

Fake News: necessary, helpful, and well over-due  
*How the 'fake news problem' is helping society*

Just as 2015 will be remembered as 'the year of the refugee crisis', and 2016 as 'the year of celebrity deaths', 2017 should go down in history as 'the year of the fake news'<sup>1</sup>.

False stories made viral, a presidency apparently built on untrue articles: fake news rocked 2017 so hard that Collins dictionary named it 'word of the year'<sup>2</sup>. Journalist Jon Snow describing it as "a serious threat to western democracy"<sup>3</sup>. I beg to differ. I believe that fake news needed to happen; that, regardless of the trouble it has caused, its existence will eventually have been a force for good, serving as a much-needed wake up call for a society that desperately needed to evaluate the way it thinks about democracy, journalism and truth.

As a neologism, the exact definition of 'fake news' is vague. Michael Radutzky, a producer for 60 Minutes, called it, "Stories that are provably false, have enormous traction in the culture, and are consumed by millions of people."<sup>4</sup> I would add to that, setting fake news apart from satire and 'inaccuracy' by specifying its intention: all lie, but for different reasons. Satire lies for entertainment, inaccuracy does so inadvertently, while fake news lies deliberately, for the purposes of misleading. Contrastingly, when I speak of 'serious' or 'proper' journalism, I am referring to 'traditional' news sources: moderated and fact-checked brands (such as The New York Times or The BBC) seeking to inform, not mislead.

My hypothesis does not suggest that fake news is harmless. On the contrary, when convincing, fake news can do serious damage. It can undermine truth as a concept, and make pointless the possession of genuine facts. It can threaten democratic elections, by warping voters' perceptions of what choosing a candidate entails. It can provoke a public mistrust in all media, making it easier for lying politicians to get away with calling exposés libel.<sup>5</sup> And, while seen as a wholly western problem, it has the traction to pollute the entire world: from untrue tales about the government spying on citizens through their money in India, to almost causing nuclear conflict between Israel and Pakistan. The Wikipedia page for 'fake news' has sections for 27 different countries.<sup>6</sup>

Defending such a negative and powerful force may seem deliberately contentious, but I genuinely believe that today's fake news problem will be tomorrow's historical reference point. It will be seen as the push towards a more enlightened, more aware, and better-informed democracy.

Fake news will fix four things. First, it will solve the dire financial crisis that currently threatens professional journalism. Second, it will increase the average quality of journalism worldwide. Third, it will wake people to the danger of passively absorbing information. And, finally, it will force hugely powerful online empires like Facebook and Reddit to behave responsibly.

All of these things desperately need to happen; all of these will ensure the continuation of genuine democracy, and none of these would have happened without fake news.

Allow me to explain. Journalism is an essential industry, a pillar of democracy and way holding power to account, but in recent years people have been unwilling to pay for it. This is because a news outlet, like anything attempting to sell itself, is a brand, and for a brand to be successful it needs to offer something people are willing to pay for. With the rise of the Internet, social media, and 'free' news, 'traditional' journalism no longer did this. People, regardless of whether they could afford to, had little incentive to pay for news.

However, an awareness of 'fake news' has started to make people lose faith in 'free news'<sup>7</sup>; unknown brands offering un-sourced 'exposés' are increasingly seen as synonymous with nonsense.

As 'proper' outlets continue to offer insightful, fact-checked, well-sourced information, fake news is turning journalistic probity back into something people don't feel they can get for free. David Rubin, senior vice president and head of audience and brand at the New York Times, says that fake news and the lack of information surrounding the US election "emphasized the fact that people would pay for [our] platform...It made them realise that it *does* matter where you spend your time and get your information."<sup>8</sup>

Confirmation comes from the New York Times' sales figures. Following the US election, the company "reported a profit of \$27.7 million in the second quarter of 2017, up from \$9.1 million in the same period last year"<sup>8</sup>. This trend is evident across 'proper' journalism. In the UK, at the beginning of 2017, the Guardian jumped from 15,000 to 200,000 'paying members'<sup>9</sup>, while The Times saw a 12% year-on-year increase in its circulation of printed papers<sup>10</sup>.

Thanks to a changed mind-set of what not paying for your news gets you, journalism is moving away from being an industry 'in danger'. This also allows outlets to exist truly independently, not having to turn to corrupting advertisers as a source of financial

support<sup>11</sup> (their messages not convoluted by reminders to buy Gatorade).

This leads me to my second point, and the increasing average quality of journalism. As well as starting to escape the need for unappealing ads and disingenuous 'advertorials', 'proper' journalists are more determined than ever to set themselves apart from 'fake news'. "Terrified of being called out for inaccuracies"<sup>7</sup>, and subject to the 'fake news taunt' by platforms like Twitter, journalists worldwide are trying harder than ever to produce 'great' content: work that it is truthful, well-sourced and essential.

According to David Rubin, the NYT has "doubled down on the quality of engagement [since the US election]. Making an enormous investment in how facts are uncovered, the investigative reporting, on our global resources."<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly in England, in November, Guardian Editor-in-chief Katherine Viner said that her paper's mission during this tumultuous time was simple: 'make our journalism better'<sup>12</sup>.

Fear of fake news leads to better journalism. Better journalism, to a better-informed public and transparent society, and from there, perhaps, to a clearer realisation of what journalism is supposed to stand for, and a change in societies negative view of journalists.

For decades journalism and 'the media' has been externally seen as untrustworthy and self-serving. In a 2013 poll naming the '10 professions most likely to attract sociopaths', 'Journalism' came sixth, and 'Media' third<sup>13</sup>.

This prejudice has always been beneficial to those with something to hide. Take Donald Trump: the ease with which the president can dismiss all negative press as 'lies' and 'fake news'<sup>14</sup>, stems from this inbuilt view of journalists as glib liars. By changing this, we remove power from power itself, and hand it back, effectively, to everyone willing buy a newspaper.

Which brings us to our third point: how fake news is causing a public awakening.

Barely a year ago, most people hadn't heard of fake news. Then, its saturated explosion around the time of the US election turned it into the definition of 2017.

In my opinion, the scariest thing about fake news isn't how suddenly it managed to dominate our political discussions, but the fact that it managed to not be involved for so long. Fake news affecting politics isn't a new phenomenon. Its use can be traced back centuries, to Ramses the Great in 13<sup>th</sup> Century BC, spreading

'lies and propaganda portraying the Battle of Kadesh'<sup>15</sup>. For as long as there have been leaders determined to keep leading, 'information' has been used as a manipulative tool.

It has also been a historically successful one, as we have an innate inclination to believe information constantly and convincingly presented to us as fact, without requiring proof<sup>16</sup>. This passivity with which our beliefs are formed can only be rectified by a conscious effort to think about the news we are hearing, and by deciding to require proof. A rising public effort to no longer be duped by fake news is achieving this, and a surge in 'proper' overtly-sourced journalism allows it to succeed.

One might assume that this 'cultural awakening' will inevitably lead to fewer and fewer people getting their news from stereotypically unreliable sources like Facebook. While trends may show this slowly happening (the beginning of 2017 being the first year since its launch that faith in the site as a news source has dropped<sup>17</sup>), given its ease, reach, and undying use as a social forum, it seems likely that Facebook will remain a secondary news source for many. However, this is not necessarily bad news. Welcome our fourth point, and how fake news is more clearly defining the roles of 'online giants'.

In the past, online brands like Facebook have largely avoided the ramifications that come with publishing fake news, because of the way they label their companies.

In Britain, 'traditional' journalism is moderated by a variety of bodies (the exact rules governing them dependent on their platform and reach). However, when pointed at by the fake news debate, Facebook has always reiterated that they don't *write* the news, and thereby don't abide by the same limitations to tell the truth: "We're a technology company, not a media company," Mark Zuckerberg said in a video uploaded to his profile in early 2016. "We build tools, not produce content."<sup>18</sup>

This disingenuous response failed to admit the power that these 'tools' possess. What Facebook does do is to serve news, to around 2.1 billion users every day<sup>19</sup>. A 2016 study by Ofcom named Facebook as the second largest news website in Britain<sup>20</sup> (after the BBC), an enormously powerful role.

The same goes for Google, named by Alexa Internet as the most traffic-heavy site in the world<sup>21</sup>, and Reddit, 'the front page of the Internet', that gets more than 230 million unique visitors every month<sup>22</sup>. Regardless of where their content comes from, sites like these are deciding a huge proportion of what we see, a role no less influential than 'writer', and in need of no fewer constraints.

Immediately after the US election, Zuckerberg said that the idea that the misinformation and fake news spread by his website could have influenced its outcome was a 'crazy idea', dismissing the need for further controls on his site's content<sup>17</sup>. However, as public awareness and 'serious' media coverage of the issue increased (the 'Google rate' for the term 'fake news' staying at at least 4x what it was in any month prior to the US election, every single month since<sup>23</sup>) Zuckerberg has since retracted his comments.

In a 'status update', he used the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur to ask for forgiveness for his ignorance and the way his platform had been used as a force for bad<sup>24</sup>. This admission has been seen across other platforms, as Twitter conceded to a study from Oxford University, claiming that pro-leave bots played a 'strategic role' in shaping conversations about the EU referendum on their site last year<sup>25</sup>.

Facebook was founded in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and fake news in 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, but this 2017 acknowledgement that external forces can manipulate their platforms is the first of its kind. And it has sparked a new, and much more serious wave of measures to stop it from reoccurring.

Compared to early 2017, when fake news fighting systems brought in by Facebook (like its early flagging measures<sup>26</sup>) were named 'not enough' by critics<sup>27</sup>, a new wave of more effective measures are being introduced.

Twitter is bringing in user-labelling systems, where users volunteer news as fake<sup>25</sup> (avoiding the suppression of 'fake' stories by the websites themselves being called a deliberate cover up of the truth). As of December 2017, Google is blocking sites that are masking their country of origin from appearing in its search results<sup>28</sup>, and all three giants are unveiling 'trust indicators' on news sources featured on their sites<sup>29</sup>.

In words that Spiderman might use: these giants possess great power, and thanks to 'fake news' they are finally starting to possess great responsibility. Beyond preventing another huge 2017-esque influx of fake news, these measures will combat 'one-off' pieces of spin and manipulation, which could easily have fallen through the cracks, were it not for 2017.

There is the argument that, because these developments are essential to a healthy democracy, they would have happened without the destructive influence of fake news. However, I disagree.

The rescue of journalism is not something that would have happened on its own, over time. We, as a species, have a strong inclination to avoid change for as long as we possibly can, until our inactivity results in self-destruction. It is a process that Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman refers to as 'loss aversion', and stems from an evolutionary inclination to not take future threats as seriously as immediate ones<sup>30</sup>. Our intake of news had to reach a crisis point; where false information seemed to be influencing our lives so much it was changing who was elected to President of the United States<sup>31</sup>.

It is not quite true to simply say 'fake news does good'. As we discussed, it is a powerful, manipulative force, with the staying power of millennia and the reach of an entire world. But I firmly believe that the problem fake news has caused, and the ease with which it managed to rise, is causing us re-evaluate several, integral aspects of our society.

I believe that at the other end of this tunnel, is a stronger, more respected, journalism industry. There is a truer democracy, a more enlightened public, and a better tamed social media. I also believe the idea that this renaissance could have happened organically is absurd. It has been a long a time since 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, and it is only now that we are starting to see some real change.

*2264 words*

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