

Firat Ciftci

LING 23920

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17 February 2019

Fake Quotes: Deception, Lies, and Public Manipulation

It is increasingly stated by political news pundits that the current era we live in is dominated by “post-truth politics.” Every day, our leaders blur the line between the factual, the subjective, and the incorrect, thus moving one step further in undermining democracy. While such is certainly the case and is extremely worrying to observe, it must be stated that the “post-truth” nature of human beings is not a recent occurrence. Throughout the history, many influential characters have been misattributed with quotes that seem quasi-intellectual. While some arise from minute misunderstandings, most of such occurrences ultimately connect to an ulterior motive, fueled by deception. This paper will focus on a random selection of fake quotes and analyze what, if any, deceptive meaning can be uncovered from each one. Furthermore, the paper will then shed light upon why some quotes may seem more legitimate than others, examining social and political reasons surrounding the perceptions of people toward quotes and their usage.

The quotes selected for this paper’s analysis can be found on project website’s “Quiz” section. The table below displays all fifteen quotes being used:

Quote	Real/Fake	Context/Justification
"This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it." – John Adams	Fake	Adams made the statement to repudiate it. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson about religion on April 19, 1817, he mentioned reading some polemical books that

		reminded him of the way his boyhood minister, Lemuel Bryant, and his Latin schoolmaster, Joseph Cleverly, used to argue <i>ad nauseam</i> about religion.
"I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals." – Albert Einstein	Real	In his essay “Why Socialism,” Einstein predicted that under a capitalist society, political parties and politicians would be corrupted by financial contributions made by owners of large capital amounts, and the system "cannot be effectively checked even by a democratically organized political society".
"In whatever country Jews have settled in any great numbers, they have lowered the moral tone, depreciated the commercial integrity, have segregated themselves, and have not been assimilated, have sneered at and tried to undermine the Christian religion, have built up a state within a state, and have, when opposed, tried to strangle that country to death financially."	Fake	Even though this quote is claimed to be from one of Franklin’s diaries, historian Charles Beard, after a thorough investigation of the "Franklin Prophecy," concluded: "This alleged 'Prophecy' ascribed to Franklin is a crude forgery, and his name should be cleared of the crass prejudice attributed to him. There is in our historical records no

– Benjamin Franklin		evidence whatever of any basis for the falsehood."
"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." – Albert Einstein	Fake	The earliest known occurrence, and probable origin, is from a 1981 text from Narcotics Anonymous: "Insanity is repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results."
"Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work worthy the interposition of a deity. More humble, and I believe truer, to consider him created from animals." – Charles Darwin	Real	Found in Charles Darwin's "Notebook C" from 1838.
"Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in healthcare is the most shocking and inhumane." – Martin Luther King, Jr.	Real	Speech to the Second National Convention of the Medical Committee for Human Rights – Chicago, 25 March 1966
"You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you can not fool all the people all the time." – Abraham Lincoln	Fake	Lincoln was supposed to have uttered these words when speaking in Clinton, Illinois, on September 8, 1858, while campaigning for the Senate against Stephen A. Douglas. But the <i>Bloomington Pantagraph</i> made no mention of the remark in its report of the speech, and it cannot be

		found in any of Lincoln's printed addresses.
<p>"Ours is one continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw Kaffir whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with and, then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness."</p> <p>– Mahatma Gandhi</p>	Real	<p>From an address given in Bombay (26 September 1896)</p> <p>Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, p. 410 (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes.</p>
<p>"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis maintain their neutrality."</p> <p>– Dante</p>	Fake	<p>John F. Kennedy misquoted Dante on June 24th, 1963 in in Bonn, West Germany, at the signing of a charter establishing the German Peace Corps.</p>
<p>"If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."</p> <p>– Isaac Newton</p>	Fake	<p>The statement is not original with Newton. It appeared in Richard Burton's <i>The Anatomy of Melancholy</i> (second edition, 1624).</p>
<p>"Veni, vidi, vici."</p> <p>– Julius Caesar</p>	Real	<p>Written in a report to Rome 47 B.C., after conquering Pharnaces at Zela in Asia Minor in just five days.</p>

<p>"A revolution is coming — a revolution which will be peaceful if we are wise enough; compassionate if we care enough; successful if we are fortunate enough — But a revolution which is coming whether we will it or not. We can affect its character; we cannot alter its inevitability."</p> <p>– John F. Kennedy</p>	Fake	<p>This quote is from Robert F. Kennedy, in a speech in the US Senate on May 9th, 1966.</p>
<p>"Where there is great power there is great responsibility."</p> <p>– Winston Churchill</p>	Real	<p>In the House of Commons on February 28th, 1906 during a speech on South Africa.</p>
<p>"Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts."</p> <p>– Richard Feynman</p>	Real	<p>Said during his address "What is Science?", presented at the fifteenth annual meeting of the National Science Teachers Association, in New York City (1966).</p>
<p>"I'm very liberal when it comes to health care. I believe in universal health care. I believe in whatever it takes to make people well and better."</p> <p>– Donald J. Trump</p>	Real	<p>From an interview with Larry King CNN (October 1999).</p>

Through the quotes analyzed, one generalization that could be made is that the quote misattributions made to positive scientists seem far less malevolent and deceptive than those

made to politicians and other socially influential figures. Scientists such as Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton are known to come up with memorable and sensational quotes and as their personas have been established as rational, scientific, and highly intellectual in society's consciousness, fake quotes tied to them seem to follow the same trend. It is not impossible to imagine Einstein stating, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results;" the quote praises rationality and has a quasi-scientific outlook, but the most important aspect is its nature of being a piece of advice. The point being made has no deceptive meaning attached; instead, it aims to give advice on something that appears simple and universal. The same could be said for Newton's misattribution, "If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" Here, we can once again observe a sense of societal guidance and advice.

In comparison, fake quotes attributed to politicians seem extremely deceptive and worrying. Ranging from real quotes being taken out of context to straight lies, the names of people who lead countries and societies tend to be taken advantage to push a certain political agenda. This kind of deceptive motive is explicit in "In whatever country Jews have settled in any great numbers, they have lowered the moral tone, depreciated the commercial integrity, have segregated themselves, and have not been assimilated, have sneered at and tried to undermine the Christian religion, have built up a state within a state, and have, when opposed, tried to strangle that country to death financially," a quote misattributed to Benjamin Franklin. This anti-Semitic portrayal of Franklin serves to connect his well-liked public persona with far-right views, aiming to justify racism through making him and the other Founding Fathers of the United States seem as if they never intended for Jews to be a part of the American society. This kind of misattribution is extremely dangerous to democracy and the global society as a whole; the argument of "post-truth politics" is visible in this quote, as it takes a far-right view and aims to

deceive the public with zero justification, hiding a proper lie while looking like a factual statement.

Although not as dire as misattributions to politicians, authors and social scientists also get attributed to deceptive quotes. For example, a quote misattributed to Dante, “the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis maintain their neutrality,” holds both political and moral value judgment. As Dante is an author known for similar ways of thinking, the fake quote aims to exploit his persona and criticize a certain group of people in society through establishing an illegitimate sense of verification for the idea being pushed forward. The connection to a famous figure aims to establish and/or heighten the sense of shame being pushed to the persons being criticized, giving the image that such popular figures being attributed *must* know better than the general public, particularly compared the people being targeted.

With any kind of quote being misattributed, quality and quantity play a distinctive role in the deception and manipulation of the audience. Without a doubt, it can be said that the believability of a fake quote increases as the quote is qualitatively more engaging and well-fabricated. To achieve such, from the examples analyzed, it can be concluded that the quote must strike at a highly particular topic, usually controversial and a politically divisive one, thus aiming to target a specific group of people while making the people who support the view not question its legitimacy. As it is easier for someone to believe in something that shares their worldview, the fake quote must do a good-enough job at striking the right cord while vilifying the correct group. Moreover, quantitatively, the fake quote must either be simple enough that no one can question it, seeming to be common sense societally, or it must be excessively long so that no one assumes it could be fabricated. Both trends are visible in the list of fake quotes selected above, and it is extremely difficult to differentiate them from real once because of such reasons.

In conclusion, it could be stated that while some fake quotes appear harmless and push for ideas that are common sense, a non-trivial portion of them have worrying motives that push certain political, moral, and societal agendas, furthering controversial and divisive rhetoric through their exploitation of well-known and well-liked public personas. The tactics utilized usually involve targeting a very specific group of people, meanwhile aiming to rile another group to take opposition. While not every fake quote is equally effective, the best ones combine quality and quantity in such a way that it seems impossible to differentiate them from real quotes.

If you want to generate your own fake quote, the project website has a fake quote image generator. While it seems fun to fabricate quotes and fool people, it has to be stated that it has a worrying potential to undermine what is factual, blurring much-needed boundaries needed to keep democracy alive and well. Thus, before utilizing the tool, one must keep everything discussed above and act accordingly.

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