

The Reality of “Fake News”

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Fake news as reality; the inability to navigate the waters in which it swims; a weakness in succumbing to material best treated with a huge pinch of salt. That, we are told, is the new condition of the global information environment.

Laura Sydell of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* furnished readers with one such example: “FBI Agent Suspected In Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead In Apparent Murder-Suicide.”[1] Shared over half a million times, it ran on a site “that had had the look and feel of a local newspaper” (not that you can feel the website [Denverguardian.com](#)).

There was not much to the site. It was the only story running, spawned on WordPress. Eventually, a triumphant Sydell, with the assistance of a head engineer at MasterMcNeil Inc., John Jansen, based in Berkeley, identified the individual in question behind the story. Justin Coler of Disinformedia, “got into fake news around 2013 to highlight the extremism of the white nationalist alt-right.”

This ushered in a life of information fakery, an attempt to “publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out that they were fiction.”

A dangerous dance is thereby initiated, one that assumes a false balance. The “meat,” as Coler calls it, is consumed more enthusiastically by some than others. Naturally, his target audience was always going to be the more indignant and loudly cheering one. Conjuring up the fiction to then condemn it only goes so far. The beast eventually develops legs, scurrying away from the truth.

This was very much the case in the reactions to supposed fake news stories. Some supporters would accept the product wholesale, ignoring the rebuttal. The Trump followers, claimed Coler, were “just waiting to eat up this red meat they they’re about to get served.”

This led to something of a perversion: to prove a point, Coler, as a registered Democrat, was effectively cultivating a market and exploiting it. He was even making money out of the credulous, even if they were backing another candidate.

Again, the wheel on this score is being re-invented. The jump to conclusions that fake news sites are somehow new is only matched by the ignorance about what came before – the carefully doctored text to defame a minority, the false narrative about a race, idea or culture (*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* come to mind), and the airbrushing of history.

Traditionally, the misinformation business was reserved for the higher end of the news production cycle: a William Randolph Hearst, a Rupert Murdoch, or a director of propaganda operations in a government (totalitarian or otherwise) ever enthusiastic about spinning the

story. The difference now is that the arm of dissimulation has been extended – to the ordinary citizen who has a huge array of sharing functions and social media platforms to spread a word.

Information in this era, being treated as some magic gold dust, is being packaged and fed to the public via various mediums. The only thing interesting about this aspect is the democratisation of production and dissemination. We are all potential directors of the fake news industry.

In that sense, fake news has seen a seamless incorporation into the commons – the dissemination of fictions, suppositions and fantasies, made available like domestic crockery to the everyday citizen. The effects of mass democracy can be, in parts, hideous. Technology, seen in conventional utopian circles as emancipative, has become the handmaiden for acts, conscious or otherwise, of orchestrated mendacity. Rather than freeing the mind and adding a corrective to standard media accounts, it can supplant them, becoming their own form of tyranny. Cheap, available, easy to use, the creation of a myth, spun with rapid ease via the blogosphere that mimics the newspaper, spreads like a violent brushfire through social media, burning down rival narratives with inexorable force.

Before you know it, clumsy Hillary Clinton is sharing the same fate with dotty Kim Kardashian, locking horns on fictional terrain about who died and which one did not, and what crime was committed or, as it often can be, not. Celebrity vacuity and political lies occupy the same terrain, and the muddle assumes total form via social media.

The digital giants of information, such as Google, claim that this phenomenon can be arrested by limiting advertising tools to websites in the service of fake news.

“Moving forward,” said Google in a statement to *Reuters*, “we will restrict ad serving on pages that misrepresent, misstate, or conceal information about the publisher, the publisher’s content, or the primary purpose of the web property.”[2]

This limited appraisal assumes that people engage in the fake news business do so purely for purely business motivations. Only the money matters; but what, of ideological motivation and basic malice?

Perhaps it is far more fitting that we accept one logical consequence of this information revolution: that we are here on this planet to also misinform and spread the fleeting lie, which is always easier than the lumbering truth. The danger here is the speed that lie rushes into the digital sphere, and eventually, print: rapid, it takes hold of the narrative, and eventually supplants the truth.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs>

[2] <http://www.theverge.com/2016/11/14/13630722/google-fake-news-advertising-ban-2016-us-election>

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