of this in perspective:

> 'Terrorist activities continued under Nixon, peaking in the mid- 1970s, with attacks on fishing boats, embassies, and Cuban offices overseas, and the bombing of a Cubana airliner, killing all seventy-three passengers...
>
> 'So matters proceeded, while Castro was condemned by [Western] editors for maintaining an "armed camp, despite the security from attack promised by Washington in 1962." The promise should have sufficed, despite what followed...'

Put simply, it is not reasonable to expect corporate media to report honestly on a world dominated by corporations. With perfect irony, the latest focus on 'fake news' is itself fake news because the corporate media never have discussed and never will discuss the framing conditions that make it a leading purveyor of 'hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation'.

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