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How to deal with fake feminism? Pour cold water in its lap

Zoe Williams

It was obvious from the start that a Russian video of a woman on the metro throwing 'bleach' on men was a hoax

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'All the anti-feminists must have felt reinforced by the video: appalled yet strangely soothed.' Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

A woman boards the St Petersburg subway, carrying a bottle. She is beautifully groomed, in an anti-feminist manner, and yet she is about to commit an act of feminism. She approaches a classic manspreader, a guy casually occupying a seat and a half in homage to his gigantic tackle, and pours what we discover is diluted bleach all over his crotch.

When a video of the incident inevitably went viral, media outlets asked: "Has she

gone too far?” And broadly speaking, most people thought she had, who knows what Russian bleach is like, it might be like our modern bleach, not terrifically dangerous, only there to make things smell as if someone’s been cleaning. Wherever his punishment fell on the spectrum from getting wet to permanent injury, it was disproportionate.

And I swear I thought, with less than 20 minutes’ hindsight, this sounded like bollocks. It didn’t pass the smell test – would I ever do such a thing? – but then, such “news” never does at the moment. More importantly, it was too neat. There probably is a feminist, somewhere, right now, going too far. Maybe she has forgotten the difference between performance art and arson, or she is yelling at a plumber when that really isn’t what he meant. But would she choose manspreading, one of the biggest internet cliches of the day, and lay out such detailed advance plans, right down to a handy videographer, to make sure everyone saw her going too far?

Turned out it was a campaign; she did it to loads of people, and had friends doing it too: now it made more sense. Except I have been around the traps of activist meetings and almost always – especially when they are all women – there is someone saying: “That sounds a bit mean.” I couldn’t imagine the meeting in which they would wave through such an overtly aggressive act.

It fell into place when the St Petersburg magazine Bumuga tracked down one of the “manspreaders” in the film and discovered he was a paid actor. Bits of the story were still missing: paid by whom? The Kremlin? Putin himself? But at least it was now within the realms of the comprehensible, slotting comfortably into the new Russian export business: socially divisive meme production, and trollbots with unpleasant yet improbable opinions.

I can’t vouch for the reliability of Bumuga. It’s all in Russian, so I don’t even know which facts I would check if I had any way of checking. All I have found is a version of reality that makes sense within the universe I already believe in. This must be how all the “alt-right” anti-feminists felt when the video first began to circulate: reinforced; appalled yet strangely soothed. The impending breakdown of the civilised social order, misogynists spreading falsehoods about feminism, other misogynists believing them, isn’t great, but at least I don’t have to change my mind.

And so fake news is perpetuated through the anxieties of its consumers. In Silicon Valley, they’re making detailed plans for the end of democracy; it could survive war and famine, just about. But not the sheer weight of people who will believe any old nonsense the web can spew forth, because the alternative is to be constantly checking things and revising opinions.

Missing from that doomsday analysis, though, is the fact that propaganda is not a new invention. People will believe far-fetched mudslinging for a while – Germany is about to win the war, your neighbour is listening to insurgent radio programmes – but scepticism always kicks in eventually, via the simple wisdom that anything that sounds at all astonishing or intoxicating most probably didn’t happen. We just need to rediscover our mild disappointment, make peace with the humdrum. Fake news has a

timeless, Wizard of Oz foe: cold water.

The secret to style? Throw out nearly all of your clothes

Somewhere in your teens, and I think this is as true for boys as it is for girls, everybody sorts into two categories: “stylish” and “if it’s clean, I’ll wear it”.

The stylish will occasionally try to revamp the sort-of-clean, but what they don’t realise about the rest of us is our huge sense of superiority, which is based on nothing at all. I’m not less consumerist, or more ascetic; I don’t have my mind on higher things; I don’t lack vanity, and I can prove that with the noise I make when I hit the wrong button on my phone and take a picture of myself from below. I just feel absolutely great about not having the right shoes: resourceful and self-sufficient, as if I’m living off-grid and slaughtering my own livestock.

Or I used to feel great, until I read *How Not to Wear Black*, by fashion editor Anna Murphy. This was a needless dichotomy of mine, the stylish versus the rest.

Now I know that the stylish don’t have more clothes, they have way fewer (there’s a 666 rule; divide your clothes into six piles; throw out any that you’ve not worn for six months; ask yourself six questions, none of which are: “What’s the point of it all? Why am I here?”). They don’t spend more time thinking about this stuff, they spend way less, because they have thrown out all their clothes.

They are not more scrutinised and critiqued by the wider world, everyone gets that in the same amount. They just make the scrutiny work to their own advantage and have a better answer to the critique. You think the way they look is a bigger part of who they are: in fact, who they are is a bigger part of the way they look. It is too late for me, now, but teenage chic-refuseniks, save yourselves.

Not everything is a recipe for a riot



'Unrest is notoriously hard to attribute.' Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

I object to universal credit as much as Gordon Brown does. The injustice, the cruel and needless spreading of hardship: who wouldn’t? Yet Brown’s verdict – that it will cause civil unrest, is wrong. It might; it might not. Unrest is notoriously hard to attribute, and the unrestier it is, the harder. Riots are interpreted to suit agendas. Reversing Brexit will apparently bring blood to the streets, but what if it coincides with universal credit? It is better to make a case on its own merits than fall back on

Molotov bugbears.

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