

After Truth: An Expert Analysis

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CMS 341

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May 2, 2022

General Overview

After Truth discusses the fake news phenomenon and provides multiple stories about fake news and its implications on average Americans, even those who don't follow these fake news articles. The fake news phenomenon falls in line with many of the concepts discussed in this course such as problematic tech use, the online disinhibition effect, viral content, and even the hyperpersonal model.

As far as problematic tech use goes, lying to the masses is immoral, but I'd like to note that it's functional since it achieves the goals that the writers are trying to accomplish. Moreover, the documentary also delves into tendencies that can be supported by the online disinhibition effect, which entails the various types of anonymity and deindividuation amongst other things. Furthermore, the hyperpersonal model even comes into play with some of these stories since the lack of visible cues achieves the writer's goal of either making themselves seem more trustworthy or even less savory, as in the case of Dry Alabama. Finally, fake news and viral content are inseparable concepts, as fake news is simply a manifestation and the strategic use of viral content.

Story 1: Pizzagate

Pizzagate was a conspiracy theory that originated from Reddit and 4Chan and spread to mainstream social media platforms and even mainstream news as the theory proliferated. The theory revolved around Comet Ping Pong, a pizza place in DC that has strong ties with the LGBTQ+ community and is frequented by key political figures. The Pizzagate theory proposed

that Comet Ping Pong was a front for a Satanic child sex ring where children were molested and trafficked. What began as a harmless theory devolved into the employees receiving death threats. What made this conspiracy reach the mainstream media, however, was how it ultimately led to Edgar Welch storming the restaurant with an AR-15, looking to “save the children”.

A good place to start with this matter is to emphasize the social and political leanings of the conspiracy theorists and the victims in this scenario. The account that started the theory in the first place had a history of posting white supremacist material and Comet Ping Pong is openly affiliated with the LGBTQ+ community, which is a commonly targeted, marginalized group. As such, I’d argue that the Pizzagate incident is the product of homophobic hate groups, which are a manifestation of anti-social communication. As discussed in class many factors play a role in online hate groups, but I would like to focus on common enemies and anonymity. These hate groups share a common enemy, the left-leaning LGBTQ+ community, and are easy to antagonize them, even if they are given a theory as far-fetched as Pizzagate. Furthermore, due to the structures of Reddit and 4Chan, users have a higher degree of anonymity than they do on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. This is because Reddit and 4Chan users don’t normally post pictures of themselves on the platforms, which provides them with visual anonymity, and they get to come up with their usernames as well. These two things along with central actors such as Donald Trump and Alex Jones, along with other variables, lead to the proliferation of online hate groups. The capabilities and tendencies of these hate groups have been thoroughly researched and one of the general conclusions is that “when people talk within groups that embrace similar values and opinions, they tend to show mutual respect towards their

partners; and are likely to focus their negativity on other groups” (Maia et al. 2016). This is exactly what happened with these radical political groups since they were able to create an echo chamber that focused their negativity on the Democrats and the LGBTQ+ community.

So we have gone over how these ideas began to sprout in the first place, but how did they spread from 4Chan and fringe communities on Reddit to larger platforms, communities, and even mainstream media? I would argue that this is where the themes of viral content and selective sharing come into play. As discussed in class, viral content is defined as communication messages that have a viral reach, affective evaluation, and message deliberation. And whether we like it or not, I’d argue that Pizzagate ticks all of these boxes. While Pizzagate started on small, radical communities on Reddit and 4Chan, it was able to expand to larger radical communities on other parts of Reddit and Facebook which allowed for viral reach. People were able to like or dislike memes and posts about Pizzagate, which allowed for affective evaluation. Finally and most importantly, Pizzagate had spectacular message deliberation. It was something sensational, accusatory, and concrete. The radical right political groups loved the idea of catching the Democrats red-handed, molesting children at Comet Ping Pong. They loved the idea of getting to pin something on and justifying their demonization of the LGTBQ+ community. Comet Ping Pong was also a real place, with real employees, that somebody could just barge into and check for satanic rituals. Naturally, people who are intrigued by this idea, people who want it to be true, will share it with their close friends and followers, which is so powerful that some have even claimed that “selective sharing is the predominant mechanism for spreading political messages”

(Liang 2018). In essence, the Pizzagate theory was the perfect story that too many people wanted to be true, which let the idea spiral out of control.

Story 2: Alabama Project

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential elections, which many speculated was tampered with by Russian operatives and other bad actors, many Democrats felt that the fake news phenomenon was tilting elections against their favor. Because of this, political operatives such as Matt Osborne and New Knowledge decided to use the Republicans' tactics against them in the 2017 Alabama Senate special election. To stop moderate Republicans from voting, they created a page called "Dry Alabama", a seemingly Conservative, Pro-Republican page that wanted to restrict alcohol in Alabama. The page featured what appeared to be a radical Republican woman with a southern accent, which was Matt Osborne trying to make Roy Moore's supporters seem to be as extreme and unreasonable as possible to scare the moderate Republicans off from voting. Ultimately, the Dry Alabama page had about 3,000,000 views. As such, Osborne posits that if their page prevented even one percent of those viewers from voting, that would account for Doug Jones' winning margin, which was about 28,000 votes.

I'd argue that the Alabama Project and similar political strategies used to tilt the vote in one way or another are the manifestations of the online disinhibition effect. The creation of a misleading web page pretty obviously falls under anti-social communication and I'd argue that a lot of this is the product of the online disinhibition effect. The three factors I'd like to focus on specifically are dissociative anonymity, asynchronicity, and solipsistic introjection. The Dry Alabama page allowed its creators to enjoy all of these advantages of using CMC to conduct acts

of deception many of them wouldn't be able to pull off in real life. Since they are not only tucked behind a screen but also the pseudonym of Dry Alabama, they are protected from identifiability for the most part. This is exacerbated by solipsistic introjection since they can blur their characteristics and instead apply their characteristics to their imaginary characters. Matt Osborne, specifically, exhibited solipsistic introjection by taking on the guise of a southern, conservative woman by changing his voice and not showing his face, which convinced some of the page's conservative viewers that he was one of "them". Finally, what I'd argue is the most personal aspect of this phenomenon, is the asynchronicity of it all. Even if the viewers were able to comment on the page or contact the creators about it, there was a buffer between the point in time where they recorded and created posts on the Dry Alabama page and the point in time where viewers saw it. Without the fear of immediate responses, the creators are given a sense of freedom and the time to craft their messages as they go. Dr. John Suler touches upon all three of these concepts concerning the online disinhibition effect, where "invisibility gives people the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn't" (Suler 2004). In addition, on the note of solipsistic introjection, people "fill in ambiguities in the personality of the online companion with images of past relationships..." (Suler 2004). In other words, people take Osborne's character's voice and words and use their past relationships to fill in their gender, looks, background, age, and other defining characteristics. As a result, people create a character in their head without realizing it, which gives the character slightly more credence. And last but not least, on the note of asynchronicity, "not having to cope with someone's immediate reaction disinhibits people" (Sule 2004). A very simple and almost commonsensical concept is one of the driving forces behind these political wrongdoings. Anecdotally speaking, there are very few

people who can consistently tell blatant lies and get away with it in person, even if the persistence is lower in person. In this case, however, whether it's the Democrats, Republicans, or Russian agents, being able to hide behind a screen and respond to things on their own time makes them more comfortable with telling lies or at least taking on a different persona.

Finally, I would like to touch on how the Dry Alabama page is very closely tied to the hyperpersonal model discussed in class. While the hyperpersonal model is generally related to dating and the formation of meaningful relationships online, because of many of the aforementioned reasons such as greater anonymity, minimal nonverbal cues, and the asynchronicity allowing Osborne to have strategic control over self-presentation, the hyperpersonal model suggests that the utilization of CMC not only protects Matt Osborne and the Democrats but also helps them become more interpersonally effective than they would be in face-to-face settings. An important thing to note here, however, is that most hyperpersonal model research focuses on positive interactions, whereas the Democrats' goal in this scenario is to create an intense, negative impression of the page. Especially supporting the power of anonymity and asynchronicity, we can look at how "individuals might find it difficult to control their nonverbal displays in person and might be forced to react before they have had time to process a situation" (Sumner, E. M., & Ramirez, A. 2017). In this particular scenario, if Osborne was in a setting where Republicans were grilling his character in real-time, even if he was still visually anonymous, he would have likely struggled coming up with answers on the spot and even holding onto his "southern" accent.

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