

The Truth About Fake News

by Michael Curtis



Say it isn't so, you can't stop people from talking and writing, but say it isn't so. It is a matter of grave concern that the U.S. is confronting a serious and growing problem related to the prevalence of fake news that undermines honest and serious coverage of public affairs. It is urgent to tackle that issue of the growth of major fake news and propaganda, deliberately and intentionally fabricating misleading information, made up and packaged to appear as fact. It is also important to assess the contention of President Donald Trump who on many occasions has equated fake news with press coverage he has received that he regards as unfair or biased.

It is currently all the more serious for three reasons: the possible impact of fake news not only as pivotal in the 2016 U.S. presidential election but also on future political activity, and thus a threat to democracy; the need for developing policy by official and non-official bodies to address the existence of distortions in information about the

state of affairs; the general lack of knowledge about the impact of social media in American life, and internet illiteracy about rapidly changing analogue and digital technology.

Two questions immediately arise. One is presently the subject of inquiry by Congress and by the American public. Was the 2016 election affected by exposure to fake news and if so how persuasive or pivotal was it? Did fake news affect or change voting intentions? No clear answer is yet available but surveys show that about two thirds of U.S. adults obtained their news from social media, especially Facebook, where fake news has been widely shared. Indeed, one survey indicates that the top 20 fake news stories on the 2016 election got more attention than the top 20 news stories from major media outlets.

Fake news has gone viral, present in at least 190 countries. In the 2016 U.S. election campaign more than two thirds of the major stories about Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump came from fake news sites. Also, in the French parliamentary election in May 2017, Facebook targeted 30,000 fake accounts.

The second issue, always difficult in democratic societies, is the possible need for some form of control over fake news. There are two aspects: how to deal with extremist political bias and hate speech which may occasion some limits of expression; and how to limit foreign, particularly Russian intervention now that Russia has been seen to have exploited the U.S. free system.

The objective of fake news is to deliberately mislead or deceive, either for financial reasons such as obtaining advertising revenue or increasing television ratings, but more frequently and ominously for ideological reasons, to support a particular political point of view or candidate, actions which will increase political polarization.

Fake news is not synonymous with satire or parody, intended essentially for amusement, or with unintentional reporting mistakes or with false statements by politicians. Political statements and propaganda with mistaken information are often biased but not necessarily false, but they may embrace elements of conspiracy theories, myths, and legends, as well as sometimes elements of true fact. It is evident that TV cable stations in the U.S., CNN on one side, Fox on the other, tend to appeal to partisans of particular points of view.

Fake News is different from interpreting terms or expressions on the lines of the Talmudic Method. It is false, fabricated presentation, with misleading content or opinion pieces pretending to be news, or doctored photos, made up and packaged to appear as fact. No one is likely to be deceived by the idea of "illiberal democracy" devised by Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban, or the slick presentation by Marine le Pen to change the name of her party National Front to National Rally, (Rassemblement National) to make it look less toxic .

Fake news by other names of course goes back to the early days of history. Hundreds of examples can illustrate this. The chariot Battle of Kadesh in 1274 B.C. was not an Egyptian victory as Ramses the Great claimed. Jewish communities have suffered and been massacred because of "blood libel" charges particularly after the fake accusations in Norwich in 1144, and Blois in 1171.

The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, was not divine retribution for sinning. In the U.S. many were deceived by the Great Moon Hoax of 1835 when articles were published on the discovery of life on the moon. No one watching Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* can forget the pseudo William R. Hearst proclaiming, "You furnish the pictures. I'll furnish the war." Nor can one erase the memory of the dishonest Stalinist show trials, 1936-38, that eliminated both rivals of the dictator, so-called "enemies of the state," and thousands of innocent people in the Soviet

Union.

Fake news has taken absurd turns in recent U.S. history with unverifiable conspiracy theories and partisan misrepresentation. Nonsense is endless: Lyndon B. Johnson was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; U.S. agencies were involved in planning 9/11; Barack Obama was born in a foreign country; Pope Francis had endorsed the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump. It is distressing there is an even stronger malevolence and nastiness in the current incarnation of fake news.

The existence and problem of fake news is qualitatively greater now and more extreme because of the internet ecosystem, social media, the ease in setting up web sites, and the increase in publishing outlets. Whether the relatively new term "fake news" was popularised or not by President Donald Trump is irrelevant to the fact that this generation is the most informed one in history, with the multitude of rival claims and competing narratives, and the impact of WhatsApp, Snapchat, and, above all, Facebook with its 2.2 billion users. Studies show that two thirds of Facebook users got their news from the site. Society faces the dilemma of whether it is possible to supervise or control the spread of information in an age of smart phones, news flashes, films, and satellite images.

Some attempt has been made at fact checking information by groups such as PolitiFact, and International Fact-Checking Network (Poynter Institute) launched in September 2015. But the examination in the media and now by the U.S. Senate of CEO Facebook Mark Zuckerberg on particular issues such as the scandals in which the privacy of millions of users of his site were violated and the criticism of content allowed on the site, is an indication of inadequate control. Facebook did not have a complete record of information that had been transferred. The most grievous revelation is that sensitive data of 87 million Facebook users were obtained without

permission by Cambridge Analytica.

The fundamental question is not simply one of the inadequacies of Facebook, or the carelessness or inefficiency of companies, or the need for disclosures from online political advertisers, though these are real problems, but the power of technology. There is course the anti-trust issue, breaking up the existing virtual monopoly of Facebook and others. But that is separate from the more basic issue of whether there should be regulation of the high tech industry now the main source of fake news. Self regulation has been insufficient. The press and general media must supervise itself more deliberately. Yet it is time to consider the case that government should play a role in regulating not only technical issues, such as transparency or data transmission, but the content of information.

Adherents of relativism may deny the feasibility of complete objective truth while post modernists hold, in rather obscure language, that truth conceals structures of power. Yet, even if real news reinforces allegiance to a particular point of view, it can be distinguished from fake news. George Orwell once wrote that in a time of universal deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act. Even the more timid in Washington and elsewhere should be prepared to deal with the negative impact of fake news and failure of social media to expurgate hate speech and terrorist designs.