

FAKE NEWS: AS THE PROBLEM OR A SYMPTOM OF A DEEPER PROBLEM?

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«Accuse the other side that of which you are guilty»

Joseph Goebbels,
Minister of Propaganda, Nazi Germany

Fake news is considered to be a significant problem that faces global society and the way it functions. There has been a considerable amount of attention that has been given to this problem, which makes it seem like a modern issue. However, historically fake news has been something that has existed for some time now and has evolved into something far more invasive owing to the development of information communication technologies that allows for rapid transmission and communication. Fake news has been perceived and defined differently over time, it is linked to how the ideal role of news was conceived within the frame of being a fourth estate to the current times that is more attune to an instrument of influence and persuasion. This present article attempts to highlight that fake news is not the root of the problem, but rather a symptom of deeper problems that affect the political and information spheres.

Key words: Fake News, World politics, information, communication technologies, information spheres.

Introduction. Fake news is firmly in the public's attention once more, occupying a lot of media space to the presumed unstoppable power and the consequences of this much slated threat to the very fabric of society and the democratic system. It has been projected as a great menace and has gradually snowballed into a moral panic in the information environment. Fake news has been billeted as an 'invasion' and in 2016 the Oxford Dictionaries announced that "post-truth" is their word of the year!¹ However, in spite of the great deal of recent publicity on the fake news issue, it is far from being a very recent 'invention' and problem.

A lot of the blame has been directed at social media and the mainstream media for spreading fake news on an unprecedented level and on a global scale. There is a great deal of divergence among stakeholders on the definition and significance of fake news. In spite of there being relatively little objective comprehensive research done on the phenomenon of fake news, many alarmist assertions point to a massive problem and risk. The overwhelming focus of media reporting and academic research focuses on the insidious use of fake news for narrow and selfish purposes.

This paper shall undertake the ambitious task of investigating whether fake news is the root problem or rather a symptom of deeper underlying problems affecting contemporary journalism and society. The assumption being that not all fake news is equal, currently there is a concentration on the destructive and selfish forms, but the underlying motivations and reasons for fake news, let alone the effects are not sufficiently reflected upon. Therefore, the following question will be asked: is fake news the actual root problem or the symptom of a greater systemic crisis?

¹ Editor, Fake News About 'Fake News' – The Media Performance Pyramid, Media Lens, http://medialens.org/index.php?option=com_acymailing&ctrl=archive&task=view&mailid=417&key=c9c76729c25a0540089ebc0e179a2195&subid=8761-a3c0ca38955a6fb3114e377791549881&tmpl=component, 5 December 2016 (accessed 6 December 2016)

The first step of this paper will be to identify and define the role and significance of news in society. There is also a need to distinguish between the ideal (utopian) and pragmatic aspects of this task as well. After this section, there will be an effort to catch the academic and practitioner debate on fake news, especially with regards to its definition and understanding its significance and implications. The disarray of global liberalism has meant that fake news has begun to be used as not only a means of misleading the public, but also character assassination of specific politically motivated targets. Finally, the paper will address the effects of fake news through demonstrable effects on the breadth of ‘allowable’ public discourse. This will in turn reveal the answer to the research question posed.

ROLE OF News

In terms of an idealised and utopian understanding of the role of journalism (as the professional producers of news) in a democratic society (where persuasion rather than coercion takes place in society between the political elite and the masses), five functions are presumed to exist. 1) To *inform* citizens of what is happening in their surroundings, 2) to *educate* the public as to the significance and meaning of those ‘facts’, 3) to provide a *platform* for open political discussions in the public sphere to facilitate the formation of public opinion, 4) to provide *publicity* to the governmental and political institutions as a watchdog role of journalism, and 5) as a channel for the advocacy of political viewpoints (McNair, 2007: 19-20). These functions often manifest themselves in the form of news.

News is something that saturates the information environment, and can come in many different shapes and forms from many different kinds of media. So what is news exactly? Denis McQuail provides a concise definition. “The main form in which current information about public events is carried by media of all kinds. There is a great diversity of types and formats as well as cross-cultural differences, but defining characteristics are generally held to be timeliness, relevance and reliability (truth value)” McQuail, 2010, p. 564). News can be found in many different shapes and forms, there are a number of common underlying conceptual commonalities though.

One of the basic underlying assumptions and duties of journalism is to separate ‘facts’ from ‘values’ – i.e. the importance of objectivity in reporting. Having said this, rather than being found in absolute values, objectivity and subjectivity should be viewed as being in greater or lesser sums. News was something that was seen as needing to be factual and non-partisan (Allan, 1999, p. 18). Therefore, there is an inherent commitment to the truth in news reporting. “The news frame’s tacit claim to comprehensiveness dictates that it must be seen as ‘balanced’ and ‘fair’ in its treatment of counter-positions” (Ibid., p. 64). Thus there are many different automatic assumptions and claims when the word news is evoked. Ties to the producers of the news content can be found in understanding that the ideological power of journalism is what makes it important to those seeking political influence and power. “The ownership and control of print and broadcast journalistic media is presumed to bring with it power in the political sphere because underpinning the ‘truth’ of any successful journalistic account of events is a statement of values and ideology” (McNair, 1998: 57).

However, the format in which the news is told has been changing. In response to changes in the information environment, news is being presented in a more simplified, trivial and entertaining manner. Infotainment, the name given to this process, creates a much more descriptive rather than analytical approach to news reporting (Thussu, 2009). Political news that involves highly subjective value judgements in an environment that requires the façade of perceived legitimacy is especially vulnerable to manipulation in order to strike the ‘right’ tone. Armed conflict is one of those subjects in particular, which can be subjected to the infotainment format. “Covering wars is inevitably a difficult journalistic endeavour but the demand for live 24/7 news, as well as

competition among news providers, can lead to the sensationalisation and trivialisation of often complex situations and a temptation to highlight the entertainment value of news” (Ibid., p. 113). Little is done by mass media in trying to adequately explain actual or proposed policy, especially when the element of a crisis laden value conflict is present, instead there is a tendency to entertaining or promoting a certain policy path (Andersen, 2006, p. 82). This has a tendency to make news as a marketable political product, rather than as something to inform and enlighten an audience.

The infotainment format of news lends itself well to supporting a policy position in an political conflict. On the superficial level, news concerns being objective and telling the truth, which can have a legitimising effect in terms of news projecting itself as an objective and enlightening activity. On the applied level, infotainment brings a level of shallowness to the news through it being very descriptive (and therefore lacking in analysis), which has the tendency to leave the event out of context. Infotainment also has a tendency to assign values to the different parties of a story, which includes identifying the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides of a story narrative.

Related to the issue of infotainment, although not the same, is the problem of spin entering the news sphere. Spin is a means and form of rhetorical-based deception. “Spinners mislead by means that range from subtle omissions to outright lies. Spin paints a false picture of reality by bending facts, mischaracterising the words of others, ignoring or denying crucial evidence, or just ‘spinning a yarn’ – by making things up” (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007, p. vii). Mixed in with this problem is the problematic understanding and judging of what is the ‘truth.’ As noted by academics, such as McQuail, truth, objectivity and verification are all essential elements of the news. The contrary has been noted, “perhaps, they speculate, in the new information age reality is simply a matter of belief, not anything objective or verified” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, p. 6). Ultimately, such as situation as the current one described above, when applied to the news industry leaves the public at risk from interest groups seeking to manipulate and exploit public perception and opinion.

Thus journalism can be caught in a severe dilemma and predicament between ideal public expectations and pragmatic situational demands. Journalism is expected to be the ‘harness’ of the truth, which means adhering to the elements that contribute to journalistic truth – accuracy, context and balance (Bivins, 2010: 122-123). However, this situation can be offset and contradicted by journalistic deception. This is in relation to “using questionable means to gather news deemed of value” although this is normally in the context of utilitarian grounds in order to further public interest (Bivins, 2010: 124). The situation may also see the practice conducted in order to further vested political or economic interests, thereby undermining the spirit and practice of public interest. Therefore, there are some that have seen news as a mechanism to steer the ‘democratic’ process by engineering the consent of the public through the nature of the timing and content of the news (Bernays, 1947). As a result journalism and news becomes a process more akin to persuasion rather than informing and educating.

One period that is more susceptible to abusing the power of journalism and news is during periods of increased political competition (such as during an election), where information is used for the purpose of influencing target audiences opinion and behaviour through persuasive communication. The situation may include news media providing their endorsement for a specific political candidate or political party (McDonald Ladd & Lenz, 2009); a generalised media bias in favour of a particular party by a media outlet to affect voting patterns, such as Fox News coverage (Della Vigna & Kaplan, 2007); news media coverage of crisis events and especially the initial phases of wars, such as the Iraq War of 2003 (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008). The news content coverage of foreign nations can also be used for an agenda-setting influence, where negative coverage can have a negative effect on the perception and opinion among the audience of the country

covered (Wanta et al, 2004). The result is a rapidly changing information environment and people’s relationship and reaction to it.

The rapidly fragmenting global information environment that is characterised by starkly diverging projections of reality may be part of a larger picture. This is one “pertaining to a larger crisis of liberal institutions marked by their potential loss of hegemony in deliberative practices and collective truth finding” (Knapfer, 2017: 15). This has had a marked effect upon the news industry in a couple of ways. In a study of recent developments in television cable news in the United States, two trends have been observed – a blurring of soft and hard news, and increasing levels of overt partisanship (Coe et al, 2008). Such developments have led to some searching for answers to the question, what is objective journalism? Media Lens took up this question and concluded that objective journalism must be for the truth rather than subjectively supporting one side or another within the context of news coverage.² It has produced a situation where some observers have warned that in the contemporary global environment, the truth is losing.³ An interesting attempt at turning trends and events came with the European Federation of Journalists, which represents some 320, 000 journalists across 39 countries, attempt to lobby the European Parliament to declare journalism as a public good.⁴ Within the context of this increasing toxic information environment is the issue of fake news.

UNDERSTANDING and Defining the Fake News Phenomenon

The term fake news has been somewhat co-opted by Donald Trump recently, it is global and further eroding an already weakening trust in media.⁵ A lot of attention has been focused upon the issue of fake news recently, the level and nature of activity, and the supposed risks and threats that come with it. Blame for the current fake news trends has been levelled at different scapegoats. “Some have rushed to blame technology and the bottom-line priorities of internet and social media giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter for the crisis. Others point to the media’s own failures – a deeply flawed and politicised press and broadcast system stuck in a metropolitan bubble, itself part of the establishment elite, and unable to properly connect with the frustration and anger of people and communities.”⁶ Fake news as a manipulative tool of communication and a problem is not something that is new. President Thomas Jefferson complained in 1807 that someone who does not read a newspaper is better informed on events than someone that does read newspapers.⁷ What is new and changing is how fake news is conceived and defined. In a 2017 a British Parliamentary inquiry submission identified a number of aspects associated with the fake news trends:

- “Fake news has a broader definition than online media outlets publishing false stories to garner publicity;

² The Editor, What is Objective Journalism?, Media Lens, <http://www.medialens.org/index.php/alerts/alert-archive/2017/842-what-is-objective-journalism.html>, 21 March 2017 (accessed 23 March 2017)

³ Ignatius, D., In Today’s World, The Truth is Losing, The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/in-todays-world-the-truth-is-losing/2016/11/29/3f685cd2-b680-11e6-b8df-600bd9d38a02_story.html?utm_term=.3f365b7b93cb, 29 November 2016 (accessed 31 August 2017)

⁴ Phillips, L., European Reporters’ Unions Want EU to Back Journalism as a ‘Public Good’, EU Observer, <https://euobserver.com/economic/29899>, 20 April 2010 (accessed 6 November 2017)

⁵ Kestler-D’Amours, J., How to Fight ‘Fake News’ in a Post-Truth Environment, Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/fight-fake-news-post-truth-environment-170327162945897.html>, 24 April 2017 (accessed 1 May 2017)

⁶ White, A., Facebook and Matters of Fact in the Post-Truth Era, Ethical Journalism Network, <https://blog.wan-ifra.org/2017/01/10/facebook-and-matters-of-fact-in-the-post-truth-era>, (accessed 31 October 2017)

⁷ Uberti, D., The Real History of Fake News, Columbia Journalism Review, https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fake_news_history.php, 15 December 2016 (accessed 29 June 2017)

- Fake news has been a problem in the news media for a long time and fake news articles can be published by any media outlet;
- Two common sources of fake news are press releases as part of marketing campaigns that are reproduced in the media without due process of fact-checking, as well as reporting on developments in science without a full critique of the scientific research conducted.⁸

The first point is in reference to the expansion of public relations and lobbying firms inside the news systems of the world, which has resulted in a deliberate form of news management.⁹ This is a basic summary from the point of view and observations of policy makers and practitioners, trying to establish the nature and extent of the problem at hand. Rubin, Chen and Conroy (2015) identified three types of fake news in their research: 1) serious fabrications that are uncovered in the media; 2) large-scale hoaxes; and 3) humorous fakes, such as news satire, parody and game shows. There are some that object to the use of the term 'fake news' because they think that it is "unhelpful", yet feel obliged to use it because there are a lack of alternative means to name it. There is also an understanding that this is not just about news, but the whole information ecosystem. Therefore, there needs to be a breaking down of that environment into: 1) the different types of content being created and shared; 2) understanding what motivates those who create that content; and 3) means of disseminating that content.¹⁰ Fake news has had a long history of use, recently the way in which the term was defined began to change.

About one decade ago, some academics attempted to characterise such media and communication formats and content as satire and talk shows as being 'fake news' owing to the aspect of their dependence on the mimicry of journalists and journalism that made up the 'real' news (Borden & Tew, 2007: 312-313). More recently, the definition of 'fake news' has moved to one that includes the elements of deception and misinformation. Albright (2017) stresses the need for journalists to seek facts and to engage audiences with accurate information. However, it is contradicted by an information environment where fact-based evidence is less relevant for a growing segment of the populace. This is evident where news organisations follow news 'trends' and shape the narrative with deceptive statements. The observation by Albright concerning audiences increasingly seeking opinionated news rather than objective news was in part substantiated in a study on youth news behaviours and attitudes by Marchi (2012). Given the current level of debate and use of the term 'fake news' a new turn in the definition and understanding of the practice seems to have evolved, which is fake news is a label to attach to news and information that contradicts one's world view and beliefs, and within the context of politicised debates where disputed facts surround complex controversies.¹¹ This is seen in the different sides that publicly dismiss news and information, such as Trump's use

⁸ Thorrington, D., Written Evidence Submitted by Dominic Thorrington, Fake News Inquiry – Publications, Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry2/publications/>, 19 April 2017 (accessed 31 August 2017)

⁹ Phillips, P., Propaganda, Fake News, and Media Lies: The Diabolical Business of Global Public Relations Firms, Global Research, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/propaganda-fake-news-and-media-lies-the-diabolical-business-of-global-public-relations-firms/5580331>, 18 March 2017 (accessed 18 March 2017)

¹⁰ Wardle, C., Fake News. It's Complicated, First Draft News, <https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-news-complicated/>, 16 February 2017 (accessed 29 June 2017)

¹¹ Parry, R., NYT's Fake News About Fake News, Consortium News, <https://consortiumnews.com/2017/02/22/nyts-fake-news-about-fake-news/>, 22 February 2017 (accessed 24 February 2017); Kestler-D'Amours, J., How to Fight 'Fake News' in a Post-Truth Environment, Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/fight-fake-news-post-truth-environment-170327162945897.html>, 24 April 2017 (accessed 1 May 2017)

of this tactic against mainstream reporting on or about him.¹² This leads to discussions on the presumed effect of fake news and assigning guilt for it.

The fake news cycle does exert an effect upon people that are exposed to it. Research conducted by Balmas (2014) hints at a trend where people exposed to high levels of fake news and low levels of hard news (as opposed to high levels of exposure to both fake and hard news) perceive a greater level of realism and authenticity in the fake news content. The higher profile of fake news in the global information environment has resulted in calls for creating automated methods for detecting deception and fake news in informational and news content (Conroy et al, 2015; Chen et al, 2015). Social media have taken a lot of attention and blame for spreading ‘fake news’, however, a lack of professionalism by journalists should be taken into account too. Even though social media is a significant source of news headlines for mainstream media, and in some cases at least a third of that information is proven to be false, there are still few editorial guidelines issued on how to verify information from social media sources.¹³ This has an impact upon how the public view mainstream media content and its reliability. A Harvard-Harris poll conducted in the United States in 2017 saw nearly two thirds of the respondents say mainstream press is full of fake news, which is a sentiment held by voters across the ideological spectrum.¹⁴ There are some disagreements and diverging perceptions concerning the issue of fake news and how it should be defined and understood.

However, not everyone agrees on the level of presumed potency of social media and fake news in manipulating people to think and behave in a manner desired by the communicator. Some observers have noted the co-opting of fake news during the 2016 US Presidential Elections as a means to try and put the opponent at a disadvantage, it is a situation where the mainstream media were not a neutral party, but a highly active part of the process.¹⁵ A Stanford University study of the fake news storm around the 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States revealed a great deal of Measure of Activity in terms of the sheer number of fake news items being published and shared. This did not automatically translate into Measure of Effect though, the study suggesting that it is unlikely that fake news swayed the election result (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).¹⁶ Internet researcher William Dutton refers to fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles as being under researched and overhyped, where the panic over these is not supported by the current evidence. He also concludes that like-minded people tend to unwittingly lock themselves into echo chambers that tend to reinforce their own existing biases.¹⁷

LIBERAL HEGEMONY in Turmoil

World politics, how it is construed and practiced, and who possesses the power to affect events are in the process of changing. There is a crisis in the incumbent political

¹² Boyer, D., Trump Calls Out CNN Reporter as ‘Fake News’, The Washington Times, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/aug/14/trump-calls-out-cnn-reporter-fake-news/>, 14 August 2017 (accessed 7 November 2017)

¹³ The Rise and Rise of Fake News, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-37846860>, 6 November 2016 (accessed 31 October 2017)

¹⁴ Easley, J., Poll: Majority Says Mainstream Media Publishes Fake News, The Hill, <http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/334897-poll-majority-says-mainstream-media-publishes-fake-news>, 24 May 2017 (accessed 31 August 2017)

¹⁵ Giraldi, P., The Fake News Fake Story, The American Conservative, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-fake-news-fake-story/>, 28 November 2016 (accessed 28 November 2016)

¹⁶ Crawford, K., Stanford Study Examines Fake News and the 2016 Presidential Election, Stanford News, <https://news.stanford.edu/2017/01/18/stanford-study-examines-fake-news-2016-presidential-election/>, 18 January 2017 (accessed 31 October 2017)

¹⁷ Dutton, W. H., Fake News, Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: Underresearched and Overhyped, The Conversation, <http://theconversation.com/fake-news-echo-chambers-and-filter-bubbles-underresearched-and-overhyped-76688>, 5 May 2017 (accessed 22 May 2017)

power,¹⁸ which is seen by the attempt to project Angela Merkel as leader of the incumbent Liberal Political Order in the wake of the departure of President Obama, the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump, and likely with more events likely to follow. Russia has resumed its role as global spoiler number one, with various assertions concerning the intentions and activities of the country and its leadership. There is also the spectre of transnational branded terrorism, such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). To add further complications to this volatile and complicated mix is a resurgent China, and the likes of Poland and Hungary in the European Union (EU). This points to a growing crisis in the centre of political and economic power, when a power is in political decline, it is very rarely the case that it goes quietly and without a fight.

Current global political divides are more seen as being political establishment versus anti-establishment, which differs from the older, more established and understood divides of left versus right and democracy versus communism. It also presents liberalism with some problematic issues on communication and influence as this is a much newer and more difficult/problematic phenomenon to explain on and about. The challenge to their continued hegemony comes from diverse political sources from the width of the old left-right political spectrum.

The hegemonic political power is the Liberal Political Order, which manifests itself in such core notions and assumptions as liberalism and multiculturalism that are considered as being 'inevitable' outcomes of societal development. In spite of its name, this political order is not so 'liberal' in its nature and especially when challenged. At the core is this: «liberals» have created numerous upheavals and crises in western societies via immigration and globalisation (including the foreign policy mechanism of regime change). The results have been massive social, economic and political dislocation, which has alienated and isolated large parts of society. A consequence of this is that there has been a significant marginalisation of elements of society. This has resulted in a backlash by a segment of the population, which has resulted in a more intense effort by the 'liberals' to reassert their control and management of reality and events via the fake news conflict. This is a means to try and regain control and impose their version of 'reality.'

A rather symbolic representation of the current political situation is the aspect that the ruling cliques in western societies, including media, politicians, high civil servants all live, work and breathe in a «beltway» and who often identify with the ideals embodied in Huntington's "Davos Man". This beltway is quite at odds with the reality that is experienced by an increasing number of people. This could certainly be seen in former Prime Minister David Cameron's miscalculation in permitting the Brexit vote and Chancellor Merkel's stance on massive immigration into Germany, as well as in the media analysis of the US election and the subsequent reaction to Donald Trump's election. The political system continues on the basis that it is the best form of governance available, even if it is not the most optimal one. This is somewhat reminiscent of Winston Churchill's quote – "it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried."

The apparent political choices in the 'democratic' political system are seemingly a façade, but are based upon the notion of a visual differentiation of brands, slogans and catch phrases. Nominally one can vote for Labour or Conservatives, Democrats or Republicans. However, in terms of substantive policy difference, there is very little to be found and there is a continuation of the same or similar line of policy. This was certainly witnessed in the United Kingdom and very evident during the imposition of New Public Management in New Zealand during the 1980s-90s. There are also hints of the links between the supposedly opposing political parties that are meant to be in competition

¹⁸ Simons, G., The Muddy Waters of History – From Latin America to Europe, The Duran, <http://theduran.com/the-muddy-waters-of-history-from-latin-america-to-europe/>, 2 September 2016 (accessed 19 November 2017)

with each other – the letter¹⁹ by the Bush sisters to Obama’s daughters or the show of unity by former US presidents²⁰ against Trump.

Rather than engage on the new politics of establishment versus anti-establishment there is a move to reinstate a projection of an era gone, the Cold War, of easily understood and identifiable forces of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ with a fight to decide the future direction of global development. Thus given the weakening grip of the Liberal Political Order there is a need by the incumbent elites in Western societies to do something about their declining position of power before it is too late. One of the mechanisms with which to do this effectively in a short space of time is through the use of fear. For fear to be effective, there needs to be the simultaneous presence in a target audience that something bad can happen (Russia interfering in an election, for example) and that this can happen to them personally. A possibly effective tool to carry this out is through the production and dissemination of ‘news’. This is the very means that is theoretically intended to inform and enlighten the public in order for them to make better decisions concerning the things that affect their lives.

FAKE NEWS – the Tool of ‘Assassination’

Character assassination, branding, public relations, news management, propaganda and deception are all tools of the trade. Personalities or narratives that do not agree with the projected narrative are labelled as being ‘fake’, subversive, conspiracy theories or any number of other labels that are intended to belittle the sender and not to engage in the content of the message. Character assassination is defined as being “the deliberate destruction of an individual’s reputation. [...] “Character assassins” target the private lives, behaviour, values, and identity of their victims. Biographical details are altered or fabricated. Intimate features are made public. Achievements are questioned. Good intentions are doubted” (Icks & Shiraev, 2014: 4). The goal is to attack the moral standing of the target in the eye of the public, and to provoke a negative emotional response towards the object of character assassination. Ultimately it is about shaping minds and hearts in order for the public to be more inclined to do what is offered or suggested by the communicator of fake news.

These situations are very much framed as being a crisis, which on the one hand is something that is a threat. It is a threat to values and norms, it is creating a situation of uncertainty and it requires urgency to rectify. That brings me to another aspect of a crisis, which involves a political call and mobilisation in order to resolve the identified source of crisis. It is often described as being something that requires unity of thought and action against a rather poorly defined threat that is promoted as being an existential threat. Of course, this requires managing and controlling the information flows around the said crisis, because if these information channels are not adequately controlled, it will adversely impact upon the operational aspects of the event.

To shape perceptions of processes and events, a reality of diametrically opposed set of political forces are created and projected. This is done in a scripted form, where ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides are seen to exist in an existential struggle that will decide the shape of the political and social world to come. The ‘good’ side consists of the global Liberal Political Order²¹ and its leadership in global processes and events. There is the general public,

¹⁹ Bush, B. & Bush Hager, J., The Bush Sisters Wrote the Obama Girls a Letter, Time Magazine, <http://time.com/4632036/bush-sisters-obama-sisters/>, 12 January 2017 (accessed 19 November 2017)

²⁰ Endorsing Precedents: An Image Reporting that all Living Ex-Presidents Have Warned Americans not to Vote for Donald Trump is not Quite Accurate, Snopes, <https://www.snopes.com/ex-presidents-warn-against-trump/>, (accessed 19 November 2017)

²¹ Smale, A. & Errlanger, S., As Obama Exits the World Stage, Angela Merkel May be the Liberal West’s Last Defender, The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/europe/germany-merkel-trump-election.html?_r=0, 12 November 2016 (accessed 19 November 2017)

which the political order speaks for and acts on their behalf, which can act as a form of victim in need of ‘rescue’ at times. Enter the ‘bad’ side (Thiele 2013), which are those that seek to challenge and/or topple the Liberal Order (by perception and not necessarily actual reality).

It should be noted that fake news is not a recent phenomenon, it has been around for some time. News was noted by the father of modern public relations, Edward Bernays, as being not accidental in its timing or nature. In fact he saw news as a means for engineering consent (Bernays, 1947). The measure of effect of fake news is found in the credibility of the messenger and the level of resonance with the intended target audience, which relies on a combination of timing and personal relevance to the target audience. That audience must also have ability to access that information or ‘news’.

An excellent example of fake news being used as a means of character assassination and to instil fear in dissenters was seen in 2016 when the Washington Post ran an article quoting extensively a front group named PropOrNot, claiming that they were a “non-partisan group of researchers” (they were forced to publish a significant retraction afterwards).²² The story denounced some 200 different media outlets as being “pro-Putin” or “anti-Clinton” without sufficient due diligence in fact checking.²³ This led to claims that the Washington Post running intelligence agency propaganda²⁴ in order to maintain information dominance by instigating a ‘New McCarthyism.’ In an Orwellian twist this is an exercise of attempting to ‘own’ the truth and to ‘industrialise’ it.

FAKE NEWS and the ‘New McCarthyism’

Before engaging in the question as to whether it is possible to state that fake news is the root of the problem and therefore the ‘cure’ should address it directly, or else that fake news is a symptom of a larger and more systemic problem that implies the ‘cure’ is much more complex in order to be effective. As the heart of this section it is about conscious efforts to deceive an audience through communication. Fake news does not appear without reason or function, it serves a particular political purpose at a certain point in time. This is often intended to exert an effect upon its intended audience through certain embedded social cues, selective information, innuendo and implication. All of which is wrapped within a deceptive layer of suggestive and often imprecise language. However, the shortcomings may be ignored if the target audience is captivated and mobilised in an emotional logic and state of mind.

Given the apparent zeal demonstrated for ‘hunting’ and eradicating ‘fake news’, the end state attempted seems to fit with Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann’s concept of the *spiral of silence*. This is a “version of a third-party effect in opinion formation: the tendency for people to be influenced in what they think or by what they think other people think” (McQuail, 2011: 571). The result is to narrow the allowable public discourse as ‘deviant’ or minority view holders are afraid of social isolation.

This is confirmed in a number of recent media articles that have taken up the subject of the effect of the fake news hunt upon journalism and media outlets. While admitting

²² Timberg, C., Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News’ During Election, Experts Say, Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/russian-propaganda-effort-helped-spread-fake-news-during-election-experts-say/2016/11/24/793903b6-8a40-4ca9-b712-716af66098fe_story.html?utm_term=.ba6524f6e85d, 24 November 2016 (accessed 20 November 2017)

²³ Adams, T. B., Washington Post Issues Major Correction After Publishing Bogus News to Warn of Fake News, Washington Examiner, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/washington-post-issues-major-correction-after-pushing-bogus-news-to-warn-of-fake-news/article/2609227>, 8 December 2016 (accessed 9 December 2016)

²⁴ St. Clair, J. & Cockburn, A., The CIA and the Press: When the Washington Post Ran the CIA’s Propaganda Network, Counter Punch, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/11/30/the-cia-and-the-press-when-the-washington-post-ran-the-cias-propaganda-network/>, 30 November 2016 (accessed 20 November 2017)

that fake news is not a recent problem and it is a problem that does exist, there is further potential harm. “The controversy over fake news is creating panic among members of the media, and seems to be serving as an excuse to hunt down conservative competitors to mainstream outlets.”²⁵ The author goes on.

McCarthy used the threat of communism as a way to instil fear and target citizens. The need for fear was often exaggerated. The effort by today’s media’s to discount any view held by conservatives as “fake news” or as Russian propaganda reeks of modern McCarthyism.

It’s no secret that the mainstream media tends to cater to a more liberal audience. As a result, conservatives who feel marginalised and disenfranchised by that dynamic often turn to conservative websites in order to find news that is not being covered by larger outlets.²⁶

The New McCarthyism narrative has become increasingly popular as a means to describe and account for the repressive trends and means in the contemporary global information environment, which has become increasingly fractured along value and normative lines. As earlier stated, McCarthyism is a means to an end, the real intent and not the stated intent needs to be considered. “The problem with McCarthy was not his stated intent but his real intent. [...] But he used the charge of communism as a tool to discredit and destroy those he disagreed with.”²⁷ The New McCarthyism is linked to the activity of character assassination, the deliberate attempt to shut down dissent in political debates, partly from the likely resulting fear and social isolation, and partly through the attempt to discredit the reliability of opposing or dissenting views that are communicated.

Conclusion. Fake news is more generally framed, perceived and understood as being an insidious problem that potentially will undermine journalism, mass media and the very fabric of liberal democracy. This is due in part, how the utopian role of journalism and mass media, particularly within the frame of news production, play in a democratic society. A reference to the notion of the function of the fourth estate, a check and balance against the excesses and abuses of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. It is also a product of people’s aversion to the thought of having their free will and choice being manipulated by another party.

In order to answer whether fake news is the actual problem or a symptom of a problem, the various uses and abuses of fake news, plus why and how it is exploited in the information space. The understanding and definition of fake news has gradually evolved over time, beginning with something that is made up or contrived, moving to something that is manipulative or deceptive in nature and to the current climate where it is being used to dismiss another point of view or opinion as being illegitimate as it does not concur with the accuser’s world view.

Therefore, fake news needs to be understood within the context as being a tool of shaping audience opinion and perception by striking an emotional resonance. As a consequence, there is the element of influencing and persuading audiences by communicating subjective news that contains some form of hidden economic or political agenda. As a result there is an intention to prime and mobilise an audience towards achieving the communicator’s aims or goals through the engineering of consent. Another use of fake news is also becoming increasingly apparent in the current news environment, and the use is directed towards narrowing the width of public debate on certain issues. As the ability to effectively communicate and influence relies upon credibility, fake news is a means to attack the brand and reputation of opponents and therefore to reduce their

²⁵ Samsundar, P., Hunt for Fake News is the New McCarthyism, The Hill, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/media/310228-hunt-for-fake-news-is-the-new-mccarthyism>, 13 December 2016 (accessed 20 November 2017)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Friedman, G., The New McCarthyism, Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-new-mccarthyism-2017-4?r=US&IR=T&IR=T>, 27 April 2017 (accessed 20 November 2017)

credibility and their willingness to challenge the hegemonic discourse owing to the risk of being publicly ridiculed and denigrated.

In the introduction the question was asked, is fake news the actual root problem or the symptom of a greater systemic crisis? Given the findings of this paper, it is quite easy to discount fake news as being the root of the problem. It is very much a symptom of a far greater and more encompassing problem that affects the political system, journalism and the media system. The current negative cycle in politics is the result of a challenge to the hegemony of liberal politics by culturally conservative forces. Given that many of the mainstream media outlets are attached in terms of the norms and values to the liberal political system, they tend to support it. This has created a subjectively polarised and politicised information environment, where consumers of news tend to follow the information and 'news' that fits with and confirms their world view. Added to this environment is the character assassination and New McCarthyism practiced in the form of fake news, which conforms more to the most recent understanding and definition of it, i.e. being news of information that contradicts a held belief or world view of an individual or group.

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Фейкові новини: проблема чи симптом серйознішої проблеми?

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Фейкові новини та спосіб їх функціонування вважаються значною проблемою, з якою стикається глобальне суспільство. Цій проблемі приділяється значна увага, що, здається, робить її викиком сучасності. Проте, з історичної точки зору фейкові новини вже існують певний час і вони стають агресивнішими завдяки розвитку інформаційних комунікаційних технологій, що сприяють швидкій передачі інформації та комунікації. З часом фейкові новини сприймаються та визначаються по-іншому, що пов'язано з тим, як ідеальна роль новин сприймалася через поняття «четверта влада» у теперішньому, що навіть більше співвідноситься з інструментом впливу та переконання. У цій статті робиться спроба наголосити, що фейкові новини не є коренем проблеми, а швидше симптомом більш серйозної проблеми, яка впливає на політичну та інформаційну сфери.

Ключові слова: фейкові новини, світова політика, інформація, комунікаційні технології, інформаційна сфера.

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