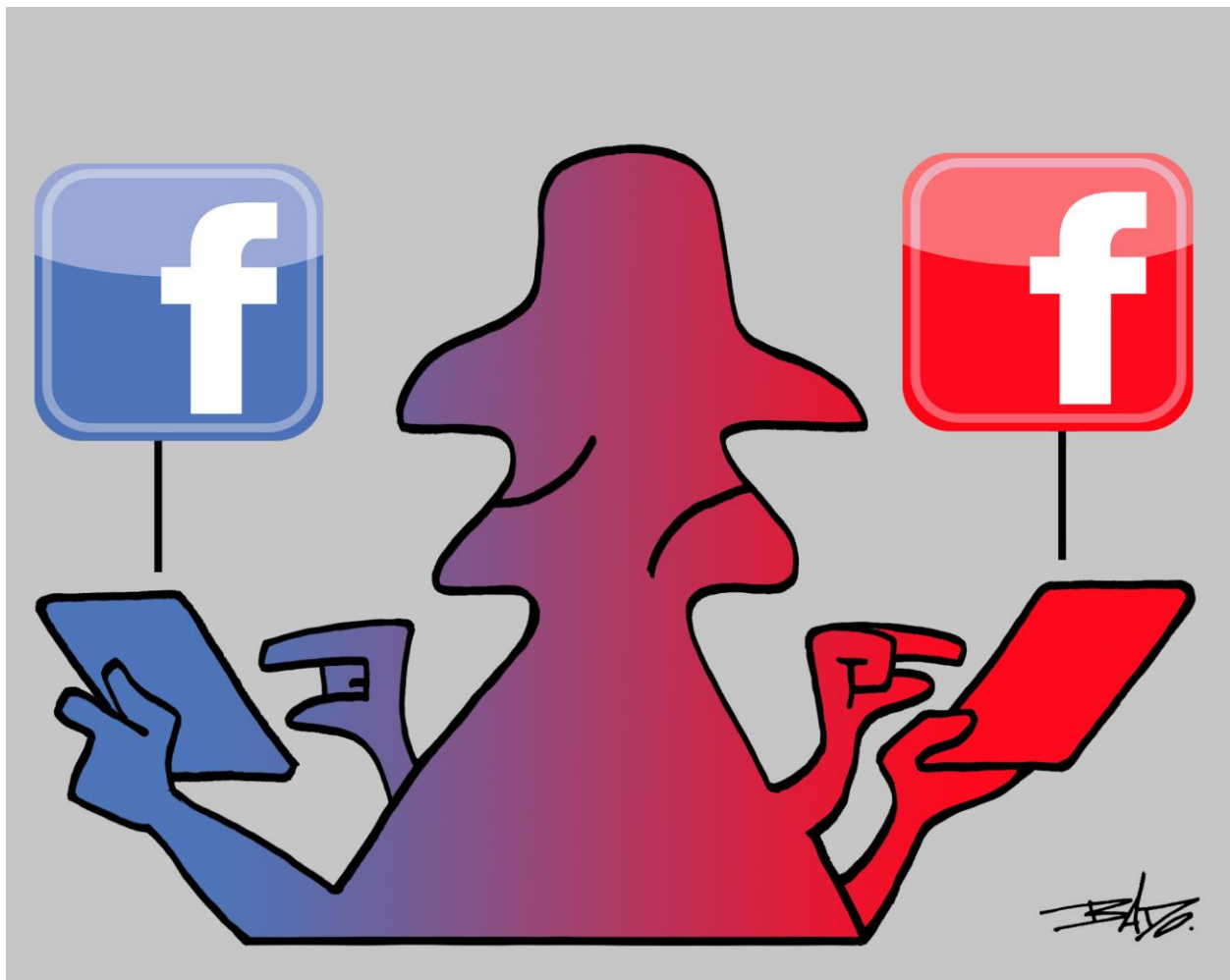


Dezinformatsiya: The past, present and future of 'fake news'



A Reflection Paper for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO
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Ottawa, Canada, March 2017

To quote this article:

DORNAN, Christopher. “Dezinformatsiya: The past, present and future of fake news”, Series of reflection papers, Canadian Commission for UNESCO, March 2017.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

1. The Killing Joke

The 21st century West is now a place of permanent surveillance, where ever more sophisticated technologies of observation compile a ceaseless record of the real. From satellite imaging to signal intercepts, CCTV cameras to the harvesting of metadata, ours is a society that scours itself in secrecy and suspicion.

At the same time, it is a society of perpetual confession, of insistent and enthusiastic exhibition. Today's social media user can hardly wait to announce what is unfolding as it happens – to engage with the flow of events, to be noticed, to interact. Every passing moment is documented somewhere, and to be alive in the 21st century is to leave a data trail, whether one wishes to or not. Every retweet, every Yelp review, every snapshot posted to Instagram is both a trace and an expression of one's self. Every Facebook post, every Amazon purchase, every Netflix selection is an identity statement, not to say a contribution to the torrent of information on which the new social media empires have been built. All this, too, is a record of the real: endless strata of incremental revelation to be mined for profit and pressed into the service of persuasion.

The technologies that have made all this possible have also compromised the traditional anchors of authenticity. When what one knows – or is led to believe –comes from a welter of competing and contradictory accounts, how is one to have confidence in what is 'real'? When the metric of success in social media is attention, the information environment surges with content whose sole purpose is to engineer attention. And when our information diet is rife with content fed to us with ulterior motive in light of our own habits and preferences, it becomes all the more difficult to know what to believe, and altogether easy to believe what one wants to know.

Consider two recent incidents that occurred within days of one another, on opposite sides of the world. Together they point up the sheer theatricality of events as we now apprehend them. On February 13, in Malaysia, a man was murdered in full view of surveillance cameras. On February 26, in New York City, two strangers were caught in a moment of conviviality. The murder, though all too real, was staged. The benign moment in New York may have been genuine or it could have been a fabrication – we have almost no way to tell which.

Kim Jong-Nam, the estranged brother of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un, was in Kuala Lumpur airport en route to Macau. Two women trailed him through the departures lobby. CCTV footage shows them closing in and pressing a cloth to his face. He makes his way to uniformed authorities to report the incident. He was dead within 20 minutes, the victim of a lethal nerve agent.

Imagine the planning and preparation required to carry this out. This was no chance encounter. The kill team had to be in the right place at exactly the right time. Which means they had their target under close surveillance, right down to knowing what plane he was booked on.

An Indonesian and a Vietnamese national have been charged with the killing. Both insist they were duped. They claim they had been hired to carry out a stunt for a candid camera television program. If so, the people who masterminded the attack orchestrated a reality show assassination, a murderous prank. The incident was real, but the legal defence of the accused rests on the fact that they thought it was fake.

Two weeks later, Colleen Hagerly, a journalist for NowThis – a digital news company that fires its content to mobile devices and social media platforms – was on a New York subway train when a bottle of wine rolled out from under the seat across the aisle. A young white man in a jacket and tie picked it

up, popped the cork, and offered to share it with a young black man wearing jeans and a baseball cap sitting next to him. According to Hagerty, the second man found an empty mickey under his seat, and they poured wine into it for him to drink from. Just as they were toasting one another, Hagerty snapped a photograph and tweeted the incident: “This is peak NYC.”

In the wake of Black Lives Matter and racial tensions in the U.S., along with the social divisions that have only deepened with the election of Donald Trump, the incident was a perfect balm: two strangers sharing a serendipitous drink in jovial fraternity. Hagerty’s tweet went viral, amassing 217,000 Likes, almost 63,000 retweets, and more than 800 replies. @Whatthadel tweeted: “this photo CAN/MAY/WILL end racism.” @exnav29 commented: “What an awesome idea. Hide wine throughout the subway system and see the friendships and connections that form.” TV news outlets across the U.S. contacted Hagerty for permission to use the photo, along with Storify, Inside Edition, and the Daily Mail Online, further amplifying its reach.

Almost as soon as the tweet was posted, Hagerty had to contend with “truthers” who doubted its authenticity. (What is the likelihood of someone drinking from a bottle found on the floor of a subway car? How probable is it that a second person would agree to drink from an empty bottle conveniently also found under the same subway seat?) Hagerty fell back on her status as a journalist to secure the veracity of what she saw. “I SWEAR,” she tweeted in all caps.

No doubt the incident occurred as she described it. But it also has all the markings of what Daniel Boorstin, in his 1961 book *The Image*, called a “pseudo-event” – something staged for the sole purpose of generating media coverage. If it was staged, Hagerty need not have been in on the scam. As media trickster Ryan Holiday details in his 2012 book *Trust Me, I’m Lying*, the stunt works better if Hagerty is a dupe who sincerely believes what she saw, in the manner of those pranked on candid camera TV shows. The perpetrators rely on her to publicize the event, while her status as a journalist – an honest witness – supplies the requisite stamp of legitimacy.

(If Hagerty was played, this begs the question of how the perpetrators knew she would be in the right place at the right time. Perhaps they enacted the scenario over and over on different subway cars, waiting for someone to take the bait and splash the incident on social media, hoping it would go viral. The unsettling alternative for Hagerty is that they chose her. She was the mark, the intended audience. Who better to select as their conduit than a young, Twitter-happy employee of a digital news operation in Manhattan? They knew that as a journalist she would document the event as a feel-good slice of life, and because she is a journalist her post would be seen by other journalists, who would repeat and repost it, extending its reach. If this is the case, it means the perpetrators were stalking her without her knowledge. Like Kim Jong-Nam, she was under surveillance.)

But if the incident was staged, why? To what end? Perhaps it was nothing more than a piece of performance art, a micro-play mounted purely for the amusement of those who dreamed it up. Or perhaps it was deliberately designed to lift the spirits of those who saw it, whether in person or via social media or on the news – a brightener in otherwise anxious times. Or perhaps it was an artfully clever marketing ploy for an upcoming theatrical production. Clearly visible behind the young man with the wine bottle is a poster advertising “Anastasia, the new Broadway musical ... Premieres Begin March 23.”

Despite the fact that the person who reported the incident is a journalist, there is no way for the public to be sure what she witnessed was genuine or an elaborate deception. More to the point, it hardly matters. One way or another, the tweet worked. It did what it was intended to do: it manufactured attention. If the role of the news media is to chronicle reality, a fact of the 21st century media is how plastic ‘reality’ has become.

2. Democracy and Public Opinion

More than 500 years ago, Christendom was transformed by an innovation in communication technology: the 2-D printer. Johannes Gutenberg's invention was the Google-iPad-Amazon-Facebook of its day. It allowed the circulation of ideas and opinions to a vast, dispersed public in a way that had previously been impossible, setting in motion the circumstances whereby the will of such a public could become a decisive political factor. It brought the notion of *public opinion* into being, and along with it the first stirrings of democracy to emerge from the Middle Ages, in which the will of the people would come to form the basis of governance.

As soon as it became necessary to win the opinion of the masses in order to achieve power, public opinion became an arena of contestation and manipulation. By the mid-1700s to early-1800s, newspapers were the voluble organs of political parties, tailoring their reports accordingly. Their proprietors – not to say their subscribers – would have greeted as absurd any suggestion that they should provide a neutral record of political affairs or even-handed coverage of their opponents. The *purpose* of these journals was to whip up fervor in support of their causes and to denigrate their enemies. And they did so with a virulence that would have been almost unthinkable until recently. This was an era in which freedom of expression in the service of political ends sanctioned almost any content.

Over the course of the 1800s, the partisan press gave way to newspapers whose revenue derived from advertising. Journalism was unhitched from patronage and a partisan agenda and yoked instead to mass markets. Capturing widespread attention became the imperative. The result was a steady diet of crime, exaggeration, scandal and outrage. Newspapers of the day were not beyond making things up. Famously, in 1844 the New York Sun broke the news that the Atlantic Ocean had been crossed in three days by a manned balloon. The story was a fabrication, written by Edgar Allan Poe. At the time, the name for this was “sensationalism.” Today we call it clickbait.

By the second half of the 20th century, the news media in North America were corporately controlled but guided by an ethos of “social responsibility.” They remained, for the most part, profit-driven enterprises, but the excesses of the past had yielded to coverage that was in the main dutiful and conscientious. Different papers still championed different political positions, but the promise they made to their readers was that their reportage was trustworthy. They adhered to methods of inquiry and verification designed to guarantee that their accounts were true to what they described – in a word, objective. Democracy might well be a roiling, fractious, overheated argument over priorities, but it would be informed by a reliable running account of the facts of political life.

The newspapers, newsmagazines and broadcast networks of the late 20th century were the portals through which the public perceived the world. They set an agenda of common concern, instructing their audiences on what they should consider important. They were able to do so because the public *had no other choice*. What citizens knew of current events beyond their immediate experience necessarily came to them through the mass media.

The news media not only fixed the terms of the ‘real,’ they established the parameters of normalcy, against which the deviant and the impermissible would be defined. Fringe or extreme views seldom found expression in the news media, except as examples of what lay beyond the bounds of the tolerable. Although they purported to map the full range of social affairs, the media were nonetheless instruments of conformity.

In the late 20th century, then, the most prominent complaint about the news media was precisely their chokehold on public discourse. Corporate control and concentration of ownership supposedly restricted diversity of perspective. The left saw the media as elements of an “ideological state apparatus,” in the phrase of Louis Althusser, obscuring the structural inequities of the society they served. They were drum majors for consumer capitalism, celebrants of entrenched power structures, mechanisms of “false consciousness.” (Why, for example, did every newspaper in North America have a business section, catering to managers, owners, investors, but not one had a labour section, chronicling the experience of workers and the plight of the unemployed?) Conservatives, meanwhile, saw the news media as shot through with a liberal agenda, hostile to corporatism, suspicious of individualism, corrosively overemphasizing the abnormal, and portraying the world, the nation and the community as one great canvas of catastrophes, social ills, divisions and jealousies.

Then the 20th century came to a close, and along with it the dominion of the traditional news media as custodians of the public conversation.

3. From Mass to Social Media

“Freedom of the press,” quipped the critic A.J. Liebling in 1960, “is guaranteed only to those who own one.” For most of the 20th century that privilege was reserved for a cadre of corporate owners who could afford the expense of mass circulation printing presses or had been granted broadcast licenses from the state. The people who produced content for the media of mass communication were employees of these corporations. Everyone else was just a member of the mass audience, a population of passive recipients.

But the advent of the Internet visited profound structural change on how societies both inform and converse with themselves. The 20th century media, Gutenberg’s children, were centralized agencies of public address that spoke to otherwise atomized audiences. The members of those audiences had few opportunities to speak back to the media, and next to no means to speak among themselves.

The new portals of public consciousness are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the other social media, which create no content themselves. What marks the era of social communication is precisely the ability of the public to talk to itself via these channels, without the mediation of newsroom professionals. Constituencies of interest that were ignored by the 20th century media can coalesce, find expression, mobilize. And the content that percolates through these portals issues from individuals far more than from corporations. The news media are just one source of information among myriad, their reports reduced to bulletins that are cited, quoted, repeated, disputed, dismissed, mocked in the turbulence of the social media flow.

And because content created by amateurs owes nothing to the truth discipline of socially responsible media organizations, it can retail falsity just as easily as it can propagate endearing GIFs of puppies at play or satirical memes of politicians. Content can be fabricated for any number of motives. Clickbait factories do so for monetary reward – the advertising revenue that attaches to frequently viewed and reposted content. Rascals can Photoshop pictures just for the lulz of guying the gullible. If the idea is to grab attention, which is more likely to do so: a picture of a flooded street with cars submerged or a picture of a flooded street with cars submerged and a shark swimming past? On International Women’s Day this March, an image circulated of a banner unfurled on a tower of the Kremlin, reading “The National Idea is Feminism.” The image was fake, but no doubt created in the spirit of advertising, to promote a social cause. And as Ryan Holiday has pointed out, digital channels of information are

especially susceptible to marketing manipulation. Hence the rise of “influencers,” social media celebrities and trendsetters who endorse products and services simply by being seen to use them.

The circumstances that make it impossible to tell if Colleen Hagerly’s New York City subway tweet captured a genuine moment or promoted a staged event permit far more pernicious forms of deceit. There is nothing remotely mischievous about coordinated campaigns of falsehood masquerading as political reportage in order to manipulate an electorate.

As it became apparent during the 2016 U.S. presidential election that outright fabrications were churning through social media, the matter of “fake news” vaulted to prominence. The “real news” media, noting that these fabrications were overwhelmingly intended to damage the Democratic candidate, worried that lies had become a propellant of political fortune. In the aftermath of Trump’s victory and his persistent disparaging of the “real news” outlets as themselves purveyors of “fake news,” the issue became a full-blown panic narrative.

All politicians express frustration with the news media, but Trump sees any coverage that questions or fails to promote his agenda as a form of sedition. With the exception of the slavishly devotional Fox News, the new president has maligned the news media as intransigently hostile to his ambitions and therefore pitted against the interests of the country he leads. They are “the enemy of the American people,” and he exhorts his tens of millions of followers not to believe them.

So, not only could untruths and hysteria circulate unimpeded in the new media environment, the institutions upholding methods of inquiry designed to ensure the trustworthiness of their accounts were suddenly under assault from the highest executive office. Just at a moment when politically motivated falsehoods favourable to him were being pumped into the information system, the U.S. president was attempting to discredit the credibility of media sources committed to accuracy in reporting.

The “real news” media, meanwhile, are now attenuated versions of themselves. Their advertising base has deserted them, their audiences dwindle, their newsrooms have imploded. They no longer command anything approaching the resources, revenues or respect they once did.

Worse, the “real news” media prove useful to “fake news” in two ways. First, as a punching bag. Second, as the sheep’s clothing the wolf requires. “Fake news” launders itself through the conventions of responsible reporting. That was always the secret of the supermarket tabloids. No matter how outlandish their stories of celebrity infidelity and alien abduction, they were presented in the guise of big-city reporting, with big headlines, lots of pictures, grabby lede paragraphs, deadpan description, sources quoted: all the markers of objective journalism. It is no accident that the leading supermarket tabloid, the National Enquirer, has been a fierce champion of Donald Trump.

4. Dezinformatsiya

The Internet liberated public expression from the 20th century media, and in many respects the result has been exhilarating. In others it has been dismaying. When what could be said in public had to be filtered through responsible newsrooms, the hateful and the demented could be sequestered. When all are free to say what they like, the comment threads fill with rancor and venom.

Anger seems to be the motor force of so many of the sites spreading false news for political motives: anger at the political establishment, anger at elites, anger at globalization, anger at immigrants and refugees, anger at the mainstream media. Because this sort of vitriol lay outside the traditional bounds

of polite society, the responsible media at first paid scant attention – to do otherwise would have been to grant mainstream publicity to fringe outlets peddling tales about, for example, Hillary Clinton running a pedophile ring from the basement of a pizza parlor. It was precisely the duty of the responsible media *not* to dignify such slanders by repeating them.

The “real news” media only began to report on the “fake news” sites once it became apparent that fake news was gaining purchase via social media. (Even then, it was BuzzFeed, a savvy digital news startup, that was in the forefront, not the legacy media.) A hidden network – or, rather, a network heretofore unbeknownst to the mainstream media – came to light. It had been there all along, and it was a good deal more sophisticated than an affiliation of cranks sharing nose-stretchers for a community of the credulous. In some ways, particularly in its mastery of social media protocols and its use of botnets (automated actors), it was more sophisticated than the mainstream media.

Kate Starbird, a computer scientist at the University of Washington, has begun to map this “alternative media ecosystem.” She runs a lab that examines how people spread rumours online during crisis events from earthquakes to mass shootings. She noticed that a particular type of rumour kept cropping up after each of the crisis events caused by humans: an “alternative narrative” that claimed the event either did not happen or that it was the work of perpetrators other than those identified by authorities and the mainstream media. Following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, the lab recorded more than 4,000 tweets claiming the attack was carried out by U.S. Navy Seals.

These rumours had different “signatures” from other types of rumours. Most crisis-related rumours spike quickly and fade just as quickly. These rose more slowly but persisted over time. They were sustained by a set group of Twitter users who tweeted often, rather than a large number of users tweeting once or twice. They often had high “domain diversity,” linking to a large number of digital sources, including InfoWars, BeforeItsNews and RT. They showed a strong botnet presence – Twitter accounts that “were not ‘real’ people, but were operated by a computer program that controlled a large number of accounts.”

In early 2016, in the wake of the Umpqua Community College shootings and the terror attacks in Paris, student members of the team decided to investigate what they suspected were commonalities in the alternative narratives spreading about these separate events.

They found a botnet connected to TheRealStrategy.com, coordinating hundreds of Twitter accounts, and charted the connections between these accounts, and between communities of accounts. To their surprise, they found Anonymous (the hacktivist group) and GamerGate accounts connecting with pro-Palestinian and European white supremacist accounts, left-wing supporters of Wikileaks connecting with right-wing Trump supporters, all spreading disinformation about mass shootings.

For nine months the team examined Twitter activity devoted to shooting events, creating a network map of Internet domains referenced in the tweets. Of the 117 domains charted, 80 belonged to alternative media, 27 to the mainstream media, and the others to NGOs and Russian media outlets. More than 80 percent of the alternative domains were cited for supporting the alternative narratives. “Mainstream media were cited for factual accounts of the events, and then used *as evidence* by conspiracy theorists as they built these theories.”

“It quickly became clear,” Starbird writes, “that the U.S. left (liberal) vs. right (conservative) political spectrum was not appropriate for much of this content. Instead, the major political orientation was towards anti-globalism,” although the meaning of this varied. “For some websites focused on a U.S. audience, globalism implied a pro-immigrant stance. For more internationally-focused sites, globalism

was used to characterize (and criticize) the U.S. government... Globalism was also tied to corporatism – in other words, the ways in which large, multi-national companies exert power over the world. And the term was also connected, implicitly and explicitly, to mainstream media.”

Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, writing on Russian disinformation campaigns two years before the U.S. election, observed the same thing. Anarchists, anti-imperialists and neo-Nazis can be mobilized, not in explicit alliance or in protest marches – if they encountered one another on the streets they would undoubtedly attack one another – but in virtual, online resistance to what they see (each in their own way) as a sinister prevailing order.

Starbird also notes a “proliferation and a convergence of different conspiratorial themes.” Every domain that hosted an article promoting an alternative narrative of a mass shooting also contained content referencing other conspiracy theories about vaccines, GMOs, chemtrails, Soros-sponsored anti-Trump protestors, and pedophile rings operated by the powerful (which Pomerantsev and Weiss point out is a favoured Kremlin tactic to discredit enemies). Meanwhile, different sites cycle content among one another, so it may appear that information is being confirmed by multiple sources when in fact it is the same disinformation simply repeated.

A confederacy of oppositional groups united in their rejection of mainstream, “corporate” news does not amount to a systemic disinformation offensive aimed at compromising the democratic process. Pomerantsev and Weiss, however, argue that the new media environment leaves the Western democracies vulnerable to exactly that.

Russia, they contend, with its troll armies and falsehood factories, has “weaponized” disinformation and “the West has no institutional or analytical tools to deal with it.” The Kremlin is engaged in a campaign of *dezinformatsiya* – defined by the CIA’s Lothar Metzler as “operations aiming at pollution of the opinion-making processes in the West,” a crucial component of which is “producing a lack of faith in traditional media.” Fake news becomes a tool of subterfuge and destabilization. In Germany, as the Guardian has reported, rumours have been planted that Angela Merkel was a member of the Stasi, the East German secret police, and that she is the daughter of Adolf Hitler. In 2016, fabricated news spread through social media and Russian news sites that a 13-year-old girl had been gang-raped in Berlin by refugees from the Middle East, prompting far-right and anti-Muslim protests.

“Today’s Kremlin,” according to Pomerantsev and Weiss, “might perhaps be viewed as an avant-garde of malevolent globalization. The methods it pursues will be taken up by others.”

There are those who believe these methods have already been adopted, and that they were deployed by the Trump campaign for the presidency. The argument is that the conversation of democracy was hijacked by sophisticated, automated social media messaging informed by psychographic profiles of millions upon millions of voters, as revealed through surveillance of their Facebook posts and Likes. According to Berit Anderson and Brett Horvath, this allowed “personalized, adaptive, and ultimately addictive propaganda,” much of which was done through dark Facebook posts, which are visible only to those being targeted.

“Did this swing voter in Pennsylvania click on the ad attacking Clinton’s negligence over her email server? Yes? Serve her more content that emphasizes failures of personal responsibility. No? The automated script will try a different headline, perhaps one that plays on a different personality trait – say the voter’s tendency to be agreeable toward authority figures. Perhaps: ‘Top Intelligence Officials Agree: Clinton’s Emails Jeopardized National Security.’”

The company ostensibly responsible for this is Cambridge Analytica, for which Steve Bannon – former executive chair of Breitbart and currently White House Chief Strategist – is a former board member, and Robert Mercer, the single largest donor to Trump’s campaign, is a major investor. Following Trump’s election, media outlets from the Guardian to the New Yorker have made mention of Cambridge Analytica. Anderson and Horvath describe it as a “nearly impenetrable voter manipulation machine that is quickly becoming the new deciding factor in elections around the world.”

The focus on Cambridge Analytica may be an instance of clutching at an explanation after the fact for a Black Swan election outcome – a result the political establishment on both sides of the aisle never saw coming. The suggestion is that public opinion, and therefore the democratic process, was suborned by machine algorithms scripted to spread prejudice through peer-to-peer networks. There is, as yet, no evidence as to how effective these techniques might be or that concerted disinformation campaigns coordinated by Cambridge Analytica psychometrics won the election for Trump. Nonetheless, the fact remains that such campaigns are not only possible, they are a reality. And they are possible because we reveal ourselves through social media in ways we do not realize. The tech realizes for us.

“Our smartphone,” note Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus, “is a vast psychological questionnaire that we are constantly filling out, both consciously and unconsciously.” These data will inevitably be used to feed bespoke information back to us to persuade us of something. In the not-so-distant future this content may be so consistent with what we already know and want to believe, it will be impossible to tell whether it is authentic or just contrived to be. “If you think #fakenews is a problem now,” University of British Columbia Journalism professor Taylor Owen has tweeted, “wait until @facebook builds a metaverse.”

5. Back to the Future

What is to be done? How do we protect the integrity of the conversation of democracy from what Boorstin, more than half a century ago, called “the menace of unreality”?

It is not possible to purge falsehood from the information ecosystem and, even if it were, a society that policed what was permitted to be said in public would no longer be free. In a liberal democracy, one is perfectly entitled to spout rubbish and to believe nonsense. Recommendations for remedies – or at least, responses – therefore fall into three complementary categories.

First, there are calls for the social media platforms to alter their algorithms so as to mute “fake news,” or to deny it commercial reward, and indeed the platforms have adopted some such measures. Google announced it would bar fake news sites from its AdSense advertising program and Facebook shortly followed suit. Facebook’s “trending topics” is now supposed to feature stories that have been verified by “real news” outlets. However, although these steps may make it less profitable for clickbait mills, they will do little to blunt the proliferation of the more insidious genres of agitprop for which advertising revenue is not the aim. Bot networks unleashed to commandeer social media conversations care nothing for commercial reward and will update their own protocols to take advantage of whatever algorithms the platforms put in place.

Second, there are calls for renewed and more robust fact checking in order to expose falsehood and exaggeration, and again there is already some excellent work being done in this regard. Sites such as Snopes.com, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com are entirely devoted to correcting misinformation. Daniel Dale, the Toronto Star’s Washington correspondent, catalogues untruths uttered and repeated

by Donald Trump on a daily basis. Craig Silverman of BuzzFeed has made reporting on “fake news” a beat unto its own. And with support from the Craig Newmark Foundation, the International Center for Journalists has announced the launch of TruthBuzz: The Viral Fact-Checking Contest, crowd-sourcing “entries that debunk fake news and share solid fact-checking in engaging or entertaining ways.”

Reliance on fact checking, though, is at best a rear-guard action. Depleted as they are, the media barely have the resources any more to cover “real news.” They can hardly be expected to also report assiduously on an alternate universe of counterfeit information. Genuine reporting, too, requires research effort, diligence and time to produce. All “fake news” requires is a fertile imagination and a hyper-partisan cast of mind. “Lies,” note Pomerantsev and Weiss, “are easy to produce and disseminate ... For every myth busted, a thousand more can be created.” And in any case, factual corrections issued by the mainstream media are unlikely to persuade anyone who already sees the mainstream media as hirelings of a self-serving power elite.

Finally, there are calls for a campaign of public education to teach audiences how to be discerning in their information consumption habits and to equip them with the critical tools to detect and dismiss falsehood masquerading as journalism. The News Literacy Project in the U.S., funded by the Knight Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others, targets middle and high school students. Journalism outlets from the New York Times to PBS have produced lesson plans to assist teachers in media literacy classes. Legislators in California have introduced bills to require the state school system to teach “civic online reasoning.”

Perversely, however, the alternate media domain has long urged the public to be vigilant in consuming media content. In a form of intellectual ju-jitsu, mainstream arguments about media literacy have been co-opted by conspiracy theorists and turned against the mainstream media. Readers are reminded to be skeptical of content issuing from “corporate” news sources and to become better consumers of information. “Perhaps the most vexing finding,” Starbird writes, “was what we perceived to be an intentional strategy by many alternative media websites to leverage rhetoric around fake news and critical thinking to further confuse and mislead readers.”

All of these counter-measures against “fake news” are therefore necessary, but even together they will not be sufficient to resolve what promises to be a persistent feature of the media environment in the coming decades of the 21st century. In all likelihood the future of news journalism will resemble its past, in the years before corporatized newspapers and broadcast networks controlled the flow of public information and hemmed in the parameters of debate. We may be returning to a period of pamphleteering (albeit one now powered by engines of artificial intelligence) in which what people come to believe is continually up for grabs, fought over at every turn, and differs from one constituency of the public to another.

The philosopher of science P.K. Feyerabend called this “epistemological anarchy.”

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He holds a Bachelor of Journalism from Carleton University, an M.A. in the History and Philosophy of Science from the University of Cambridge, and a Ph.D. in Communication from McGill University. He taught for two years at Cornell University before joining the faculty at Carleton in 1987.

He has worked as a reporter for the Edmonton Journal, an editor and editorial writer for the Ottawa Citizen, and a columnist for The Globe and Mail and CBC National Radio. In 2006 he was Erasmus Mundus visiting scholar at the Danish School of Journalism and the University of Århus.

Among other venues, his academic work has appeared in Critical Studies in Communication, the Media Studies Journal, the Canadian Medical Association Journal, Topia, Journalism Studies, and the research reports of The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing.

He is the co-editor (with Jon Pammett) of The Canadian Federal Election of 2015 (Dundurn Press) along with five previous volumes in this series.

He was a principal writer and editor for both volumes of the 2012 government-mandated Aerospace Review (the Emerson Report), the Canadian Space Agency's 2014 Space Policy Framework, and the Public Policy Forum's 2016 report on the state of the Canadian news media, Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age.

At Carleton, he served for nine years as director of the School of Journalism and Communication, and for six years as associate dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs and director of the Arthur Kroeger College of Public Affairs.

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