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Fake news: The truth behind the lies

When discussing the vast scale and impact of "Fake News," it is worth keeping in mind that the term itself has become a politically charged rhetorical device, which does not necessarily make it the best descriptor for a phenomenon that is swiftly changing how the world digests information. Nevertheless, the term has caught on. So it can serve as an easily recognisable shorthand, though it is at most an umbrella term for various distinct types of disinformation and misinformation.

The world's leading universities are opening research programs looking into this, while governments and international organisations have made repeated announcements that they now consider the pollutive qualities of disinformation and misinformation a major contemporary threat.

Many institutions and companies are creating specialised services focusing on how to counteract it — there's a noticable rise in fact-checking sites, and rising political pressure on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook to address the issue on their platforms. The President of the United States, all the while, uses the term "Fake News" broadly and repeatedly in his fight against political opponents, often in a wide variety of contexts.

Journalists, who just yesterday were anticipating another wave of dismissals due to their industry's continuing crisis when it comes to finding a financial model, are looking to the future with a glimmer of hope, believing (and rightly so) that they have a special role to play in the response to these new challenges.

In fact, the term "fake news" describes a broad variety of communications phenomena and practices. Some of them were known and well-studied long ago (just like the ways to counteract them). But some practices have turned out to be new, specific mutations created by the digital revolution. The concept of fake news also describes a small but very worrying group of "weaponised" communication technologies, brought into today's Internet reality from the dusty corridors of the Cold War. These seem to be more dangerous and malicious in the new reality than their original creators could have imagined.

A classification developed by the NGO FirstDraft is often used to describe the term "fake news". The reference system in this chart represents "harmfulness" and "premeditation." Less harmful varieties feature on the left of the chart, while those on the edges have more to do with "premeditated" content, and those in the middle are mostly the result of mistakes or misconceptions (more misinformation than deliberate disinformation). At the same time, any form of "false" information poses a threat, even satire: Jokes that are misunderstood or taken at face value may lead to as great negative consequences as deliberately "weaponised" disinformation.

Deception and propaganda

Being fallible and being deceptive are two very different, very human traits. Deceptive communication, one way or another, is present in all disciplines of communication science – be it interpersonal, corporate, or strategic deception at the state level. Deception is a natural (though regrettable) practice.

Deception — disguise, imitation, false leads — is a normal element in the military world, and in recent years

also in the corporate one; when the lives of soldiers (managers, products, services) and civilians are at stake, when the cost of a mistake almost always translates into mass deaths (or dismissals). The desire to outsmart an opponent, to intimidate them and cause them to make false moves, is justifiable in the modern world full of communications, and in certain circumstances is better than the large-scale use of direct force.

Strategic deception is possible without direct military conflict, but as the second half of the 20th century demonstrated, it is undesirable: Instead, nuclear-armed countries made efforts to increase mutual trust (by renouncing deception and following the principle of "trust but verify"). Large-scale deception of an opponent who has the power to blow to smithereens not only the enemy but all of civilisation is a dangerous and unsettling business. During the Cold War, when tension would occasionally jump to the "finger on the button" level, opposing countries developed the principle of deterrence: To prevent your opponent from making a tragic mistake, the expected retaliation should be so obvious and painful that they will prefer to do nothing instead of acting.

Meanwhile, the peculiarity of what we are now discussing as fake news is not deception and lies as such, but intentional use of such practices in national and, ultimately, global mass communication. This is what causes crises and neurotic anxiety within society. That is to say: Accidental deception, unintentional use of lies and self-deception that affects others are unpleasant, and our brains have a built-in mechanism of doubt and critical analysis. But a strategically constructed and employed deception trap is a weapon, which is harmful not only to those it targets, but possibly to everyone, including its creators.

The other side of trust

The main damage from fake news – both as a phenomenon and as a concept – comes from the destruction of public trust, especially in the country's independent mass media. All countries, not only democratic ones, have some form of such institutions: Together with an institutional monopoly on violence, they seal the foundations of the social contract.

The credibility of information, especially when it comes from the authorities, is a "double-edged sword", which has been in the hands of mass media and journalists (or party ideologists in the USSR and China, or ayatollahs in Iran) for many years. Recent decades have demonstrated that totalitarian lies and attempts to isolate citizens cannot hold together the foundations of a state. Unfortunately, however, the parallel processes of building trust, and its destruction, are also happening in democratic countries. Surprisingly, the reasons for the decline in trust are almost the same as those that support it: by criticising the authorities, mass media affect the relations between politicians and their electorates (which are not always based on common sense), and, although they seemingly fulfil a "purifying" social mission, they simultaneously reduce their credibility in the eyes of individual groups.

The outcome of such a two-track process is now sitting in the White House, insulting the *New York Times* and CNN, to the utter delight of that part of his electorate whose interests and habits have been affected by the impenetrably liberal position of the newspaper and the pro-Democratic Party focus of the TV channel. This mechanism, described by Eli Pariser in his book *The Filter Bubble* back in the mid-noughties, has been amplified by social media.

At the same time, digital distribution of information has introduced another problem (or, to be more accurate, aggravated it). In the good old analogue world, the number of information sources was limited by both political and economic factors. The number of newspapers and magazines was defined not only by supply and demand, but also by the physical possibilities for their production and distribution. The number of analogue TV channels and radio stations was limited by the restricted number of frequencies, distributed by the state. The structure of editorial mass media in itself was an additional limitation: a multi-level model, in which the editor played the role of a gatekeeper, deciding whether to allow a certain message to reach the audience. But the theory of traditional communication channels, formulated by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, turned out to be defenceless in the face of technological development.

The liberation of Authors via Internet publishing, and the mass media's (frankly, forced) loss of the gatekeeper role, has provoked exponential growth of sources of information, which became available to everyone simultaneously. In order to ensure continued functioning of the mass media's traditional business model,

media outlets had to constantly boost traffic on their websites and social media. Since media consumption is becoming more and more dynamic, journalists and editors are forced to rely on headlines more than ever, as this may be the only way to catch readers' attention.

Hence the rise of clickbait: the art of creating headlines that attract readers (but don't necessarily correspond to the meaning or the essence of the underlying text). As in the case of double-edged mistrust, clickbait poses no direct threat; however, after a while, the quantity of deceptions becomes a quality all its own, and society's willingness to trust the messages coming from mainstream media declines — after all, they deceive us with those headlines!

The third double-edged property of the trust problem is the mass media's disregard of the psychological traumas of the societies in which they operate. As mentioned above, with the benefit of hindsight we realised that we underestimated the risks faced in the post-communist, globalising world. There was too much confidence placed in Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" concept, and too little thinking about potential generational conflicts – from digital inequality to societal frustrations caused by migration.

In almost all developed countries, mainstream politicians have ignored the "frustration agenda", leaving it in the hands of populists and radicals; the situation in Russia is unique, because, although this agenda was exploited by nearly all politicians, nobody except Putin and his ideologists has managed to come up with a "Russian" version. If we remove bureaucratic language and state patriotism from the Kremlin's rhetoric, the isolationist, anti-globalist messages, with clear traits of the "white race movement", becomes obvious.

Mass media in Russia, in the West, and even in America noticed those messages but misinterpreted them, probably assuming that such isolationism and nationalism were developing on the "periphery" of society and were marginal. Their rhetoric opposed (or supported) various kinds of ultra-right geeks, or aggressive anti-globalists, while such attitudes were apparently shared by much wider population groups, capable of changing the electoral landscape even in very well-established and stable democracies (as the 2016 US elections showed).

Consequently, while the media were throwing mud at marginal politicians and their views, they failed to realise that they were, in fact, criticising and accusing quite significant groups in society. And those groups very quickly started doubting such media, and then started openly calling their critics "fake news". The direct result of these mistakes is the unprecedented low trust expressed by the US public towards institutions including the mass media: Surveys show that less than one-third of respondents are ready to support journalists' position on certain issues without hesitation.

The situation in authoritarian political cultures – Russia, for example – is further complicated by the government's active attempts to reduce the influence of independent mass media on society. Starting from the mid-2000s, state channels started intentionally worsening the already unbalanced relations between the media and society. By tearing the delicate fabric of trust, they were counting more and more on the volume of their own loudspeakers, without expecting that their weapon against trust would also backfire. Today, it looks as though there are no more institutions of "universal trust" left in Russia.

Fake news platforms

There are several types of platforms serving the fake news phenomenon, best classified by the motivations of those who commission them, the behaviour of the implementers and the impact they have (here I will concentrate on what is happening in the United States).

Analysing fake news from the liberal point of view, we have to understand that there are cases of quality journalism or "proper activism" from the opposite side of the political spectrum too (which could serve as examples for liberals). Mutual accusations are very different in nature: While liberal criticism of fake news focuses on consumers being deceived (false information, edited information, content distortion) and weaponisation of news stories (or what we in Russia call "the atmosphere of hate"); conservative critics complain primarily about the bias of liberal news (partisanship, desire to support or highlight only political opinions they agree with) and "elitism" (not unfounded, as demonstrated above). Accusations of "liberal tantrums" have been also added recently.

The most prominent example is commercial fake news: websites created exclusively to distribute falsified pseudo-news content, which monetise traffic from social networks and use bot amplification and other tactics. The most interesting example is the [fake news factory in Macedonia](#), but there are also [purely American "news dumps"](#), which actively exploited the filter bubble effect with stories like "Hillary participates in cannibalistic rituals". Organisers of this orgy of deception have no specific political preferences: They were (and some of them still are) earning money on the political polarisation of the US, where, as we know, the audience is the most valuable. Each click in Google or on Facebook brings money to the owner of a fake news website.

Ultra-partisan websites and their networks, which exchange banners and links, and used such connections to expand distribution for Twitter and Reddit botnets, could be viewed as further examples of fake news platforms. Back in the autumn of 2015, certain web analytic tools (e.g. MediaMetric) started unexpectedly showing very high reader ratings for a certain group of conservative writers and bloggers, mainly connected to Breitbart. The dominance of these extremely one-sided conservative columnists (there was no journalism there, just biting, knee-jerk anti-Hillary slogans with links to various sources with materials compromising the Democratic candidate) were so impressive that I had to do my own investigation. My findings (which later received [quantitative confirmation](#) from a group of researchers led by the Yochai Benkler group from Harvard) showed the presence of specific "amplifying networks" for conservative websites, in which, apart from Breitbart, there are several other big traffic generators, such as Drudge Report, public accounts on Reddit and discussion groups on 4Chan/8Chan. These unexpected "amplifiers" also included RT and Sputnik, which discretely published links to conservative resources and, presumably, were engaged in link exchange with them.

It is rare that ultra-conservative websites are caught peddling blatant lies or fabrications. Their most common methods rather fall into the categories of misinformation and misleading context – deliberate misrepresentation by the authors, who refuse to listen to arguments from the opposite side (and consequently sees the world only in one light, treating any contradiction in terms of conspiracy theories), or providing false context for the information by, for example, making comparisons using dissimilar metrics, or portraying a single incident as a trend. This form of fake news is dangerous not only because it can be easily and effectively distributed among supporters of a certain point of view (using the same filter bubble effect), but also because the main if not only weapon of criticism against liberals is accusing them of deception and distortion of information. Any "column" on Breitbart will always mention "the lying mainstream media" (or perhaps "the lamestream media"), and these messages are always amplified by online bot farms and the Fox News channel.

The third type of fake news platforms are online propaganda resources, among which we can also list [RT](#).

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