

# Fake News and the 2020 Election

by Michael Curtis



**It is more fitting to seek the truth of the matter** rather than have imaginary conceptions. Be sure it's true when you speak your words, it's a sin to tell a lie. Political crises come when false words are spoken.

At the raucous debate of Democratic presidential rivals in Charleston, South Carolina, on February 25, 2020 the candidates under unwelcome pressure sometimes misplaced the truth and expressed fake news with tortuous logic. Bernie Sanders, the obvious target of the debate, was said to be the preferred choice of Russian President Vladimir Putin to be the opponent of President Donald Trump. As an addition, Bernie was also linked indirectly to the Charleston church massacre in 2015.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg informed Sanders that Russia was supporting his campaign for the Democratic nomination, one

part of Putin's attempt to influence the 2020 election. Bloomberg apparently knew that Putin wanted Trump to be president of the U.S. and that was why Russia was helping Sanders become the nominee, so he would lose to Trump. To add to the confusion there is related unsubstantiated information. On February 20, 2020 Shelby Pierson, Homeland Security official for intelligence, is supposed to have told the House Intelligence Committee, headed by Adam Schiff, the indefatigable believer in Russia-Trump collusion, in a bipartisan briefing that Russia was resuming its policy of influencing U.S. elections. Schiff concluded by repeating his long held belief that Russia was opting for Trump in 2020.

Fake news and fake jobs, the repacking of information to fit one's opinions, have a long history. In ancient Rome, Octavian in his struggle to be and remain Roman Emperor Augustus in 27 B.C. engaged in misinformation about the will and testament of his rival Mark Antony. At one time Christians were declared to be engaged in cannibalism and incest. Starting in 1475 in Trent, Italy, when a two year old Christian boy was said to have been found in the basement of a Jewish home resulting in the entire Jewish community being arrested and 15 burned at the stake, Jews have had to face fake news of blood libels, anti-Jewish propaganda and accusations of the use of Christian blood for religious rites .

Fake news has also had a long history in the U.S. before and after independence. Ben Franklin on March 22, 1782 published a false account of atrocities, especially scalping, by Indians who worked with King George III against the American rebels. George Washington in a letter on June 26, 1796 to Alexander Hamilton expressed his "disinclination to be no longer buffeted in the public prints by a set of infamous scribblers." A disgraceful example of distortion was Walter Duranty, *New York Times* correspondent in the Soviet Union, 1922-1936, in his effort to make the Soviet Union attractive and seem a paradise, perpetrated sensational fake news,

including covering up the Stalinist campaign that claimed millions of lives, mostly in Ukraine. Perhaps most amusing was the surprising success of fake news on the CBS network broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* in October 1938 when Orson Welles presented a faux invasion by Martians taking place in New Jersey, and the broadcast supposedly caused panic among part of the audience.

The master of fake news was Joseph Goebbels, Nazi minister of propaganda, and virulent antisemite who implemented what Adolf Hitler had called the "big lie," a lie so great and infamous that no one could have the impudence to deny it.

It is disturbing that in discussions about the 2020 US presidential election many Americans believe that fake news, a more dramatic form of misinformation or disinformation, is a bigger threat than terrorism, illegal immigration, violent crime, or racism, and is causing significant harm. Indeed, a recent MIT study concludes that fake news is more likely to go viral than other news, because the fake news is more novel and evokes more emotion than valid news.

Though it is uncertain that fake news changed many people's mind in the 2016 U.S. election, and it is probable at the time that most political news exposure came from mainstream media outposts, the problem has become apparent. In April 2018 Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, declared that his organization did not do enough to "prevent these tools from being used for harm as well as good, that goes for fake news, foreign interference in elections, and hate speech."

The issue now is whether and to what extent fake news is influencing the 2020 election. Social media firms have deleted thousands of inauthentic accounts that seek to be influential, but this has not stopped all penetration. Though hundreds of fake accounts on social media have originated from other countries as well as from Russia, it is clear that Russia has established many fake accounts on social media to undermine

U.S. elections and cause chaos. Since 2015 Russia has used a web brigade, Internet Research Agency, a firm of 400 employees in St. Petersburg to this end. Putin had already established the Russian World Foundation in 2007, ostensibly to promote the Russian language as Russia's national heritage, to unite all who cherish the Russian word and Russian culture wherever they may live, but in essence it is a body to project Russian "soft power." Putin has the Russian Orthodox Church as a strong ally, and used religion for political purposes. Putin has said it is Russian duty to stand together against contemporary challenges and threats "using their spiritual legacy over invaluable traditions of unity to go forward and continue our thousand year history."

The fake news and disinformation emanating from the Kremlin continues. This is ironic because in March 2019 Putin signed a bill for punishment of individuals and on-line media for spreading fake news and information that disrespects the state. This involves material considered insulting to Russian officials, which can then block websites publishing the information. Irresponsible publications may face fines of up to \$23,000 and jail for information that presents disrespect for society, government, state symbols, the constitution, and government institutions.

*Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose.* The old game of Kremlinology continues, making guesses about who's really in power in Russia, the intentions of Russian leaders and their policy objectives. In spite of fake news, it is unlikely that Russia or Putin himself is supporting a particular U.S. candidate, but very likely it is attempting to sow discord in the U.S. system, and trying to persuade supporters of Bernie Sanders to think the system is rigged.

The truth about Putin is hard to fathom for lack of any systematic position or dialectical belief.

He remains popular in Russia though a dictator, a combination

of aggressive foreign policy, opportunistic, nostalgic patriotism, anti-Western resentment, and antagonism towards the U.S.

Putin wants to be a player in international affairs, even if without a single key, but with short term goals in the context of conflicting and often contradictory forces in Russia.

His view of Russia is at the center of world history and must be defended. A major concern is the possibility of the expansion of NATO to Russian borders. In opposition to the West, he held that Ukraine was a puppet of the West though Ukraine was not separate from Russia because of links through language, history and culture.

Irrespective of Putin's real motives and interests, attention must be paid by sensible authorities in the U.S. about the prevalence of fake news, and irresponsible use of them. This includes U.S. journalism. In August 2019 Lawrence O'Donnell, MSNBC host, announced that Trump was a Russian operative and that Russian oligarchs were signing loans for Trump. This was an actual statement, not a description of a bad Hollywood Cold War script. O'Donnell later apologized, explaining that his story came from a source close to the Deutsche Bank who had told him that Trump's loans were co-signed by Russian billionaires close to Putin. But in what seems more paranoia than genuine analysis he still persisted in his essential argument, declaring that Putin was working hard to reelect his favorite president of the U.S., and that Putin was Trump's real running mate.

American politicians and the media have been too prone to imitate Oscar Wilde, "As for believing, things, I can believe anything provided it is quite incredible." Now they must understand the importance of being earnest about fake news.