FAKE NEWS
A ROADMAP

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Fake News: A Roadmap

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FOREWORD

In the summer of 2017 a group of students on the Strategic Communications Masters at King's College London decided to bring some clarity to the discussion of Fake News. Their concern was that what separated truth from untruth had for too long been obscured—made ever less intelligible by certain people intent on distorting responsible debate, while others simply fail to do their research.

The term Fake News has become the default catchphrase for truth-seekers wishing to label inaccurate reporting, truth-obscurers spreading malevolent assertions, or the unprepared who simply want to close down uncomfortable discussion. The shorthand expression 'Fake News' may fit neatly into tweeted messages, but willing amplifiers have spread it across all media, traditional and social, without necessarily giving it a meaningful definition.

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Fake News: A Roadmap is intended to be used. We invite you to read on.

INTRODUCTION

Fake News: A Roadmap explores the character, consequences, and challenges of fake news. The twists and turns that connect fake news to related buzzwords and themes including 'post-truth', 'populism', and 'trust', are far from straightforward.

This book uses the image of a map to navigate the complexity of localised events, mounting pressures, and seismic shifts in the political and media landscapes that appear to have converged in recent years.

Much of the discussion surrounding fake news has made great play of 'populist' political victories. In **Route 1,** we attempt to disentangle these concepts. In **Route 2**, we consider 'fake news' and 'post-truth' as part of a historical trajectory in order to understand what is at stake in the way these concepts are used today. **Route 3** explores age-old debates concerning truth, proof, and evidence. Next we ask: should leaders lie? Sometimes, according to **Route 4**. Have changes in the media landscape, the topic of **Route 5**, made information sharing more democratic? Not quite. But changes in the media environment have perhaps been a contributing factor to perceived lower levels of trust. **Route 6** discusses the relationship between this decline in trust and the growing appeal of fake news. In the next three Routes we widen our gaze beyond democratic Europe and the United States to pseudo-democracies and authoritarian regimes: while **Routes 7** and **8** consider the role of truth in Daesh and North Korean strategic communications, **Route 9** offers insights into the Russian perspective on disinformation. In conclusion, **Route 10** considers measures to counter fake news, and questions assumptions often taken for granted in these discussions. Who gets to judge truth and decide what we should believe? And who, if anyone, can make us change our minds? We conclude with some signposts for our readers to consider. Should we respond to the challenge of fake news, and if so how should we go about it?

A ROADMAP

TELL ME LIES, TELL ME SWEET LITTLE LIES

Leonie Haiden

Many political analysts maintain that the 'era of post-truth' began in 2016; the year we allegedly left the world of rational argument and objective facts and entered a world of 'bullshit' and lies. The election of President Donald Trump and the success of the Brexit campaign are often cited as evidence.[1] However, such an interpretation of contemporary politics is not without limitations. Not only has lying always been part of the political repertoire, but the notion of a post-truth era also creates too harsh a break with the past, failing to address the central questions of how to distinguish between different (legitimate) truths and fake-news strategies, and how both of these impact the political and media discourses of today.[2] Why does the dissemination of false information appear to be such an attractive strategy in our current information environment?

By interrogating populism and post-truth/fake news against each other, we attempt to disentangle these terms. Is categorising certain politicians as populists simply a convenient way of rationalising their disregard for the truth? Or, is there perhaps a deeper, mutually illuminating connection between the act of spreading fake news and populism?

There are four main strategic goals of fake news or disinformation campaigns. First, some false stories are spread primarily for commercial gain; sensational stories or 'click-bait' cost little to produce and disseminate online, and are used to attract attention and increase readership.[3] Second, disinformation may be spread for *political gain*, such as when the damaging and false story that Hillary Clinton, her campaign manager, and her husband had been operating a child sex ring from a pizza parlour in Washington was spread online.[4] The third and fourth strategies are also politically motivated but go beyond simply defaming one's opponent. They are *exclusionary* and *inclusionary* communication strategies, and will be the focus of this Route, as they are intimately linked to the success of so-called populist politicians.

Defining Populism: A Clear Sense That There Is No Clear Sense to It

What exactly is populism? What characteristics make us describe a politician as populist? Fifty years ago, in 1967, leading academics devoted a two-day conference to the contested question of how 'To Define Populism' at the London School of Economics and struggled to come up with an easy definition, or indeed a single definition. After decades of contested academic debate, we have not progressed significantly: 'Attempts to identify a core of populism… have left some writers with the clear sense that there is no clear sense to it.'[5] Yet, as the philosopher Isaiah Berlin argued, this should not stop us from looking for 'the common core' of populism.[6] Berlin himself summarised some of populism's characteristics, which had been discussed at the conference:

- the evocation of a *Gemeinschaft* (coherent, integrated society);
- a critical stance towards political institutions;
- a 'belief in some kind of moral regeneration' that will lead to the freedom of the 'ideal, unbroken man';
- the belief in the evitability of history;
- and the claim to be speaking on behalf of those people who have been left behind.[7]

While the scope of this Route does not allow for a complete discussion of populism, what can be observed is that the aim of both populist rhetoric and fake news is to provoke a certain reaction in the audience rather than to share a valuable piece of information or policy strategy. In other words, the act of communicating populist rhetoric or fake news, and its effects on the audience, are more import-

ant than their content. In her discussion of truth and lies in politics, the German philosopher Hannah Arendt explains that when we tell a lie, this always implies action (*Handeln*). Instead of stating the way things are, the liar describes them as he/she want them to be. The gap created between the words and the reality they claim to describe, implies that steps should be taken to realise that vision.[8] Thus, the very articulation of a lie suggests action and forward momentum. This implied change allows politicians who follow such a rhetorical strategy to avoid suggesting specific policies that would lead to their desired future. For example, the leader of Britain's UKIP party, Nigel Farage, emphatically campaigned for independence and 'liberation' from the EU, which would allow the UK to 'take back control'.[9] Both these campaign phrases include strong action verbs but do not spell out how the process of separation would unfold in detail. Instead of interrogating the detailed policies that might lead to change, such seductive visions for the future lead audiences to interpret the political environment through a rhetorically-constructed conceptual framework. Let us now consider how this plays out in terms of *exclusionary* and *inclusionary communications*.

Exclusionary Communications: Edifices of Shared Meaning

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, scholars of cognitive linguistics, draw a connection between one's worldview and one's perception of the truth. They argue that whether we judge a statement to be true or not depends on whether 'our understanding of the statements fits our understanding of the situation closely enough for our purposes'.[10] This 'understanding of the situation' will be shaped by a combination of the beliefs and views we already hold, social conventions,[11] and the political discourse surrounding the issue in question.[12] While breaking news-bites and snappy headlines are forgotten by the next day, edifices of 'shared meaning' constructed through language, particularly imagery and metaphor, are more long-lived. Depending on the flexibility of one's conceptual frameworks, finding comfort in shared meaning with some group can lead to the *exclusion* of different points of view. Even when ample evidence and justification to assert the veracity of a claim are given, one's audience might doubt and reject these because its conception of the world cannot accommodate that fact. Seduced by a vision for the future based on political promises and true and false information, audiences find themselves interpreting the political environment through a rhetorically-constructed conceptual framework that erects fences to help define a common identity through the exclusion of whatever doesn't fit the framework. The exclusionary character of this communication strategy can be identified by an unwillingness to discuss and the shutting down of dialogue. Once this framework becomes entrenched, it is very difficult to engage in meaningful political dialogue, as the policies it articulates will be based on and intend to concretise

these divisions.[13] Data collected from Twitter during the U.S. Presidential Race shows that political divisions ran so deep that even journalists' Twitter networks rarely included pro-Trump voices.[14] While we do not expect the core supporters of either candidate to engage with each other, the purpose of media coverage should be to offer a more balanced account.[15]

This idea also seems to be implied by the definition of 'post-truth' offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), who made it their word-of-the-year in 2016, as '[r]elating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'[16] Post-truth, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, and populism emphasise the local, personal truth above the rational, scientific, or academic truth. Today, according to sociologist Scott Lash, we live in a world where space, distance, and the linear experience of time have been compressed by modern media and communications networks[17] (more on this via Route 3). This is partly due to the speed with which 'news' reaches us, making it very difficult to make sense of these splinters of information. We read the headlines, but we do not know how to assimilate and analyse them because we lack background information and specialised knowledge.

Additionally, today we are left much more to our own devices. It would take a lot of time and effort to make sense of and fact-check all the information reaching us through our smartphones, tablets, computers, and traditional media. For some, these technological advances might not have changed much, since they still place their trust in one or more selected media outlets. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016 revealed that older generations (65+) were more likely to be in the group of Americans (around 50%) loyal to one or a few media sources, and favoured TV over other media. However, those who do consult a greater variety of different sources were found to be more distrustful of the information they were given, especially information disseminated online.[18] For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between trust, politics, and the media, consult Route 6.

Inclusionary Communications: Elevating 'Subjugated Knowledges'

The interconnectedness of modern society also makes it more difficult to have confidence in national politicians. Power (economic and political) is global, but so are challenges, while 'institutions of political action remain… *local*'.[19] Individual lives are strongly shaped by a capitalist system of economic liberalism,

whose power lies in networks that transcend national boundaries. Yet the effects of decisions and developments in this network are experienced on a local level, where not everyone is included in the benefits of globalisation.[20] According to Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, power is located in the networks that operate in the 'space of flows' (of information, money, ideas). Not everyone, however, plays an active part in these power networks. The unemployed, the homeless, and ethnic or religious minorities, for example, are often excluded from information and communication structures.[21] David Goodhart describes this division as the difference between 'the people who see the world from Anywhere and the people who see it from Somewhere'.[22] This discrepancy and inequality leads to a lack of confidence in the abilities of our politicians,[23] and feelings of resentment toward the global intellectual elite.[24]

'Populist' politicians capitalize on these sentiments by offering a sense of empowerment. They claim that no background or specialised knowledge is necessary or even desirable to solve domestic and international problems. Norbert Hofer, far-right candidate in the elections for the Austrian Presidency in 2016, used the slogan: 'For Austria with heart and soul.'[25] The campaign thus implied that these emotional faculties were more important than intellectual grounding and objective deliberation, qualities for which his contender, the academic Alexander van der Bellen, was frequently attacked.

In this light we might understand 'post-truth' politics as privileging an emotional and local approach to knowledge and to justifying truth claims. While Harry Frankfurt defines a person who 'bullshits' as someone who does not care if he is telling the truth or not,[26] post-truth in the context of populism is slightly different. Truth is still important, but instead of scientific research, for example, personal experiences and emotions are favoured as guiding principles for making the right judgments and seeking truth. Communication studies scholar Liesbet van Zoonen describes this tendency as '*I*-pistemology', where questions of knowledge are answered 'from the basis of I (as in me, myself, I) and Identity, with the Internet as the great facilitator'.[27] The OED definition of 'post-truth' quoted above suggests that making sense of the world via emotions and beliefs is diametrically opposed to truth. However, it would seem that it is just the kind of hierarchical reading of truth that an *inclusionary communication strategy* seeks to challenge.

In a lecture given in 1976 the French critical theorist Michel Foucault appeals to his listeners to be attentive to those areas of knowledge that have been subjugated and brushed over in the general discourse. Such as a 'particular, local, regional knowledge', which he terms '*le savoir des gens*'.[28] He does not mention populism. But examples of these 'subjugated knowledges' in the context of post-truth and populism might be the local, personal experiences of those

dissatisfied populations that have not felt the advantages of globalisation and capitalism.[29]

A survey in Britain by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) revealed that 56% of people questioned did not feel adequately represented by any political party. Individuals in this group were more likely to hold ' 'blue collar' jobs and live in local authority or Housing Association properties'.[30] Some politicians capitalize on this representation gap, taking an overly personal and emotional approach to truth. Such a 'truth'-strategy becomes problematic when it does not confine itself to politics. It can lead to the politicisation of the spheres of science and academics and resulting in claims that deny climate change, distort immigration and unemployment statistics, or criminalize drug addicts. The spreading of fake news on behalf of and by politicians and political movements leads to the shutting down of discourse because it creates exclusionary conceptual frameworks. In turn, these accommodate only information that fits into such frameworks. Likewise, focusing on emotions and personal experience creates solidarity and empathy within a selected 'core' group, but this sense of inclusiveness is dependent on the clear exclusion of a demonized 'other'—the outsider or foreigner.[31] Such a polarization can make true dialogue with other political opinions difficult, if not impossible. Audiences might become so invested in a certain worldview that it becomes impossible for them to accommodate a new fact or truth, which would require the recognition that they were 'wrong' and cause uncertainty.[32] Indeed, we might describe 'populist' politics as sharing the seductive quality that the scholar of political marketing Nicholas O'Shaughnessy attributes to propaganda, which he describes as the 'antithesis of the objective search for and exposition of truth'.[33]

* * *

Populist rhetoric and the spreading of fake news are both highly *strategic* communicative approaches that require the actor to know his/her audience well and anticipate their reactions. Populist politics take this even further; it presents emotional and personal sources of truth as superior to knowledge gained from science, academic inquiry, or discussion. This approach has found fertile ground in the current political climate. Our times are characterised by a growing dissatisfaction with and a lack of trust in government institutions.[34] In some cases populist rhetoric has reinforced, rather than alleviated such sentiments. Simultaneously, dramatic changes in the media environment in terms of volume, costs, speed, and multi-directionality have made it easier to spread false information for economic and political gain, reinforcing 'populist' arguments for a personal, local approach to truth.

The importance and power of 'truth' has not declined. Rather, the question of what qualifies as a legitimate source of truth has been politicised.

This is because a 'populist' movement will often use the notion of antagonism between 'the people' and a political elite to garner support. According to such a view, this elite uses science, statistics, and scholarship to maintain their hegemonic position. In opposition to this, populists foster and benefit from a political and media environment where it has become more acceptable to no longer couch opinion in factual and 'rational' arguments, but to audaciously argue from a more emotional and idiosyncratic standpoint. All the while making their appeal to so-called 'ordinary people'.

Additionally the volume of (often contradictory) information freely available today has created an environment in which open disagreement over factual information has become more commonplace, of which a tweeting President Trump is merely the epitome. It seems to be more than a coincidence that especially those politicians who have been described as 'populist'—Donald Trump in the USA, Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Nigel Farage in the UK, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France—have been accused of distorting facts, and commonly question sources of information previously considered authoritative and trustworthy, i.e. the scientific community, journalists, and academics. This enables them to raise the legitimacy of their personalised, 'authentic' standpoints. Listening to the voice of the expert would mean subjecting oneself to an imposed authority that goes against what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin back in 1967 identified as the 'real populist ideology' of 'unbroken, continuous plebiscite'.[35]

Post-truth and populism are both used as shorthand expressions to explain political developments that are in fact related to or even caused by more fundamental issues of social and economic inequality and uncertainty, as well as a lack of popular democratic engagement and a dearth of visionary politicians. Questions such as these indicate the need for discussion, not shutting down dialogue. We can only hope to address the challenges we face by communicating and taking into account emotional *and* scientific, local *and* global truths.

NEVER MIND THE BUZZWORDS: DEFINING FAKE NEWS AND POST-TRUTH

Chelsea McManus and Celeste Michaud

The previous Route has shown that the relationship between post-truth, populism, and fake news is often described in overly simplistic terms. Simply proclaiming that we are now living in an era of fake news and post-truth politics does not actually help us to understand these phenomena. This Route will trace the development of these concepts, tease out what is unique about the way they are currently being used, and identify what is at stake in the different definitions.

Fake News Is Not New

In 1674, King Charles II issued *A Proclamation to Restrain the Spreading of False News, and Licentious Talking of Matters of State and Government*.[36] Prior to the English Civil War, there was strict censorship of printed materials.[37] Since the late 1630s the press had been increasingly exploited to manipulate public opinion in England.[38] However, between the 1640s and 1650s, the rapid proliferation of partisan pamphlets led to a growing concern around the politicisation of the press.[39] During the English Civil War print became the ideological battleground-

upon which the parliamentarians, Cromwellians, royalists, and Puritan preachers, fought each other and amongst themselves to manipulate political thought.[40] After 1660, censorship was reinstated in England.[41]

While the spreading of false news had been a growing challenge since the invention of the printing press in 1439,[42] the term is relatively new to the English language. 'Fake news' only entered the lexicon from the United States in the latter part of the 19th century, with the word 'fake' only gaining currency in the English vocabulary in the late 18th century.[43] Prior to the 19th century, lies printed by the press were called *false* news.[44]

Regardless, the content of fake news stories has not changed significantly. With no way to quickly verify facts, and the conceptualization of journalistic ethics only emerging in the 20th century, fake news has always been a part of the printed press. The first journalistic code of ethical practice was drafted in the United States during the early 1920s, and the first book on the subject was published in 1924 by Nelson Antrim Crawford.[45] In 1936, the United Kingdom and Ireland's National Union of Journalists adopted a journalistic code of conduct; most European countries followed suit between the 1920s and 1930s.[46] Prior to this, sensationalist print had long been used to increase readership, and therefore profits.[47] 'Yellow Journalism', a particular type of sensationalist print popularized in the late 1890s, was most frequently associated with the fiercely competitive rivalry between newspapermen William Randolf Hearst, who owned the *New York Journal,* and Joseph Pulitzer, owner of the *New York World*.[48] The defining characteristics of yellow journalism include the use of 'impostures and frauds of various kinds, such as 'faked' interviews and stories, misleading heads', and doctored photos.[49] While yellow journalism had reached its peak by the turn of the century, the popularity of tabloids rose during the 1940s, and while sales declined during the 1970s, the circulation of tabloids continues to this day.[50]

Sensationalist stories, as academic and journalist Chris Frost argues, were used to increase newspaper sales[51], but, moreover, fake news has been used to achieve financial gains through the manipulation of stock prices.[52] European historian Catherine Davies has suggested that the financial 'Panic of 1873', which began with the failure of the New York banking house Jay Cooke & Co., was caused, in part, by the spread of rumours over telegraphic cables.[53] As a result, the following year, New York State Senator John C. Jacobs introduced a bill to 'declare the publication and dissemination of false news a crime'. Senator Jacob's bill did not pass, but as reported by *The New York Times*, the bill sought to criminalise the circulation of 'false intelligence, with the intent of depreciating or advancing the market price of the public funds of the United States'.[54] The issues surrounding financial gains from fake news remain today. Fake news is profitable for those who produce

it; from Macedonian teenagers who financially profited from the advertising revenue gained by sharing pro-Trump news articles on pro-Trump Facebook pages,[55] to companies who pay for the production of fake news to conflate stock market prices.[56]

... and Neither Is Post-Truth

Fake news, then, is not something that emerged during the 2016 American presidential election, but has been a contentious issue since the initial stages of mass print. Similarly, even though the term 'post-truth' seems to have been coined much more recently, it too is not new. In 1830, Physician John Abercrombie published *Inquiries Concerning the Intellectual Powers and The Investigation of Truth*.[57] This celebrated book attempts to provide a thorough philosophical and scientific review of how the mind understands truth. Although Abercrombie did not use the term post-truth *per se*, issues that we now associate with post-truth, post-truth politics, or the post-truth era are found in various editions of this book. For example in the 8th edition, Abercrombie explains the following:

> The investigation and control of emotions … relates to those measures by which the statesman attempts to control and regulate the conduct of masses of mankind united as members of a great civil community.[58]
>
> [….]
>
> The second source of uncertainty in this class of sciences consists in the fact, that, even after we have ascertained the true relations of things, we may be disappointed of the results which we wish to produce, when we bring their tendencies into operation.[59]

Although it is hard to determine who coined the term post-truth, Abercrombie's book demonstrates that questioning truth, questioning scientific facts and evidence, and using emotions for political gain do not originate from Brexit or from the U.S. presidential election.

However, data gathered from both Google Trends[60] and the TV News Archive[61] seem to affirm the commonly held belief that fake news is a recent phenomenon

that catapulted into the mainstream after the November 2016 American Presidential Election. Prior to November, neither 'fake news' nor 'post-truth' were part of popular discourses in the media or online.[62] But despite their absence, their effects were playing out on social media and in Western politics. While both fake news and post-truth are not new challenges facing governments, something about their recent popular use seems different.

Towards Definitions

In linguistic terms, using the prefix *post-* suggests that the 'specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant'.[63] **Post-truth** would therefore imply that truth is no longer relevant, and more importantly suggest that it was preceded at some point in time by an era of truth. Route 4 illustrates why speaking of eras of 'truth' and 'post-truth' is overly simplistic by looking at how we have tried to define 'truth' throughout centuries of philosophical inquiry.

Post-truth has also been used as part of the phrase 'post-truth politics'. Jane Suiter, Director of the Institute for Future Media and Journalism at Dublin City University defined post-truth politics as a situation 'where appeals to emotion are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions'.[64] Will Fish, professor of Philosophy at Massey University, further adds that post-truth politics involves making misleading assertions and disregarding facts 'for the purpose of gaining an electoral advantage',[65] and the journalist Evan Davis explains that politicians use 'extreme exaggeration or direct falsehood in order to draw attention to the issues that favoured their side of the argument'.[66] In post-truth politics, 'what seems to matter most is … the ability of a nativist or populist leader to appeal to the instincts and nostalgic emotions of this group',[67] as has been discussed in the previous Route. Moreover, as explained by Nobel Prize-winning psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'when faced with a truth which contradicts a bias we hold, we as a species are likely to ditch the truth'.[68] Ultimately, post-truth entails that facts do not matter should they not support one's pre-existing opinions or ideas.

Defining **'fake news'** is even less straightforward. Grammatically, it is simply a 'self-explanatory compound noun', where fake is understood as something that is false, or counterfeit, and news is 'material reported in a newspaper or news periodical or on a newscast'.[69] This definition becomes increasingly muddled, however, when taking into consideration overlapping concepts, such as satire, 'bullshit', propaganda, and mis/disinformation. Does fake news automatically take the form of propaganda? Does it include political satire? Does it include satirical website-

containing misinformation, such as *The Onion*? These are questions addressed in the literature about fake news, but the variety of understandings makes it challenging to pin down what should be included in its definition.

Satire, in the form of political news programs, is the use of comedy to blur the line between political news and entertainment.[70] Political satire programs have been shown to influence their audiences' opinions, beliefs, and perceptions in that they shape how people process political information,[71] and can reframe public discourses around political events.[72] '**Bullshit'** is a catch-all term that includes half-truths, lies, and misrepresentations; but most importantly for bullshit, it involves a disregard for truth altogether, for the purpose of crafting a narrative.[73] **Propaganda,** on the other hand, does not disregard truth, but uses elements of truth in the 'deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions', in order to achieve a specific response or reaction from an audience, meant to benefit and 'further the desired intent of the propagandist'.[74] Similarly, **disinformation** is the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive, while **misinformation** is inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence.[75] Whether difference in intent leads to difference in effect is, however, a more difficult distinction to make, which will be addressed in Route 10. Disinformation is not limited to fake news; it can include deceptive advertising, doctored or forged documents, and manipulated websites, and is used in warfare,[76] environmental politics,[77] and public health debates,[78] amongst others.[79] In understanding fake news, there are competing arguments regarding which of these concepts, if any, should be included in the definition.

The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy define fake news as 'misinformation that has the trappings of traditional news media', however recognizing the 'ambiguity concerning the precise distinctions between 'fake news' on the one hand, and ideologically slanted news, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, etc. on the other'.[80] Similarly, some insist that propaganda should be included, such as Irina Khaldarova and Mervi Pantti, who argue that 'fake news often takes the form of propaganda entertainment … which is a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context'.[81]

Yet, there are important differences between these concepts that allow us to distinguish them from fake news. Propaganda and fake news do hold similarities, in that they are both intent on deceiving audiences by distorting facts and truths. However a noteworthy difference is that traditionally, propaganda has largely been a state controlled initiative, whereas the recent wave of fake news appears as both private and state enterprises.[82] While political satire programs such as *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, Kenya's *The XYZ Show*, and the French *Les*

Guignols, are modelled as 'fake evening news shows',[83] they do not fall under the umbrella of 'fake news', as the intent is not to deceive the audience, but to entertain.[84]

Given these nuances, in order to better understand—and to counter—fake news, it is best to define the term narrowly. If the term 'fake news' comes to encompass everything from false advertising to state-sponsored propaganda, to any information one disagrees with, then it will lose all meaning. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow define fake news as 'news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers'.[85] This definition is similar to those put forward by journalists, who argue that fake news consists of 'deliberately constructed lies, in the form of news articles, meant to mislead the public'.[86] This fits the definition of disinformation, as it is the manipulation of information with the purpose to mislead and deceive. Misinformation should however also be included in the definition of fake news. When unwittingly repeated, disinformation becomes misinformation.[87] Even though not deliberate, misinformation can equally affect the audience regardless of the intention behind it. Hence, we define **fake news** as *the dissemination of false information via media channels (print, broadcast, online). This can be deliberate (disinformation), but can also be the result of an honest mistake or negligence (misinformation)*.

However, since the second half of 2016 the term 'fake news' has experienced an evolution in meaning. The way that 'fake news' is used in popular discourse has shifted further away from academic understanding. While the term was initially used to describe fabricated and false news stories, 'fake news' is now also used to dismiss information that one disagrees with, for the purpose of closing down debate.[88] When President Trump criticizes *The New York Times*, *NBC News*, and *CNN* of being 'failing' 'fake news' media, one might almost see this as a modern version of the proclamation of King Charles II.[89] However, there is an important difference. While Charles II was decrying the act of spreading false news, the U.S. President is using the term to discredit the total journalistic practice of these institutions. He, moreover, suggested that judgment of media outlets was not a question of factual accuracy, but of alignment with a set of views.

'Fake news' and 'post-truth' are associated terms as they both describe a disregard for truths and facts. As noted above, the challenge of post-truth politics is the tendency to use only facts that support a specific point of view whilst dismissing those that challenge it. Interestingly, the most recent use of the term 'fake news' resembles the definition of post-truth more closely than the original definition of 'fake news', turning a descriptive term into a derogatory expression.

What Is at Stake?

After reviewing the history and defining the terms fake news and post-truth, it is important to ask ourselves: 'What is at stake?' If the spreading of fictitious and deceitful news stories has been a problem prior to the Internet, mass media, the first printed newspaper, and even before the invention of the printing press, what makes this moment unique?

As post-truth is associated with the 'growing skepticism in society toward science',[90] academia, journalism, and other voices that were previously considered authoritative,[91] there is a growing danger of the development of policies that disregard factual evidence. A noteworthy case that had lasting negative consequences was the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when it came to light that the Bush Administration had manipulated scientific evidence and intelligence to justify a military intervention.[92] Most recently, President Donald Trump's position on climate change demonstrates 'blatant political disregard for scientific evidence',[93] a policy change in the context of post-truth politics with potential long-term consequences. At stake, then, is not necessarily the definitional challenge of post-truth and fake news. Rather, what is a stake is the risk that only a limited set of information and evidence is considered in political discourse and policy development.

THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH?

Erin Duffy and Kierat Ranautta-Sambhi

Appeals to relativist notions of truth have revealed that the way we judge truth has become a political as much as a philosophical debate. Thus, it is even more important that we carefully consider terms such as 'truth', 'proof', or 'evidence', particularly in the era of instant news, where the court of public opinion is constantly challenged to judge the truthfulness of information.

Contemporary discussions of post-truth and fake news are coloured by a sense of dejection and perplexity. However, the fact that these terms have entered the political debate also points to an increased sensitivity to terms such as 'truth', 'lies', 'facts', and 'evidence' among the wider population. Renewed attention to the topic in popular discourse does not mean, however, that we have to reinvent the wheel with regard to assessing it. Rather, we can draw on extensive debate and knowledge dating back to Ancient Greece to understand what is at stake. This Route provides an introduction to the debates regarding the meaning and definition, and hence the evaluation, of 'truth', ranging from the definitions used in epistemology to those used in the courtroom. This, we hope, will equip the reader with a better understanding of the debates behind the buzzwords and hence provide the tools to evaluate the variety of claims to truth being made in the current media environment.

The Facts of the Matter

We cannot discuss truth without considering what we mean by 'fact'. A fact can be distinguished from a belief, theory, or subjective value because it is objectively known or can be proved as true—or, at the very least, has not (yet) been proven false.[94] Stating a 'fact' is hence an inherent claim to stating truth. The boundaries of 'fact' are, however, blurred by the emergence and increased use of variations of this concept. Most recently, the notion of 'alternative facts' has entered political discourse through Kellyanne Conway, senior adviser to U.S. President Donald Trump. Conway defended former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's pronouncement that President Trump had had 'the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period'. Comparative photos of previous presidential inaugurations featured on various media platforms in the following days, disputing the fact that President Trump's ceremony had attracted such an audience. Yet, in an interview on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Conway argued:

Kellyanne Conway:	You're saying it's a falsehood. And they're giving—Sean Spicer, our press secretary—gave alternative facts.
Chuck Todd [moderator]:	Alternative facts aren't facts, they are falsehoods. [95]

Conway's use of the term 'alternative fact' can be seen as a way to mitigate the negative effect of a claim being dismissed as a blatant lie. While in this case the photographic evidence from the inaugural event clearly contradicted Sean Spicer's claim, hence closely connecting the meaning of truth and fact, there are cases in which this connection is not so straightforward. Let us consider the proverbial phrase: 'Do you see the glass as half-empty or half-full?' Even though stating that half of the glass is filled is arguably a fact, whether it is half-empty or half-full depends on which representation is more attractive to you at a given moment.

By introducing the term 'alternative facts' Kellyanne Conway created the impression that truth regarding the crowd at the inauguration was open to interpretation, just like whether the glass is half-full or half-empty. Blurring the boundaries between cases where 'truth' is a matter of perception and where it is not can be used to create a favourable perception of reality. If the situation or your interests were to change, a review of the facts of the matter could bring to light a different interpretation—or, in other words, reveal alternative facts.[96]

Another label that was recently authored by Damian Thompson is 'counterknowledge', defined as '(m)isinformation packaged to look like fact'. Yet, it can easily be refuted by offering counter-evidence or by highlighting the lack of evidentiary support.[97] Such uses of 'fact' were rife in the run-up to the Kenyan presidential elections in 2017.[98] For example, the fake news website *Foreign Policy Journal* published an article falsely claiming that opposition leader Raila Odinga had orchestrated the attacks on Kenya's white-owned ranches.[99]

Whilst the significance of these 'pseudo-facts' becomes most clear in high-stakes events such as the Kenyan elections, the term has long been used in disciplines beyond politics. The scientific understanding of a pseudo-fact, for example, is 'a statement based on deceptive or weak inductive arguments, involving observation or experimentation that cannot be reproduced and verified by others, including experts in relevant fields'.[100] The concept of a pseudo-fact can be applied to 'truths' in international politics. For example, in September 2016 an aid convoy was bombed in Syria. Arriving at the scene of the incident only 11 weeks after the bombing, the UN Headquarters Board of Inquiry were able to deduce, on the evidence available to them, that it most likely deliberately targeted.[101] A definitive and verifiable truth, however, remains difficult or even impossible to prove, a challenge especially present in international politics, operating outside of controlled laboratory conditions.

Whichever label is put on 'fact-related ideas',[102] positioning information as 'fact' inherently communicates to the audience that the truth of a matter is being portrayed. Yet, stating a fact does not disregard the need for evidence to verify its truthfulness. Especially with the boundaries of the concept 'fact' being stretched, it is essential to interrogate the ways in which we assess statements or facts to be true, which brings us all the way back to Aristotle.

Is the Truth Out There?

Contemporary discussions about fake news and truth are rooted in longstanding philosophical debates about how we assess truth-claims. In this Route we will introduce the reader to the Correspondence and Coherence Theories of Truth. According to Aristotle, truth is 'telling it as it is' (as we would say today).[103] This understanding of truth lays the foundation for the Correspondence Theory of Truth.[104] It proposes that 'a judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality'.[105] In other words, there are universal and unchanging facts about the world that can be discovered. A statement is true if it accurately describes these 'objective features of the world'.[106]

Skeptics of the Correspondence Theory regard this approach to truth as being circular. They argue that facts are merely statements constructed on the basis of what we already believe to be true.[107] The Coherence Theory of truth opposes the idea of Correspondence, stating that truth is based on the coherence of a set of propositions.[108] Proponents of this theory do not believe that facts or states of affairs can be objectively known.[109] Questions remain, however. Who gets to set these propositions? Are they universal, as is the claim of religious belief, or is a statement true as long as it is coherent with an individual's beliefs, whatever those may be?

It is often the public who determine—rightly or wrongly—what constitutes truth. This public does not always apply a consistent and rigorous methodology in assessing truth.

> It allows everything into evidence and has no mechanism to separate facts about the case from the experiences and political leanings of the millions of us who are all acting as witnesses, judges, and jurors.[110]

In some cases information is believed merely because it is trending on social media, because it fits into a pre-existing understanding of the world, or because it is what we currently believe en masse to be true. We judge truth on 'dynamic narrative' and knowledge-based interpretations of the world around us.[111] Furthermore, we tend to gravitate towards those who believe the same as we do, for strength in numbers gives us the courage of our convictions. This is especially true in the contemporary context, in which '[s]imilarity breeds connection.'[112]

For example, according to the Ipsos 2016 Perils of Perception survey, many in France believe that Muslims are 'taking over'—a 'truth' partly based on the perceived fact that the number of Muslims '*s'accroîtrait dangereusement, chercheraient à submerger et, in fine, à dissoudre les cultures nationales*'.[113] However, France has significantly overestimated the size of its Muslim population: the average guess of those interviewed is that 31% of the population is Muslim when, in reality, it is only 7.5%.[114] Moreover, the average guess on the size of the Muslim population by 2020 is 40% whereas the actual prediction is considerably lower, at 8.3%.[115] In terms of the Coherence Theory of Truth, a popular *perception* about the size of the Muslim population became the proposition upon which the judgement regarding this (exaggerated) claim to truth was based.

Current debates on truth are not new, but rooted in longstanding and complex epistemological problems. In assessing what is at stake with truth in the current media environment, the Correspondence versus Coherence contrast can shed some light on one of the core dilemmas we are facing. Recent debates about

post-truth have emphasised a Coherence rather than a Correspondence approach. Awareness of the various methodologies to get to a truth can assist us not only in understanding our own assessment of truth, but also in evaluating the provided evidence to statements of truth in political statements and the media.

Assessing the Evidence

Given the extent to which we are influenced by our pre-existing beliefs and the views of the people around us, one can argue that our judgement of truth will never be perfect. Approaching 'truth' can, however, still be aided by the provision of some form of evidence. The varied grounds for proving legal, moral, and scientific truths are reflected in the numerous existing understandings of the nature of 'evidence'.[116] For example, the evidentiary standard for proving a scientific truth is particularly rigorous, requiring extensive research and the general acceptance of the scientific community (at minimum, through peer review). In a legal sense, evidence can be defined as 'any material which tends to persuade the court of the truth or probability of some fact asserted before it'.[117] However, the standard of proof for criminal cases is 'beyond reasonable doubt',[118] while the standard for civil cases is that something is proven on a 'balance of probabilities'.[119]

Evidence is inextricably linked to the concept of proof. There are various types of proof, reached through scientific, mathematical, and logical methodologies. Consequently, although not infallible, such truths are considered more certain because they are usually based on extensive research and reasoning. However, proof in the everyday context finds more similarities in the legal environment, where proof is determined by direct evidence,[120] circumstantial evidence,[121] and/or argumentation in front of juries, basing a judgement on coherence with past rulings.

Two final points need to be addressed regarding the standards of proof and evidence in society today. First, in the context of the communications revolution, scholar Ben Mor questions 'whether the unprecedented intensification of cross-cultural interaction that [the communications revolution] has fostered will ultimately generate shared global norms on the meaning of proof and the criteria of evidence (analogous to the status of court proceedings).'[122] This in itself presents difficulties—determining universal criteria to which every country willingly subscribes has (thus far) proven impossible for any given international court.

Second, under certain circumstances, a truth-claim may lack proof but there are those who still believe the claim, more recently described as 'truthiness.' Satirical newscaster Stephen Colbert popularised the notion of 'truthiness' on *The Colbert Report* in October 2005, defining the term as 'something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist'.[123] Consider Colbert's example of the 2003 Iraq War:

> If you think about it, maybe there are a few missing pieces to the rationale for war. But doesn't taking Saddam out feel like the right thing?[124]

Despite the inability to find nuclear stockpiles in Iraq, over a decade later 42% of Americans still believed that U.S. forces discovered weapons of mass destruction there.[125] A lack of evidence does not hinder belief, for truthiness is a version of truth unburdened by fact. This leads us back to Conway's notion of 'alternative facts', a verbal gesture that seemed equally unburdened by facts and relativised truth.

Multiple Versions of Truth?

What are the implications of relativist ideas about truth? How are they different from the ideas of post-modernist thinkers? The question of relativist or absolutist notions of truth is related to the Correspondence versus Coherence debate. Absolutists argue that something can be universally true across time and space, whereas a relativist would state that truth always depends on its context. Relativist notions of truth are often asserted to have been popularised by post-modern thinkers. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared that there was no such thing as a 'real' world, and that '[t]here are no facts, only interpretations.'[126] What is understood to be fact ultimately depends on intersubjective agreement,[127] thus implying that facts are merely a socially-determined construct. This approach calls into question whether there is such a thing as 'fact', or whether facts merely serve as a construct developed as a means to demonstrate truth.[128] Despite the ubiquity of relative truths in the contemporary context, there are those who claim that their truth is absolute, such as Daesh and the Kim regime in North Korea. To find out more about how to negotiate the tension between claims to absolute truth and effective strategic communications, follow Routes 7 and 8. It is tempting to identify post-modern thought as the origin of relativistic thinking. This is, however, as Kevin Marsh points out, 'a misguided attribution of blame'.[129] This debate has always been a part of philosophical discussions about truth. So what has changed?

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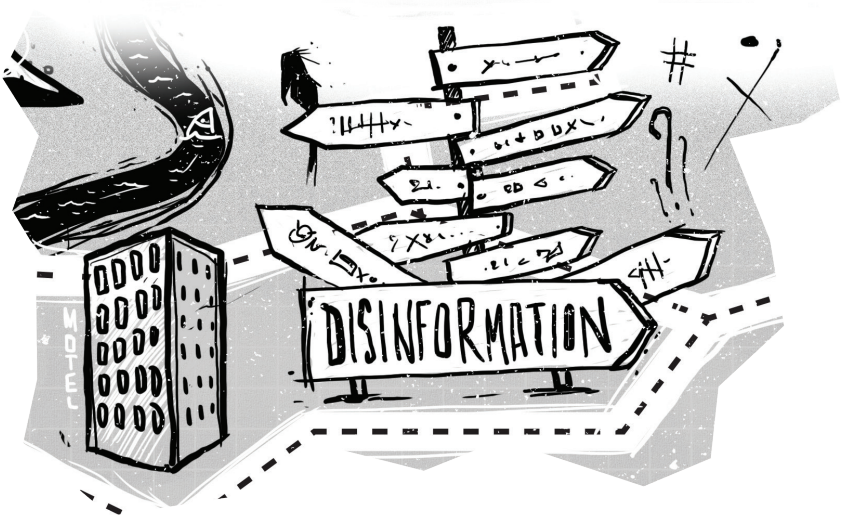
We can make a better-informed judgment about truth and falsehoods if we understand the meaning of these terms. In this Route we have presented the reader with some of the key concepts in the debate on truth.

In the absence of a single, universal definition of truth, identifying what kind of truth-claim is being presented in a statement, an image, or a piece of news is essential. If truth is relative, what does its context tell us? Based on which system of thought and on whose propositions does it claim to be true?

Being able to address these questions when encountering information, fact or fiction, might not reveal a universal truth, but will certainly enable us to put truth in perspective and discover something about the worldview of those speaking their truth.



WHEN DISHONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY. REALLY?

Mitchell Ilbury

'How can you tell when a politician is lying?' the joke goes, 'because his lips are moving.' We may roll our eyes when we hear it, partly because it is not that funny, but also because we are well aware of the fact that leaders lie. Sometimes, however, leaders *should* lie, as it can be an important tool of statecraft. Honesty can compromise military planning, and in the international system, diplomatic relations between states may require a well-placed lie to gain strategic advantage, or prevent another actor from doing so. In such circumstances, not only is it justifiable, but leaders may even have an *obligation* to lie. While the potential for abuse means lying should remain a controversial and scrutinised aspect of leadership, it is important to acknowledge that it sometimes functions as a necessary feature of government.

The End Justifies the Means?

'To be truthful in all declarations is, therefore, a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits of no expediency whatsoever.'[130] Hardly words

we would hear from a politician. In fact, this was Immanuel Kant. He believed that one should never lie, no matter the circumstances, no matter the consequences. His absolutist stance stipulated that lying is never justified. Many politicians and military leaders would probably disagree. To them, it may be justifiable to lie in the name of 'national security' or 'the public good', or as one former Israeli Prime Minister said, 'for the sake of the land of Israel'.[131] In contrast to Kant, they would generally take a consequentialist approach; in other words, the end justifies the means. This is why U.S. President John F. Kennedy lied to Soviet Premier Krushchev at the time the Bay of Pigs invasion, saying, 'I have previously stated, and I repeat now, that the U.S. plans no military intervention in Cuba', all the while the U.S. had been planning military intervention in Cuba.[132] And similarly, why Lincoln White of the U.S. State Department said there was 'absolutely no—N-O, no—deliberate attempt to violate Soviet airspace', after Gary Powers' U-2 was shot down over Soviet territory, initially suggesting the U.S. was not spying, but on a 'weather mission'.[133]

In *Why Leaders Lie*, John Mearsheimer categorises these kinds of lies as *strategic lies*, which, he argues, 'aim to facilitate general welfare and they usually have a modicum of legitimacy'.[134] U.S. Defense Department spokesman Arthur Sylvester tried to make this distinction at a press conference on the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis when he said that although the government must not put out false information, 'the inherent right of the government to lie to save itself when faced with nuclear disaster is basic'.[135] As far as legitimacy goes, lying to avoid nuclear disaster has more than a modicum—it is perhaps obligatory. Few, if any, would insist on a 'right to know' if it meant they might get annihilated in a nuclear holocaust.

Lies for Lives

Attempting to avoid nuclear disaster is a legitimate reason to lie, but the ethical scope for lying may be wider. In 1797, Benjamin Constant published an article alluding to Kant's strict absolutist prohibition on lying, suggesting that if such a principle was applied too strictly it could lead to the destruction of society.[136] No one, he suggests, has a right to a truth that harms others. To this extent, claimed Jody Powell, press secretary for President Jimmy Carter, '[Arthur] Sylvester, of course, was right. In certain circumstances, the government not only has the right but a positive obligation to lie.'[137] Powell told a lie on behalf of Carter when the U.S. was planning a rescue mission during the Iran hostage crisis. He told reporters that there was absolutely no chance of a rescue mission when in fact preparations for a raid were well under way, and U.S. aircraft would be entering Iranian airspace in the next 48 hours.[138] Was such a lie justifiable? Telling the truth, and admitting to their preparations for a 'surprise' mission, would have risked not only the lives

of the hostages, but also those entrusted with carrying out the raid. It is unlikely any reasonable citizen would expect such information to be disclosed, risking the lives of their servicemen and women, purely for the sake of not wanting to be deceived. In fact, Jack Nelson, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter whose question prompted Powell's lie said afterwards, 'I didn't like being lied to…but I didn't have a great deal of problem with [Powell's] doing it. If it was a real matter of life and death, and he thought it was, I can't argue with what he did.'[139] 'Only lie to save a life' is perhaps a justifiable mantra our leaders can live by.

To this end, lies can provide the necessary cover for politically sensitive negotiations. Regarding discussions between the British government and the IRA in November 1993, Prime Minister John Major said 'to sit down and talk with Mr. [Gerry] Adams and the Provisional IRA…would turn my stomach. We will not do it.'[140] Major had been secretly corresponding with former IRA commander Martin McGuiness but would have faced significant pressure to break contact if the talks were made public, especially after the Warrington bombings earlier that year, which killed two children.[141] It would have been extremely difficult to persuade the IRA to announce a ceasefire in 1994 had these talks broken down because of public pressure. Major lied for the sake of a peaceful end, believed to be in the best interests of everyone.

If 'lies for lives' are justifiable, what is the price of life? For politicians with an eye for power, the primary value is political capital. In August 2017, at a press conference announcing the safe release of a South African who had been abducted by al-Qaeda, South Africa's foreign minister, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, said, 'The South African government does not subscribe to the payment of ransoms.'[142] However, the *New York Times* subsequently published evidence that suggested his release *did* come at a price: 3.5 million Euros.[143] Some context to value: the cash, allegedly facilitated through an intermediary in an operation managed by French and South African intelligence, added up to more than 182 times the average annual salary of an employee of the South African Police Service.[144] The debate about the cost aside, governments have to lie if they do decide to trade cash for lives. Admitting to paying terrorists would not only risk the ire of allies that refuse to bow to terrorist pressure, but would be equivalent to holding up a sign saying, 'Take our people, we pay!'

The Convenient Lie

For leaders, the necessity to lie often arises from the diversity of the audience. Arthur Sylvester pointed out that '...the assertion that Government information must always be truthful requires qualification, because […] information may be

addressed to the American people, to their adversaries, their friends, to the neutrals, or to any combination of them or to all of them at once'.[145] Only by acknowledging the complex, interconnected, and uncontrollable media environment, which reaches friend *and* foe, can we really understand why leaders lie, and often should. While this is usually presented as a reason for why leaders should tell the truth,[146] it is also crucial to understanding why sometimes lying or withholding information can be preferable. Leaders who speak in public must be cognisant of how the cross-pollinating media ecosystem spreads messages as the wind spreads dandelion seeds; propagated by misplaced honesty, unwanted weeds can pop up all over the place. The ones who are aware of this know a well-placed lie can ride the wind and deliver a fertile fib in the minds of an adversary for strategic effect. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev exploited this when, between 1957 and 1960, he consistently lied about the Soviet Union's 'superior' Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capability compared to that of the United States. In fact, the Soviet Union had far fewer ICBM's, but hoping to deter and coerce the United States by exaggerating the myth of a 'missile gap', Krushchev's lies successfully planted the belief in his counterpart that America was at a serious disadvantage.[147]

Of course, sometimes lies are neither strategic nor malicious in their intent to sow confusion—just easier than admitting the truth. Robert Mugabe, former Zimbabwean president, sat on the stage at the World Economic Forum on Africa in early 2017 and said, 'Zimbabwe is the most highly developed nation in Africa after South Africa…We are not a poor country.'[148] With 72% of its people living in poverty, Zimbabwe is undoubtedly a poor country.[149] Incredibility only really matters to the extent his core security team trust they will get paid. The public's lease on lies often depends on their leaders, and to what extent they can be held accountable.

Lie Allowance and its Limits

This 'lie allowance', however, does not extend indefinitely. As the philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok argues, it is problematic when 'some come to believe that any lie can be told so long as they can convince themselves that people will be better off in the long run'.[150] This touches on an important facet of lying: *why* and *when* a leader should lie is often left to the discretion of the liar. Leaders interpret this to mean that the occasional lie is permissible so long as it functions for, or within, a wider effort to do what *they* believe is best for the nation. This may be fine, so long as they have impeccable judgement and are immune to the corruptive effects of power—high standards to which not all leaders aspire. In 1985, in a passage that could easily pass as commentary on the early days of Donald Trump's presidency, Anthony Marro wrote this of a man who also campaigned to 'Make America Great Again,'

Ronald Reagan:

> There was a time, early in the Reagan administration, when the president's aides argued that it didn't matter whether some of his stories were literally true—his numerous misstatements of fact, his confusion about detail, and his repeated anecdotes about supposed welfare cheats that no one was ever able to confirm, for example—because they contained a larger truth.[151]

The effective—but alarming—aspect of this practice is the public's consonant propensity to allow lies for the same reason. President Trump's lies on the campaign trail were often dismissed by voters as speaking to a larger truth. Lies are purposefully constructed, which is why they often fit nicely within preconceived ideas, or offer simple summaries and solutions to complex problems; they are designed to do so.[152] This is why it is healthy for the public always to balance their trust with skepticism. More on this in **Route 6**.

A very real and understandable concern is that lying breeds lying, and while lying in the name of national security is permissible, this sets a dangerous precedent. At the heart of this concern is the perceived slippery slope that follows a lie, and the seemingly inevitable slide in the standards of government, as well as the fear of what a lie may represent—a more pervasive cancerous iniquity lurking beneath. Sissela Bok points out for those leaders that justify lying,

> …it is a short step to the conclusion that, even if people will not be better off from a particular lie, they will benefit by all manoeuvres to keep the right people in office. Once public servants lose their bearings this way, all the shabby deceits of Watergate—the fake telegrams, the erased tapes, the elaborate cover-ups, the bribing of witnesses to make them lie, the televised pleas for trust—become possible.[153]

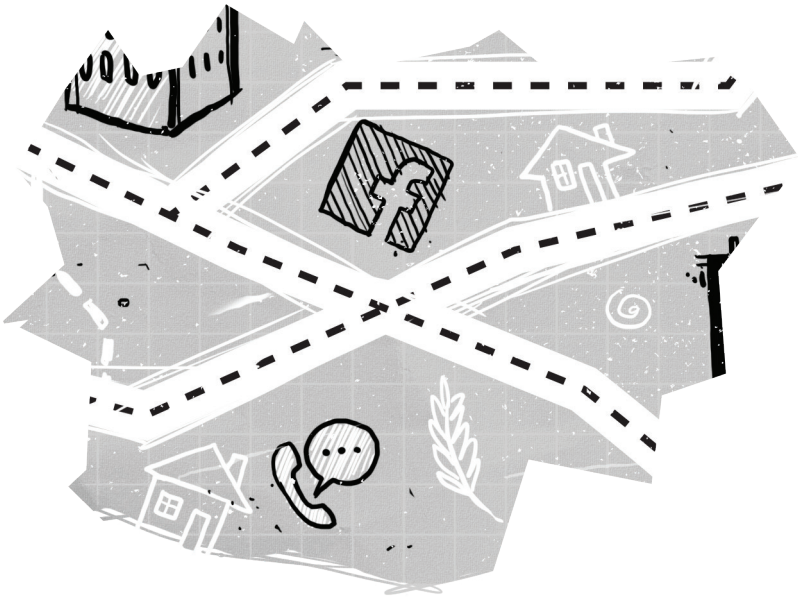
Harry S. Truman may have been exaggerating slightly when he said of Richard Nixon, a man he never liked, 'he can lie out of both sides of his mouth at the same time… if he ever caught himself telling the truth, he'd lie just to keep his hand in',[154] but the Watergate scandal did bring attention to the fact that a lie generally requires more lies to protect it, and if it is important enough, may prompt further pernicious acts for the purpose of preservation.

In *The Republic*, Plato attempts to lay the foundations of a utopian state, and points out the need for what he calls a noble lie—a grand myth of civic identity. Designed primarily to ensure social harmony and to motivate individuals to care for the city and for one another, the fable underpins a differentiated class structure, which is a matter of divine dispensation, distinguishing rulers—destined to be so because of their 'golden' souls—from the 'silver' souls of the auxiliaries, and the 'iron' and 'bronze' of the farmers and artisans.[155] It is quite clear that not all of our leaders are 'golden-souled'; the corrosive effects of power, and the fallible element of human nature, mean that whatever the metal from which they are forged, all are susceptible to the corrosion of lying for the wrong reasons. There was nothing noble when President Richard Nixon, nicknamed 'Tricky Dicky', proclaimed defiantly 'I am not a crook';[156] or when President Bill Clinton said, 'I want you to listen to me' before pointing his finger and almost angrily asserting, 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman.'[157] However, these examples of U.S. presidential perfidiousness should not prejudice our beliefs against the potential legitimacy of lying.

The complexities and many demands of government mean that the question of whether leaders should lie should be assessed with the appropriate wariness that contextualises how and why a lie may be told. Only once equipped with this information can a citizen distinguish a 'legitimate' lie from an 'illegitimate' one.

* * *

In the play Dirty Hands by Jean-Paul Sartre, the communist character Hoederer, poses a controversial question of political expediency, 'Do you think you can govern innocently?'[158] Perhaps, as Hoederer suggests, lies are necessary to govern. History no doubt holds numerous examples of when leaders have told important lies that may have saved lives. In these instances, the 'right to know' is considered secondary to national security. It would be wrong, however, for us to wholly sanction lying by our leaders. The incentives for leaders to justify lying when it is inappropriate are obvious, thus the narrow scope for legitimate lies will always be subject to abuse. Instead of rolling our eyes in dismay, we should consider the sage words of the historian Martin Jay, 'the ability to detect deception is, after all, just as functional in evolutionary terms as the ability to deceive'.[159]



CHANGE AND 21ST CENTURY MEDIA

'What if the real attraction of the Internet is not its cutting-edge bells and whistles, its jazzy interface or any of the advanced technology that underlies its pipes and wires? What if, instead, the attraction is an atavistic throwback to the prehistoric human fascination with telling tales?'
The Cluetrain Manifesto[160]

Sarah Dooley and Emma Moore with Alexander Averin

The Cluetrain Manifesto, written in 1999, around the advent of the Internet, celebrates the emergence of a flattened and divided media space. Each individual user is equal amongst the millions of other users but at the same time divided as the Internet enables coalescing amongst like-minded people. The sixth of *Cluetrain's* 95 Theses states: 'The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media.'[161] The Internet is, however, not the only result of technological development. As has been slowly becoming clear over the past two decades, this new technology might not be merely 'enabling conversations'. In order to understand the position of fake news in our current media environment, one needs to take a bird's eye view, not only in space, but also in time.

The next few pages will not only outline, but also assess these changes: What are the innovations that have changed the way we produce and consume media, and what does our current media environment look like? Are these innovations only technical, or do they coalesce with other developments in our society? Do we interact differently with media and news because of these changes, or are they merely a change in interface enabling the same behaviour as before? And finally, what is the evidence suggesting a relationship between the current media environment and the presence and spread of fake news? Discussing these questions, we will situate fake news in the dynamic landscape of our current media environment.

What Has Changed?

Marshall McLuhan was among the first scholars who conceptualized the media and communication environment as broad and dynamic—a 'medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action'.[162] Developed against the background of rapid technological change, the medium, according to McLuhan, represents a global network, which constitutes a unified field of experience.[163] At the time of writing, in the 1960s, the author saw means like TV and folk singing as forces that increase global social involvement and connect individuals in unprecedented ways, establishing a 'global village'.[164] In the modern media environment, however, the nature of connectivity is increasingly digital and multichannel. The one-to-many communication paradigm characterized by a one-way channel between the professional media and their audiences (TV, printed press, radio) has been replaced by a many-to-many mode of information exchange where audiences and media platforms are simultaneously producing and exchanging content. This development has not only empowered individuals by effectively turning every Internet user into a potential content-creator, but has also led to the development of a more high-choice media environment.[165]

It is hard to deny the reality of the ongoing 'democratization of information' characterised by the greater ability of Internet users to get more and more information from various sources and encounter different viewpoints.[166] Yet, as Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells points out, there is a flipside to the advantages of these new digital networks. The networks in today's media space are also being profoundly influenced by powerful players who perform gatekeeping functions, thus undermining media diversity.[167] More specifically, when discussing 'network power' exercised by digital networks, Castells underlines the importance of the decisions and directions of 'the programmers' of such net-

works, which are capable of 'blocking or allowing access to media outlets and/or to messages conveyed to the network'.[168] Building on this argument, Scott Lash suggests that 'the information age has replaced ownership and property relations in the means of production by relations of access and intellectual capital'.[169] Ultimately, as a consequence of digitisation and increased media diversity we are experiencing a shift from markets to networks, and from ownership to access. The outcomes of the 'democratization of information' are thus mixed—as the new online media exposes individuals to a diverse spectrum of perspectives on any given issue, the broader environment continues to be dominated by a small number of power holders who are able to perform regulatory and coordinating functions.

Algorithms, Bots, and Other Power Brokers of Information

Algorithms deployed by power brokers are now largely in control of selectively predetermining what information we see and where. Broker predictability means an increase in broker control, which makes them more powerful in terms of their relationship with individual participants.[170] This centralisation of information is linear, passive, programmed, and inward looking. Algorithms show us more of what we think we want to see. Such as what brand of jeans is advertised, what prefilled Google search appears, and suggested AirBnB locations. Social norms exist online as well as interpersonally and help determine what information is important through signals, cues, and heuristics.[171] Marketing companies interact with these norms to cater to personal preferences by leveraging friends' interests, clicks, and purchases. The current media landscape blurs the distinction between trustworthiness and authority, popularity and engagement.[172] This creates 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' that divide people into groups according to their online behaviour. A filter bubble[173] describes a bubble of information and individual experiences. These are created by technology companies and search engines that make decisions about what information a user would or should see via advertised content, suggested articles, and top search results based on an individual's personal data.

Filter bubbles—which can conform to socio-economic, regional, ethnic, and gender lines—are most worryingly manifest in politics. The 2016 U.S. presidential election demonstrates how social media was used 'as a backbone to transmit a hyper-partisan perspective to the world'[174] within polarized social media filter bubbles. The study found the pattern was not symmetric in right- and left-wing networks. The authors call this a 'network of mutually-reinforcing hyper-partisan sites [that combine] decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world'.[175]

The 2017 French election, on the other hand, exhibited a different end result as traditional media and social media were able to address instances of false information.[176] However, the 2016 'Brexit' referendum that voted for the UK to leave the European Union exhibited many voters who consumed media content and produced opinions in isolated groups.

Information filtering through self-selection and marketing choices plays an outsized role in Internet power dynamics and how credible information is shared. Intensive use of algorithms has led our personal views—as depicted online and through social media—to become more and more predictable.

Companies, therefore, exacerbate the tendency of individuals to self-select information that is palatable and supportive of their existing beliefs, further separating them from contradictory viewpoints and perpetuating ideological echo chambers by limiting controversial or opposing opinions. Other attempts to make sense of isolating trends call the phenomenon *splinternet* (the Internet splintering into factions) and *cyber-balkanization* ('the potential balkanization of preferences, including social, intellectual, and economic affiliations, analogous to geographic regions').[177] Echo chambers are particularly worrisome when they repeat political, religious, or ideological ideas. People with similar political, religious, and moral views, as well as similar tastes, tend to coalesce online, often filtering out contradictory information.

The existence and growth of echo chambers is often aided by the use of bots, which target ideologically segregated individuals and groups. A social bot is a 'computer algorithm that automatically produces content and interacts with humans on social media, trying to emulate and possibly alter their behavior'; such bots have had an ever-increasing presence online in recent years.[178] Although not all bots are harmful, in cases of fake news and media disinformation, such bots are often programmed to 'mislead, exploit, and manipulate social media discourse with rumors, spam, malware, misinformation, slander, or even just noise', which can result in significant levels of damage to society.[179] In Venezuela, for example, a recent study showed political bots were responsible for 'impression management' and manipulating public opinion.[180] The use of bots is particularly problematic given the 'number of real social media users incarcerated for using platforms like Twitter for political speech'.[181] Although bots retweeted fewer than 10% of analysed tweets from Venezuelan politicians, they found that the more active bots were those used by Venezuela's radical opposition. Worryingly, another study confirmed that current bot detection methods are profoundly limited in detecting sophisticated types of bot, including bots that function purely to manipulate public opinion.[182]

How Do We Behave in the Current Media Environment?

The transformation from analogue to digital has been crucial to how we interact with traditional media technologies (newspapers, magazines, and television) as well as relatively new platforms (online news outlets, blogs, Twitter, Facebook). The switch to digital has been expressed as both a 'conceptual change' and a 'sociological change', distorting how our world is perceived and challenging consumers' interaction with the media.[183] More importantly, the switch to digital changed how the public thinks about public affairs as expressed by the media.

Whilst the tone of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* was celebratory, in recent years there has been an increased focus on the problems that these changes have produced. An important consequence is how the media, specifically the Internet, has become a medium of communication that 'either bridges cultural divides or further fragments our societies into autonomous cultural islands and trenches of resistance'.[184] When all (unverified) information is effectively treated equally, the Internet becomes 'one great seething cauldron of opinions'.[185]

Within the changing information environment and media landscape, the concept of the 'Gutenberg Parenthesis'[186] expresses the idea that the Internet age is returning human communication to its original form of person-to-person knowledge sharing. The Internet is host to unverified and questionable information, shared by many but verified by few. The Gutenberg Parenthesis posits that there was a pause, a parenthesis, in human communication while the prevalence and import of the written word was unquestioned.[187] The printing press changed 'the way we look at the world and the way we categorize things in the world'.[188] Thomas Pettitt suggests that human communication and knowledge acquisition shifted from people speaking to one another to writing down their thoughts. This process, enabled by the printing press, legitimised the written word. In the Internet age communication has returned to communal knowledge sharing. The renewal and expansion of person-to-person communication occurs alongside and together with advances in computer networking, software development, enhanced broadband transmission with better handling capacity, and local and global communications via wireless networks.[189] The confusion of communication and the cries of 'fake news' are complicated by the ability of multitudes with access to the Internet to send and receive information.

The technological transformation is correlated with, and gave rise to, the combination and blurring of sending and receiving roles. Senders and receivers are at once the media and the audience: able to read, post, share, and question with equal ease. We now live in an age not just of mass communication, but rather mass self-communication.[190] Initially 'mass communication' operated in one di-

rection i.e. from one sender to many receivers, however, with the growth of the Internet 'mass self-communication' has emerged, defined as the ability to send messages from many people to many other people anywhere in the world. Thus with mass self-communication came the redefinition of the consumer audience from one that absorbed and witnessed the media and information to a combination producer-consumer. No longer is there just an audience: participants now produce and disseminate information, acting simultaneously as producers and consumers of information.[191] This change in particular has been referred to as a 'game changer'; individuals now influence the choice and use of content and its dissemination—they are no longer dependent on media organizations or governments to 'gatekeep', or to filter information prior to its dissemination. It is this democratisation of the media that has limited the ability of governments and organisations to control or dominate the flow of information,[192] and, by extension, has made it possible for fake news to emanate from sources outside government. The influence of traditional 'gatekeepers', such as printing press owners in the 20th century, has waned. As a result, we live under the illusion that because we engage in mass self-communication, we have a greater amount of individual agency in terms of what information is gathered, absorbed, and even disseminated. Furthermore, there is the assumption that the equalisation, or flattening of communication into one dimension is preferable. In today's media space individuals have a voice, but the unrealistic perception of having control over the information we consume translates, in effect, into the erosion of individual agency.

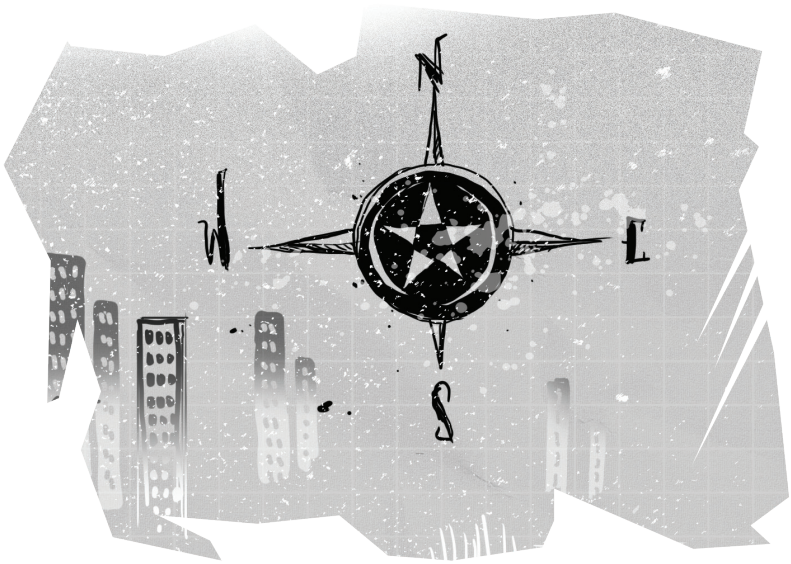
With the seemingly endless possibilities the Internet provides, it seems as though users can determine their media consumption by finding, processing, and sharing information as they see fit. However, the user is often pushed and pulled by technological currents to a predetermined location of information. Ultimately, the ability to segment information and communication, which is controlled by media platforms and algorithms, has considerable consequences for social organisation and cultural change.[193]

It is this 'shift' in power dynamics that has had the most destructive effect on the relationship between power, the media, and society. Such change in power dynamics has accelerated the rate at which individual control is being eroded: it is not that all individual agency has been lost, but rather the rate at which loss occurs—often without the realisation of the participant—is alarming.

The Modern Media Environment and Fake News: What Should We Pay Attention To?

The age-old tool of lying now finds itself in an environment that is especially conducive to its use. This is due to: the technological transition from analogue to digital; the decline of traditional arbiters of content; shifts in the power dynamics of controlling information flows; and the creation of self-referential online communities.

The medium, not the phenomenon of fake news, has changed; the democratisation of information has made it easier to mis-share information and subsequently to consume misinformation as false news. Two components of fake news are now harder to verify: 'truthiness' (the sensation or approximation of truth) does not correlate with truth, while 'legitimacy' (power and authority invested in actors or companies) has become less important. Both factors undermine credibility for all producers of news and information. The change in the nature of power dynamics and relationships between consumers of the media, tech companies, governments, and corporations has been the most significant change in modern communications. Echo chambers and filter bubbles now dominate our social media newsfeeds through the use of sophisticated algorithms. The destructive effects of these filter bubbles can be seen in the political culture of the US and the UK in 2016, while similar events can be seen to have occurred in Ukraine, North Korea, Russia, Venezuela, and beyond.



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO TRUST?

Leonie Haiden

Along with changes to the media landscape, low levels of trust in news media and government are often cited as creating a fertile environment for fake news and disinformation. According to polls and commentators, institutional trust reached a historical low in 2017.[194] Edelman's 'Trust Barometer'[195] reports that governments and media are our least trusted institutions, with the number of respondents indicating their trust at 41% and 43% respectively.[196] These and other similar findings by pollsters, such as the *Pew Research Center,* have been widely reported.[197] Referring to his survey, Edelman declared in *The Economist* that '(t)rust—or, too often, the lack of it—is one of the central issues of our time'.[198] Such an approach to trust makes several assumptions: First, that trust levels have indeed reached a point of 'crisis' that can be measured. Second, that trust and distrust stand in a binary relationship. And finally, that a pervasive lack of trust in society is one of the reasons we have 'a broken media industry'.[199] We will interrogate these assumptions, showing that while trust is indeed crucial to understanding today's political developments, and fake news in particular, the way it is usually discussed is too simplistic and not conducive to finding adequate responses to fake news.

Most definitions of trust, from the fields of economics to psychology, focus on two key elements: a 'willingness to be vulnerable', and having positive expectations for the future.[200] A morality-based interpretation of trust is also closely linked to 'truth', defining trust as the belief that another will abide by 'ordinary ethical rules', such as refraining from harming others and telling the truth.[201] 'Political trust' in particular, has been defined as a willingness on behalf of citizens to be vulnerable to the actions of political institutions (e.g. government and parliament) 'in the face of uncertainty'.[202] It is important to distinguish between a *lack* of trust and *dis*trust. A lack of trust is presented in the results of these surveys as a loss of confidence of the population in their politicians to deal with social, political, and economic problems, which, as discussed in **Route 1**, might have to do with the fact that in today's globalised and interconnected world, policy makers are struggling to find local solutions to global problems.

Distrust is an even more intense form of this. It is the belief that an institution or government official is acting *against* one's interest.[203] When the point of actual *distrust* of politicians has been reached, this means that we no longer believe that the same 'ethical rules' are being observed by us and by (some of) the politicians in power. According to these definitions of trust, then, a lack of trust or distrust can be the result of both intensely uncertain times and a lack of confidence in political actors.

A Discourse of Distrust

With reference to the first point, it is extremely difficult to quantify whether we are actually living in more uncertain times. However, according to authors like Zygmunt Baumann and Pankaj Mishra, such feelings are particularly prevalent today. They have highlighted how social and technological changes and the pace of globalisation have created not only opportunities, but also a sense of instability and uncertainty.[204] Indeed, respondents who reported that the political system as a whole had 'failed them' (53%) were also very likely to express a fear of eroding social values, globalisation, corruption, immigration, and 'the pace of change and innovation'. [205] But trust is based as much on *perception* as it is on political and social realities.[206] If uncertainty and crisis are common terms used to frame current issues, then individuals are also more likely to feel that they are indeed living in uncertain and unstable times.[207]

Historian Richard Overy investigates this dynamic in *The Morbid Age,* where he reveals how the *Zeitgeist* of the interwar years in Britain was shaped by a profound sense of looming crisis. However, according to Overy's analysis, this was only partly rooted in political, economic, and social realities. It was equally a product of

and intensified by the dominant rhetoric of social, political, and economic 'crisis.' Today we require more than simply an awareness of the central role played by trust in a political environment where terms like 'post-truth', 'populism', and 'fake news' are being thrown around. We may also need to take a step back and scrutinise whether this rhetoric of 'crisis' is perhaps a self-sustaining and intensifying discourse that 'develops a reality of its own'.[208]

In order to counter such rhetoric, then, we need to understand why the sense of crisis finds such strong resonance in society, so that we can channel this sentiment towards a more hopeful and constructive vision of the future. In fact, Jan-Jonathan Bock and Sami Everett have stressed that while there has been ample talk of a 'migration crisis' and a 'financial crisis', at the same time 'each crisis has energised trust within local communities.' [209] This shows that trust, like truth, was not irrevocably lost in 2016, but that we have witnessed a shift in where we place our trust, from global to local institutions for example.

The Binary of the Barometer

Just as we should not take the idea of a 'crisis of trust' at face value, the notion that democracy is in crisis must also be looked at more closely.[210] The historian Pierre Rosenvallon critiques the widely-held view that we have somehow lost touch with a fully functioning form of democracy. He is sceptical of rhetoric that describes democracy as having reached a point of 'crisis', 'malaise', 'disaffection', or 'breakdown'. For him, distrust has always been a feature of democracy and the 'history of *real* democracies has always involved tension and conflict'.[211] While it has been widely argued that trust is a necessary element of successful democratic government,[212] trust is not always an entirely positive thing. Moreover, when asked about 'trust in government', what institutions or individuals are people actually thinking of?[213] Research has revealed that how people understand 'government' depends greatly on how an issue is framed in the media, whether there is an emphasis on international or domestic politics, on tax laws or healthcare.[214]

As a study into the relationship between levels of trust and citizen behaviour in the U.S. shows, higher levels of trust do not necessarily correlate with highly engaged democratic citizens and 'unquestioning trust in government can be every bit as dangerous to democracy'.[215] Citizens with low levels of trust are often carrying out the important function of 'vigilant watchdogs of government', which is crucial for a healthy, functioning democracy.[216] Moreover, findings from the 'Asian Barometer Survey' reveal that there is no clear correlation between how democratic a regime is and how much people trust their political institutions: 'the level of diffuse regime support in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia and the Phil-

ippines have been consistently lower than that of the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes'.[217] The supposedly high levels of trust in President Vladimir Putin are another case in point.[218] In short a healthy democratic system and high trust levels do not necessarily go hand in hand.

Why Don't You Trust Me?

While describing the state of trust or the state of democracy as being in 'crisis' might not be an entirely accurate representation, recent surveys nonetheless reveal a popular perception that politicians care less about the welfare of their constituency and more about their own interests.[219] In combination with feelings of uncertainty and instability, this perception encourages questioning traditional voices of authority. Game-changing developments in the way media is consumed and disseminated, mean that all actors have suffered losses of their legitimacy and authority, which they must now justify anew.

Today politicians in Western democracies are more exposed, and image-management has become increasingly difficult.[220] As discussed in our exploration of the changes in today's media landscape, there are two processes at work simultaneously. On the one hand, due to the low cost of dissemination and the fact that gatekeeping functions are no longer carried out primarily by political elites, but also by actors with monetary interests (Facebook, Google), citizens are presented with a much greater variety of (sometimes contradictory) information.[221] This means that politicians have less control over what information is shared with the wider population. And while campaigns to discredit the legitimacy of actors might not always be convincing, they sow confusion and exacerbate feelings of uncertainty.[222] At the same time, the need to navigate this mass of information combined with the potential to make money from predicting people's online preferences has led to the formation of 'echo-chambers' and 'filter bubbles'.[223]

Cognitive processes—the way we think about news stories—can further amplify the grouping of opinions into segregated blocks. Whether or not a piece of news fits into our world-view is one of the first things we consider when judging its truthfulness.[224] As a result, news that is damaging to 'our' political candidate, or that runs counter to our political views, will be met with a higher degree of suspicion, especially in an environment where we are well aware that false or misleading information is being used to discredit political actors and influence our political behaviour. This is exacerbated by an increased sense of media polarization throughout Western democracies, and especially in the US, which can partly be explained by rise of online, highly partisan media brands such as Breitbart or Occupy Democrats.[225] The mistrust people feel is reinforced by the fact that it is

often difficult to determine the sources of online news stories,[226] and that sometimes fake news is disseminated accidentally by traditional and mainstream media outlets.[227] If we trust the source of a piece of information less, and instead we judge its truthfulness on the basis of its content, the role of confirmation bias will be even stronger. This is made even more problematic by the tendency that we all have to develop a 'bias blind spot', and to find it uncomfortable to admit that we might be partial to certain views and can be manipulated by false information.[228]

The more we engage with news that lines up with our pre-existing beliefs, the less likely we are to accept a truth-claim that contradicts our point of view.[229] Strong personal involvement with an issue makes people want to maintain a positive sense of self, which they might perceive as being threatened by an outside view. This then further entrenches partisan preferences,[230] and increases suspicion towards news outlets that do not align with our views. Research into why people in the US perceive mainstream media as being biased in their coverage found that both Republicans and Democrats regarded the same news media as biased against the party they were associated with.[231]

Truth or Dare

By establishing the premise that they are offering 'facts' previously withheld from the public, fake news sources build on and amplify suspicions, and in some cases conspiratorial beliefs, that political actors or systems are following a hidden agenda that is contrary to the interests of marginalised groups.[232]

While trust in the media has always fluctuated, it has traditionally been seen as an institution that took it upon itself to investigate and bring such cases to light.[233] When *The Washington Post* played a crucial role in exposing the Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration in 1972, public trust in the media in the US was not far below the trust invested in the Supreme Court and the military.[234] However, the speed of today's media environment, demanding real-time coverage and ever-breaking news, as well as dependence on advertising revenues and competition from cheap online media platforms, has made it more difficult for news outlets to work to the same (ethical) standards and to fact-check with the same degree of thoroughness as they once did.[235] A perceived lack of investigative journalism is now partly being filled by disseminators of fake news and disinformation, claiming to offer facts that no one else dares to share. For example, the Czech news provider 'AC24', one of the most prolific disseminators of false information, claims to offer truth while the rest of the 'Czech media scene is subject to the propaganda of power circles, intellectual laziness, and a simplified depiction of the world'.[236]

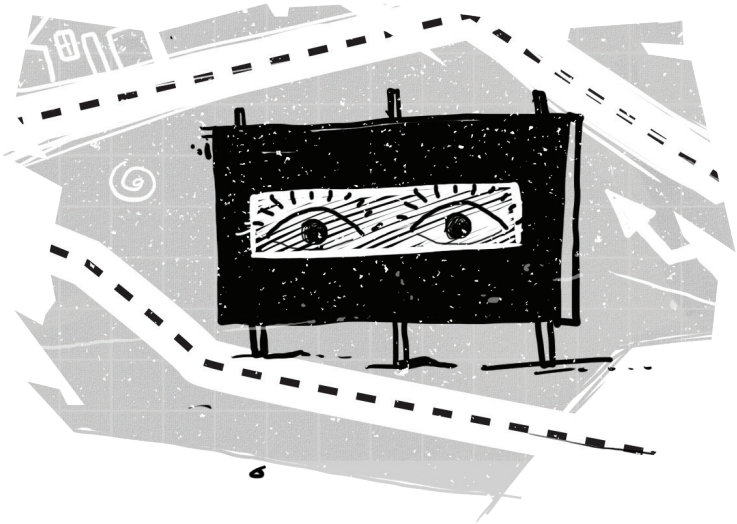
To effectively counterbalance and combat 'fake news', 'populist politics', and the exploitation of relativist notions of truth, we must understand why people are suspicious, and even distrustful, of institutions of authority. First, we should focus on reinvesting our political institutions with moral integrity, and emphasise accountability rather than absolute transparency. The World Wide Web Foundation studies public access to government data, and has shown that there is still a lot to be done in terms of giving people the accurate information they need to be able to hold their governments accountable in a constructive way.[237]

Second, media outlets and journalists should focus on establishing a premise for why they should be trusted, justified by something other than the tradition of legitimacy and authority they once held. A recent survey has shown increased sensitivity to the need of journalists to redefine and reconsider their practice in response to the challenges of fake news.[238] Moreover, the role of investigative journalism is being taken on by new organisations such as 'Bellingcat: the home of online investigations,'[239] or the 'Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project' (OCCRP), which recently published a report on an extensive money-laundering operation in Azerbaijan.[240]

* * *

Our times have been described as being characterised by 'epistemological suspicion,'[241] 'post-truth politics,' and a 'crisis in trust.' However, what they all essentially refer to is distrust in the traditional voices of authority (be they politicians, the mainstream media, or the scientific community). Colourful infographs illustrating decreases in trust often gloss over the complex nature of trust and scepticism. They seem to forget that while distrust can lead to partisan polarisation and conspiratorial beliefs, it is simultaneously crucial to a healthy democracy. Recognising scepticism and distrust as an opportunity to engage citizens in the political process will help us to escape a self-perpetuating cycle of crisis-talk.

So far we have considered fake news, (post) truth, changes in the media landscape, and trust in the context of Western models of government. Now we explore the issues covered so far in relation to three autocratic societies and their respective communication strategies. Much has been written from a Western perspective on the control of the Russian domestic media space and the disinformation funded and directed by the Kremlin. **Route 9** will consider the Kremlin's point of view on disinformation in the modern media environment. First, however, we will interrogate the role of truth in two absolutist ideologies—the Kim regime's Orwellian propaganda strategy, operating within a completely controlled media space, and Daesh's use of emotional appeals and flexible truth-claims.



DAESH AND ITS SINGLE TRUTH

'[Allah] grants the truth victory, even if after some time.'[242]
Rumiyah, October 4, 2016

Kierat Ranautta-Sambhi

As a militant, fundamentalist group, we expect Daesh's[243] approach to truth to be unequivocally absolutist. However, many believe that the group has been able to communicate effectively because it is not constrained by truth.[244] So what role does truth play in Daesh strategic communications?

Given that strategic communications can be considered a 'contest between truth claims',[245] Daesh is bound by truth as much as any other strategic communicator. Being recognised as a truth-teller—a credible player in the public sphere—creates the basic condition for communicative success.[246] Yet, to effectively persuade audiences to accept a particular claim, it must be a truth that is also *recognised as a truth* by the target audience.[247]

Daesh seems to have recognised the overwhelming influence of emotional resonance when target audiences accept a truth-claim as truth. It is where truth-claims

become entangled with emotional appeal that Daesh can be said to excel as strategic communicators. The group is a master manipulator of 'truth', constructing a set of claims that are both credible and emotionally satisfying for its key audiences. Truth-claims are made potent by their emotional appeal, rather than whether they are actually true—a fact that Daesh seems to have fully embraced.

The Illusionist: Creating the Perception of Truth

To maintain its credibility as a truth-teller, Daesh changes its approach to a given truth-claim as the situation on the ground unfolds, recognising that its truth-claims must constantly be seen as true in order to continue to be deemed credible. Perhaps the most obvious example of how Daesh has relativised its absolute, theological truth-claims related to the coming of the Day of Judgment. Daesh explained the *ḥadīth* that foretells the advent of the *Malāḥim* (the battle of Armageddon) in its English-language magazine, *Dabiq*—the namesake of the militarily inconsequential, yet symbolically crucial, town of Dābiq:

1. 'The hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-A'māq or Dābiq';[248]
2. The epic battle of good versus evil between the Muslims and the crusaders will then '[lead] up to the conquests of Constantinople, then Rome'[249]; and,
3. Culminate in the apocalyptic final battle in which Islam will triumph.[250]

In a bid to actualise its truth-claims by showing that it is heralding the great battle, Daesh released the video *Although the Disbelievers Dislike It*. The video shows the severed head of captured American, Peter Kassig, suggesting that he had been executed in Dābiq in order to show that Daesh was 'burying the first American crusader in Dābiq, eagerly awaiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive'.[251] The group attempted to provoke the contemporary Roman—the US and its allies—to take action in Dābiq, thus, sparking the beginning of the end, as per the prophecy.

Contrary to the strength of conviction displayed in Daesh strategic communications, victory at Dābiq did not occur. Rather, the loss of Dābiq to Syrian rebel forces in October 2016 signified a physical, symbolic, and strategic loss for Daesh. Consequently, the fallaciousness of the prophecy was becoming increasingly apparent. Whilst Daesh supposedly remains committed to its absolutist approach to truth, it has clearly understood that 'the key to changing per-

ceptions is to change the underlying truths'.[252] Having realised the importance of avoiding a say-do gap, the group seems to be willing to change what it says to reflect what it does, or, more accurately, what it is forced to do (in this case, retreat from Dābiq). To suit the reality on the ground, it distorts previous truth-claims so as to maintain coherence in its truth-claims.

This is difficult to reconcile with its absolutist approach to truth. It begs the question of whether there has been a shift from the 'old' absolute truth, or whether a new truth has emerged (thus suggesting the old one was a lie). Daesh seems to be standing by its absolutist truth-claim, preferring instead to contort the situation to support its current truth-claims and overall objective. Upon losing the town, it simply shifted its interpretation of the situation. Daesh spurned the view that its soldiers 'couldn't distinguish between the minor battle of Dābiq and the Major Malḥamah of Dābiq', before recounting yet again the apocalyptic *ḥadīth*.[253] It reiterates its truth as absolute, arguing that the 'Major Malḥamah of Dābiq' would be 'preceded by great events from the minor signs of the Hour', but that such events had not yet occurred.[254]

Although the victorious outcome in Dābiq was heavily emphasised, Daesh seems to have made contingencies in case of failure, even though (at the time) Daesh believed it would succeed. Even before the loss of Dābiq, Daesh had highlighted that 'tests and tribulations' must be faced by all true believers.[255]

Following the fall of Dābiq, there has been a clear shift in focus in its strategic communications from provocation to patience. Daesh instrumentalised the truth of the matter, arguing that 'there will be no consolidation without trial, no victory without hardship, and no ease without difficulty.'[256] Such 'trials and tribulations' were subsequently increasingly emphasised, given that it has fewer victories to celebrate. Yet, Daesh maintains belief in its victory, arguing that it 'requires but an hour of patience'.[257] Daesh seeks to persuade audiences to be devoted acolytes who weather the tests, thus enabling them, 'in the darkness of night', to '[straddle] the light of truth'.[258] This demonstrates the continued emphasis of its truth as the only truth, despite its malleability in practice.

The shift in perception of the ongoing situation results from an effort to reinterpret the underlying truths. Daesh carefully constructs its strategic communications to ensure that the aura of truth surrounding its truth-claims remains intact, even in the event of failure. Consequently, this suggests that Daesh continues to be faithful to the truth of the religious prophecy, albeit under the guise of new interpretations of the facts on the ground.

Aligning truth with what is expedient to the end goal allows Daesh to inspire belief in its target audiences by retaining the status of truth-teller.[259] The per-

ception of truth allows Daesh to gain credibility in the eyes of these audiences. However, emotional appeal is just as important in inspiring allegiance to and confidence in Daesh. Strategic communications remains a battle for hearts and minds. Thus, strategic communicators cannot rely on truth (or the appearance thereof) alone in their efforts to gain credibility. Emotional appeal—the heart—is often more powerful in the contest for credibility.

The Truthiness-Teller: The Heart of Strategic Communications

An illusion of truth forms the basis for Daesh strategic communications because it serves as an instrument with which to appeal to target audiences on an emotional level. Let us explore one key emotion—desire.[260] Daesh has recognised the need to construct its strategic communications campaign in a way that appeals emotionally to the immediate desires of many local residents in territories under its control in order to win the hearts and minds of the people so as to be able to effectively persuade them of its aim of 'remaining and expanding' the caliphate.[261]

To this end, whilst Daesh seeks to proselytise its apocalyptic truth, it seems to understand that it may have to settle for tacit acceptance of its caliphate amongst local residents who desire stability and security in their conflict-ridden towns. Consequently, many locals may accept Daesh governance principally because the group has created a semblance of being a compassionate, capable governing group. Mara Revkin explains that Daesh has created a 'social contract' of sorts, as encompassed within the *Wathīqat al-Madīnah* (Document of the City) applicable to territories within the caliphate.[262] Under this social contract, Daesh promises to provide safety, security, rights (albeit limited), and justice in return for '[joining] the society [the Islamic State] and [renouncing] factions and strife', and providing material support for the group through paying taxes or military service.[263]

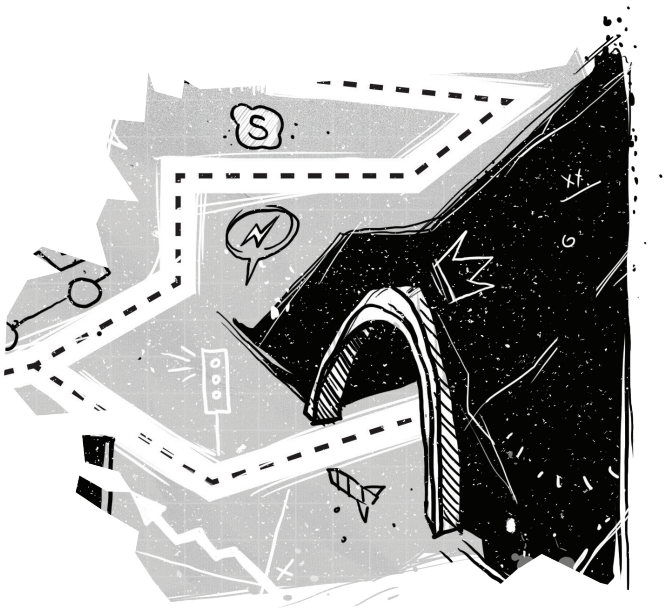
Although Daesh demonstrates its fulfilment of this social contract in various ways, its provision of bread is of particular significance in local communities.[264] Bread has increasingly constituted a vital part of the Syrian diet, especially where little other food is available.[265] Daesh strongly publicised its efforts to fulfil the responsibility of providing bread in Syrian territories under its control, a task traditionally attributed to the government.[266] However, the outbreak of war hindered the ability of the regime to adequately provide bread, as demonstrated by the considerable rise in the price of bread.[267] In the early days of Daesh control of Syrian territories, accounts given by some local residents showed that 'daily life in the city is good',[268] with bread, crucially, being made available by the new ruling power.[269] Demonstrating its compassion for the needs of local

residents and its ability to govern effectively allowed Daesh, even if only briefly, to gain credibility amongst some of those who chose not to flee.

As Daesh began to failing in its ability to provide the services desired by local residents it lost support. This serves to highlight the importance of the emotional appeal of the group's earlier strategic communications. Discontent among the population rose when Daesh started demanding 'heavy taxes and fees for water and electricity'.[270] The group was failing to uphold the perception that it had constructed of itself as an able governing body, and thus lost credibility amongst target audiences.[271]

* * *

Daesh succeeds in gaining credibility irrespective of the truthfulness of its truth-claims as it constructs its strategic communications so as to 'reflect the experiences of the audience'.[272] Appealing emotionally to its target audiences allows it to gain support without necessarily being burdened by truth. Daesh instrumentalises the truth to suit its strategic objectives, allowing it to create the perception of being a sincere, yet formidable, group that acts to fulfil the desires of its target audiences. Daesh appeals at 'an emotional level first'.[273] It primarily constructs truths that its target audiences want to exist, rather than stating truth in and of itself.



NORTH KOREA AND ITS DIFFERENT, SINGLE TRUTH

Douglas Gray

Not unlike the example of Daesh, and perhaps counter to popular perception, truth also holds a crucial place in the communication strategy of Kim Jong-un's regime in North Korea. Deash distributed bread to appear as a capable governing body in Syria. Similarly, the Kim regime craves domestic legitimacy and credibility through its nuclear missile programme.

On September 3rd, 2017, instability on the Korean Peninsula, already tumultuous, reached new heights. In its sixth nuclear test since 2006, long-isolated North Korea claims to have successfully tested a miniaturised hydrogen bomb. The test comes coupled with the development of multiple intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), capable of reaching not only its neighbours but also its far-away adversary, the United States. And like those before it, the test represents an uncomfortable truth for the international community. The reality of a nuclear North Korea, long touted as the most threatening rogue state within the international system, is a difficult fact for policy makers worldwide to swallow. On the other hand, for the Kim regime this is a deliberate, and convenient, reality. From releasing photos of Kim Jong-un standing beside the purported weapon to signalling its military potency with missile flights over Japan, North

Korea has ensured that the international community is painfully aware of its nuclear successes.

This 'truth-telling' exercise of broadcasting nuclear success speaks to the state's communications strategy as a whole. In the eyes of the international community, the regime has, at best, a tentative relationship with the truth. Falsehoods prevail in state propaganda. During the period of intense famine in the 1990s, also known as the Arduous March, the government went to great lengths to cover up any truth that implied state failure.[274] Nevertheless, North Korea's communications are not devoid of truth. To the contrary, truth is fundamental for government. The Kim regime, like any other authoritarian organisation, craves legitimacy. It seeks to preserve it by fostering credibility; trumpeting its own unique and absolutist truth.

This Route evaluates the place and value of truth within North Korean propaganda. By setting out the ideological formation of North Korean propaganda, we will show that truth provides the seed from which North Korea's propaganda flourishes. It is manipulated and exaggerated in order to feed a unique worldview, a worldview built upon an absolutist notion of truth that the entire state apparatus espouses. In this sense, the truth, or at least a manipulated conception of it, is harnessed as a powerful tool to uphold regime credibility—to garner and maintain the legitimacy that underpins authority. Moreover, North Korea's ideology projects an absolutist truth that itself feeds the state's perceptions. The state's confrontational wariness of the external is a result of objective truths being seen through the prism of its unique worldview. For policy makers and foreign policy pundits alike, understanding this employment of truth is vital to deciphering how the Kim regime perceives the world and how to respond.

Pyongyang's Propaganda Prism

Propaganda, built upon an extensive ideology, is the central pillar of the North Korean regime. Max Weber famously noted that power needs to justify itself; authoritarian regimes must use the power of (selected) information to legitimise rule, employing ideologies to justify a grip on power.[275] By implanting an ideology, leaders can justify priorities, rationalise mistakes, and bolster their legitimacy through 'righteousness'. North Korea's ideology is founded on an obsessive remembrance of its past, a historical account that informs the state's propaganda. History provides the truthful seed from which the Kim regime's mythology flourishes. This mythology is built on the anti-Japanese insurgency in Manchuria in 1931.[276] Kim Il-sung, his son, and his grandson after him, have infused the anti-imperialist struggle into a narrative of heroism, disseminating it through storytelling and education.[277]

For example:

> 'During the Fatherland Liberation War the brave uncles of the Korean People's Army in one battle killed 374 American imperial bastards, who are brutal robbers. The number of prisoners taken was 133 more than the number of American imperial bastards killed. How many bastards were taken prisoner?'[278]

Likewise, the arts are controlled and employed in a constant effort to uphold the historical narrative. Symbolism is used to such an extent that, as Jane Portal points out, Pyongyang has become a stage for the narrative of the state.[279] Collective recollection of the humiliation of Korea by Imperial Japan (1910–1945) and of the Korean War (1950–1953) are used to empower and validate nearly all actions of the North Korean regime. The juche ideology, at the heart of North Korean propaganda, is built upon this mythology. Typically translated as 'self-reliance', it prescribes independence of the people and of the state. Economically, the ideology advocates autarky; politically, it promotes rigid independence from external powers, self-defence from external capitalist enemies, and dependence on the state 'family'.[280]

This mythology is North Korea's Genesis—it justifies the Kims' positions as supreme leaders (suryong), legitimising the military's powerful role in society and exalting the status of the guerrilla elite. The suryong ideology holds that the Korean people are childlike innocents, protected by their patriarchs, Kim Il-sung and his descendants. Writers and artists are tasked with highlighting their leader's thoughts, leadership skills, personality, and revolutionary achievements, a ubiquitous narrative that sustains an ever-present cult of personality.[281] Portraits of the deceased leaders Kim Il-sung, the 'Eternal President of the Republic', and Kim Jong-il, gaze upon public spaces and are hung in every home.[282] The leaders are revered as great military leaders. Even though Kim Jong-un was only in his late twenties, he was promoted to the rank of four-star general in the People's Army. In January 2012 the North Korean documentary, Succeeding the Great Work of the Military-First Revolution, exalted the 'great successor' as an experienced military leader, presenting him riding tanks and horses.[283] To the Kim regime, this cult of personality is vital. Such personality cults afford leaders a standing that, as Max Weber notes, allows them exercise blatant authoritarian power, to break the rules and norms that other leaders grapple with.[284]

It is this propaganda, built upon historical remembrance, that helps generate the anxiety and fear of outside threats that persists to this day.[285] At the core of North Korean communications lies a pronounced xenophobia. The narrative demonises Japan and the United States for their historical engagements in aggression

and atrocities across the Korean peninsula, and for preventing unification. Racist overtones permeate state propaganda and the nationalism that it espouses, denigrating the Japanese and Americans as bastards and swine, and depicting South Koreans as subservient to them.[286] This xenophobic nationalism is a vital pillar of legitimacy for the Kim regime. It simultaneously justifies military spending and stokes fear of hostile encirclement. According to the worldview that the narrative supports, only North Korea, and therefore the Kim regime, can claim the right to Korean nationalism. By unremittingly denouncing foreign enemies, foreign 'bastards' can be blamed for domestic issues, domestic rivals can be labelled traitorous puppets, and the military-first doctrine can be justified.[287]

A Kernel of Truth

Truth, albeit a manipulated version of it, lies at the heart of this mythology. As philosopher Jacques Ellul posited, propaganda is the intentional distortion of reality *within* the world of facts. Truths, half-truths, and limited truths are employed to accomplish this distortion.[288] Whilst North Korean propaganda embellishes reality, truth is still present. Within the five principles of *suryong* as dictated by the state, writers and artists are tasked with crafting images of their leader on the basis of historical facts, not mere imagination.[289] Propaganda is built upon a kernel of truth in order to develop a foundation of believability. And their hatred of the external world is not wholly contrived. The scars left by Japanese Imperialism remain vivid in the minds of the North Korean elites.[290] Often overlooked by the West, the extent of the destruction that took place during the Korean War was overwhelming, equivalent to Hitler's destruction of Poland. American General Curtis LeMay unabashedly explained that UN forces (primarily American) burned down 'every town in North Korea and every town in South Korea', killing 20% of the population.[291] Bolstering internal credibility, the North Korean regime employs historical narratives to give credibility to its propaganda. Veracity is not absent, but is manipulated within a feedback loop that informs the state's unique worldview. In this sense, propaganda provides a prism through which truth is seen by both the Kim regime and the North Korean people.

So how is truth perceived through this prism? North Korea's ideology is absolutist; reality is seen through the state's ideology. When the world is seen through an absolutist prism, objective truths are perceived in accordance with the state-generated worldview. The United States, and indeed the world, have long negotiated with North Korea convinced that its leaders do not believe their own propaganda. However, as Brian Myers contends, this viewpoint is inherently flawed. North Korean nationalism is built upon the mythology espoused by successive Kim regimes, which are entrenched in a steadfast belief in a North Korean purity that must be defended.

Their hostility towards the external—the 'others' who wish to destroy the perceived specialness of North Korea—is paramount to the North Korean worldview. [292]

> Where the Nazis considered the Aryans physically and intellectually superior to all other races, and the Japanese regarded their moral superiority as having protected them throughout history, the Koreans believe that their childlike purity renders them so vulnerable to the outside world that they need a Parent Leader to survive.[293]

Popular support for the regime is built upon this perception, which generates a higher degree of uncoerced mass support than the outside world is willing to recognise. And no matter how ruthless or violent, the political elites do not think of themselves as monsters, but as patriots and heroes. A recent RAND report places the number of truly senior elites who exercise power in Pyongyang at only 5,000 to 10,000.[294] The regime relies on these elites, many of whom are the state's intellectuals, to craft state communications. And it is these very elites who are imbued with Kim Il-sung's teachings.[295] Propaganda is not merely a tool used to manipulate and control the population, but a reflection of the views of its political elites, including the cadres surrounding Kim Jong-un, like his father and grandfather before him. It is the prism through which the state sees reality and truth. In this sense, North Korea is more akin to pre-World War II Japan than the other states with which it is usually compared, Maoist China or the Soviet Union. In accordance, for example, food aid provided by the United States to help North Korea through the famine of the 1990s was treated not as generosity, but as supplication.[296]

Nukespeak

This worldview must be taken into account in assessing North Korea's newfound nuclear power capabilities. North Korea, like other nuclear states, has pursued nuclear weapons to counter perceived threats from its adversaries, and to heighten both international and domestic perceptions of power.[297] Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, however, go beyond allaying insecurity. Policy not only drives propaganda, but propaganda also drives policy. North Korea is in many ways archetypal of Nicholas O'Shaughnessy's symbolic state—a state where symbolic actions and celebratory rhetoric have become the principal concerns of the government, with the management of these communications and symbols surpassing even the importance of the management of the state itself.[298] Externally, nuclear weapons are for North Korea as much a means of communication as instruments of power. As

Thomas Schelling notes, such tacit communication—the exploitation of potential force—is vital to coercive diplomacy; it is the diplomacy of violence.[299] This is a form of communication that the Kim regime knows all too well. Each nuclear test, missile flyover, or grandiose warning is an exercise in signal-sending. The Kim regime seeks to enhance its credibility on the world stage, and to heighten its coercive influence. Delivering this uneasy truth has become central to North Korean propaganda as it seeks to force others to accept its unparalleled self-image. And internally, power-signalling gives prestige to a nation that has been challenged by famine and hunger for centuries.[300] Conveying this prestige and emphasising the young leader's achievements is vital to cementing Kim Jong-un's domestic legitimacy.

However, nuclear capabilities are not merely a propaganda tool, but a result of the worldview that the propaganda has propagated. The regime's leadership credibility is built upon the state's confrontational wariness of the external. To break this enmity would be to break the foundational narrative of the regime's authority, and therefore this enmity is something for the regime to manage, not to solve. George Kennan spelled out a similar logic in his famous Long Telegram of 1946 on the conduct of the Soviet Union. According to Kennan, Soviet decision making was driven by an instinctive insecurity and an inherent authoritarian need for an enemy.[301] For North Korea, nuclear weapons serve not only as instruments of propaganda to heighten the perception of the exalted leader, but are used to manage a necessary animosity and to establish an animosity-based absolutist truth that informs the state's entire policy.

Understanding the logic behind Pyongyang's communications is vital to deciphering how the Kim regime perceives the world. The United States, along with the international community as a whole, has been criticised in the past for stereotyping, rather than understanding, authoritarian regimes.[302] In addressing contemporary North Korea, such a lack of comprehension could be disastrous. Abandoning nuclear weapons, or the state's confrontational anti-Americanism, would contradict the state's entire mythology: the absolute truth that acts as the state's Genesis. To do so would fundamentally undermine the credibility of the regime, uprooting the foundations for the version of the truth that it espouses, thus causing the regime to forfeit its legitimacy.

RUSSIA AND ITS MANY TRUTHS

Alexander Averin

In March 2015, the European Council set up the East Strategic Communications Task Force aimed at addressing Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. Seeking to expose the breadth of the pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts in Europe and beyond, the EU's initiative unites over 400 experts, journalists, officials, NGOs, and think tanks in more than 30 countries. Contributors monitor fabricated stories and regularly submit their analysis to the EU's special 'Disinformation Review'.[303] The demand for such projects has been rising steadily following Russia's interference in Ukraine in 2014, which placed the notion of 'information warfare'[304] at the heart of the public debate. Three years later, the international academic, media, and military communities continue to grapple with challenges posed by Russian attempts to influence public opinion abroad. From a European point of view, the Kremlin's tactic has been to confuse rather than convince, to divide opinions rather than provide an alternative viewpoint. Russia's goal, as seen from the West, is to deprive audiences of the ability to distinguish between truth and lie by creating as many competing narratives as possible in the global media space.

The Russian Perspective

On the other hand, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Maria Zakharova also regularly raises concerns about the dangers of disinformation. She talks of 'systemic disinformation [regarding Russia's actions] in the EU', criticizes falsehoods disseminated about Russia by media outlets such as CNN and Fox News, and even invites the United Nations to develop a global strategy aimed at combating misinformation and fabricated news.[305] In her eyes, as well as in the eyes of many state officials, Russia remains a *victim* of disinformation, not one of its chief instigators. It is not Russia's fault that European publics' faith in democratic institutions is seen to fade when outlets like Russia Today (RT) tell uncomfortable truths Western governments prefer not to hear. Rather, so the argument goes, European democracies should work harder to fix their domestic problems and stop blaming Russia for their failures.

These two interpretations are strategically conflicting, and yet strikingly similar. They both victimize domestic populations and institutions and both see the other as the driver of so-called 'information confrontation'. Moreover, both insist on their own version of the truth, favouring familiar sources and domestic journalistic traditions. In such an environment, characterized by a cacophony of views and perspectives, it is becoming increasingly difficult to search for a single truth. Rather, the global information space now presents a variety of opinions that are increasingly seen as expressions of special interests, thus providing their own versions of the truth—be it the BBC view, the CNN view, or the RT view. Hence, in accordance with a Western notion that every viewpoint has a right to exist, attempts to discredit one view in order to boost the credibility of another inevitably implies an unwarranted imposition of authority.[306] But who is to say who is right? While most writing on Russian information politics is dominated by Western scholarship, this article presents a dialogue that incorporates Russian thinking into the analysis of the country's disinformation campaign.

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It has been open season on all things Russian for a while now. Their hackers meddle with election processes overseas, their military jets are flying in the UK's airspace, their state-sponsored media outlets are spreading false stories, seeking to destabilise the principles of good journalism.[307] While some observers have rightly noted the signs of a 'Putin panic' surrounding international events in recent years, it is hard to deny the evidence of Kremlin strategists being engaged in information confrontation with the West aimed at 'creating an internal divide in [foreign] societies'.[308] Recent attempts to disrupt national self-confidence in European states have included providing funds for the French right-wing

presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, fabricating stories about ruthless acts by the Ukrainian army,[309] and offering Nigel Farage, the former leader of Britain's right-wing party UKIP, a regular time slot on state-backed international broadcaster RT.

A Tradition of Disinformation

None of this is particularly new. Soviet intelligence units regularly used 'active measures'—an umbrella term for a variety of tactics including disinformation, subversion, and forgery, aimed at dividing foreign populations.[310] Back in the 1970s, a wide span of activities associated with *dezinformatsia* was supervised by 'Directorate A' of the KGB.[311] Set up to weaken Western democratic values, the department meddled in American politics by fabricating stories about AIDS being a biological weapon invented in the US, and by blaming the CIA for President John F. Kennedy's assassination.[312] Renamed but never dismantled, the unit continues to rely on Soviet-era practices. Yet today it operates with the aid of modern technologies and ever-expanding global communication networks.[313] Ultimately, Russian military theorists insist that 'information confrontation will be at the heart of all future wars, in which both the media and the global computer networks are going to play an increasing role'.[314] Russia's 'information confrontation' campaign is deeply connected with military structures and supported by a stable, authoritarian political system. Therefore, it is impossible to analyse Russia's quest to create an impression that there are no reliable facts, without examining military traditions related to information warfare.

Russia's Take on Information Warfare

In the Russian construct, activities associated with information confrontation are not limited to wartime. Rather, they tend to represent an ongoing campaign that takes place regardless of the nature of relations with the adversary.[315] As one Russian analyst points out: 'unlike other forms and methods of confrontation, information confrontation is conducted constantly in peacetime';[316] it is 'a regular feature of a country's news and current affairs coverage'.[317] Unlike the West, Russia does not regard information warfare as a tactical, short-term operation used exclusively in wartime. Instead, the Kremlin considers confrontation in the information space a constant feature of modern political reality.

Methods and tactics used to sustain this kind of offensive encompass various practices associated with but not limited to: distortion, destruction, manipula-

tion, fabrication of information, *maskirovka,*[318] debilitation of communications, and psychological operations. Additionally, and crucial to the discussion of 'fake news' and 'post-truth', the creation of an 'alternative reality'—an atmosphere that fosters interpretations of facts and events favourable to the Russian state—is also part of this 'information confrontation'.[319] Thus, information can be seen as an instrument, a target, and an operational space in which confrontation unfolds. Going beyond plain lies and denial, the Russian state approaches information warfare in diverse, unconventional, and creative ways.[320] The most common of these include the use of 'reflexive control', the creation of a permissive environment, and the spreading of disinformation.

Reflexive Control

In President Vladimir Putin's Russia, the Soviet notion of 'active measures' was replaced by the concept of 'reflexive control', which may represent the most influential method associated with the Russian approach to information warfare. Developed by the mathematical psychologist Vladimir Lefebvre in the 1960s, reflexive control refers to systematic measures aimed at shaping an opponent's perceptions, latently compelling him to act willingly in ways that are favourable to one's own strategic objectives.[321] Grigory Smolyan, one of the first Russian scholars to develop this concept, underlines that 'successful reflexive control requires a deep understanding of the "inner nature" of the enemy, his ideas and his way of thinking'. [322] This understanding has proven to be useful in Ukraine. As suggested by Western observers, Russia's framing of pro-European demonstrations as a fascist coup d'état was instrumental in activating Soviet identity in regions of Ukraine loyal to Russia. This, in turn, helped to fuel divisions within Ukraine as well as reassure the citizens of Crimea that they were better off under Russia's protection.

This way of looking at the Russian use of reflexive control is very common in Western scholarship, especially in the context of recent developments in Ukraine. Yet, Russian observers often highlight that the country's entry into the global information space is being manipulated and shaped by foreign governments.[323] Reflecting on this development, a group of Russian academics concludes: 'On the one hand, Russian citizens get free access to a variety of alternative sources of information, which, undoubtedly, can be viewed as a positive outcome. On the other hand, "colour revolutions" in the former Soviet republics and the recent bloody events in the Arab countries have demonstrated new opportunities for the use of information wars and Internet technologies in a targeted impact on public opinion.'[324] Coupled with the prominence of normative arguments highlighting long-established historical and cultural ties between Russia and Ukraine, such thinking has led many in Russia to believe that the events of the 'Ukrainian

Spring' were, to a large extent, provoked by Western meddling with domestic processes in Ukraine, facilitated by modern information technologies.

Ultimately, it is very hard to measure the success of attempts to divide audiences abroad, as they often tap into existing sentiments—from disillusionment with political elites to the fear of terrorism.[325] Ultimately, the effectiveness of reflexive control depends on broader measures aimed at shaping a favourable information environment in a foreign state.

A Permissive Environment

The ability to effectively divide public opinion among target audiences does not just come from campaigns planned around specific events. Rather, using various instruments of influence, Russia seeks to create a permissive communicative environment—a virtual alternative reality in which Russian narratives are seen as factual and trustworthy.[326] The Kremlin's ultimate objective is thus to win hearts and minds in foreign states, reducing both the potential for resistance against Russian actions abroad and the possibility of provoking negative reactions from the international community.[327] Russian strategists attempt to frame ongoing debates rather than promote specific stories. Using the Internet to effectively place disinformation in reputable sources, they tap into existing grievances—from anti-immigration discourses to sentiments associated with disillusionment with the acting governments in various states across Europe.[328]

Troll factories

One way in which the Russian state attempts to penetrate Western public consciousness is through the activities of 'trolls' (fraudulent online accounts operated by humans) and 'bots' (accounts operated by automated processes). These directly engage with readerships of various media outlets globally.[329] In an interview with Radio Free Europe (RFE), a former Russian troll revealed how 'thousands of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LiveJournal, and vKontakte' were created to sustain and promote Moscow's position on several issues as well as to create the impression of a plurality of opinions in the information space.[330] According to one source, the troll factory in St. Petersburg runs on a 24-hour cycle with each of its employees producing at least 135 comments per 12-hour shift.[331] The work of these facilities goes beyond merely conducting disinformation activities. They also use trolling as an 'injection method' that aims to sidetrack or suppress discussions that contradict Moscow's interpretation of events, eventually creating a feeling of consensus and understanding rather than forcing specific narratives onto online audiences.[332]

Wider activities of troll factories include the use of blogs, false stories, and opinion pieces posted on pseudo-news websites. By increasing the flow of information and artificially creating an impression of diversity of opinions in the information space, trolling inevitably erodes readers' ability to differentiate between opinion and news, which further misleads global audiences in their search for objective truth. The very nature of the global online space makes the effective insertion of disinformation in respectable media outlets much easier and cheaper than ever before, which benefits Russian efforts to create a permissive environment.

Sputnik and RT

While Russia undoubtedly exploits the pluralistic nature of Western media culture to achieve its strategic goals, the view that is commonly expressed in the Russian public discourse is quite critical of Western media practices. When speaking in front of President Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping on July 5, 2017 RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan stated:

> The world where everyone sings the same song and doesn't hear any other voices, any other songs, is a dangerous world. It's a world where, to the loud jeering of the mainstream media, they bomb Iraq, Libya, Syria, create Al-Qaeda or ISIS, then get terrified by it. […] Today we offer you, our Chinese colleagues, to fight information terrorism together.[333]

Sputnik and RT are perceived by many in the West as agents of the Russian state who seek to undermine trust in media, democracy, and authority figures. In contrast, they portray themselves as independent, alternative voices and claim to be 'telling the untold truth' and providing 'a perspective otherwise missing from the mainstream media echo chamber'.[334] Of course, more often than not, these outlets support the official Kremlin position, helping to boost support of the Russian government abroad. Yet it is evident that both Sputnik and RT seek to tap into the existing norms and practices of the Western media culture, in which diversity of opinion and freedom of speech are celebrated and encouraged.

Attempts by the UK's NatWest bank to close the accounts of RT in October 2016 were met with outrage in Russia. The attempted closure was seen as an act of discrimination against the Russian media outlet and a violation of the freedom of speech. The issue boiled down to an ethical dilemma. Should Western governments shield themselves from Russian propaganda using undemocratic measures, or hold on to the fundamental principles cultivated by Western media culture? At the end of the day, what is it that makes BBC's reporting trustworthy and RT's not? And is there such a thing as truly objective reporting?

The journalistic community struggles to agree on the issues associated with neutrality and objectivity as well as on ways in which Russian stories and approaches should be countered by Western governments and media. Some believe the goal of any good journalist is to help the reader make up his or her mind. Others perceive neutrality as a weakness, arguing strongly for promotion and defence of one's position, especially in the context of information confrontation.[335] The greatest challenge here is faced by Western reporters, whose task is to remain resolute in the face of Russia's attempts to divide societies abroad. The Kremlin, on the other hand, does not have to prove anything. Its successes so far have relied only on its ability to cast doubt on adverse accounts.

Western news practices have traditionally been associated with the practice of seeking hard evidence and weighing both sides of the story before drawing any conclusion. Aiming to undermine this approach, leading Russian media specialists insist that objectivity and neutrality are of questionable relevance to the modern media environment. One of Russia's leading television presenters, Dmitry Kiselev, claims that 'objectivity is a myth that is being imposed on us'.[336] Coupled with a considerable increase in the budgets of Sputnik and RT, it is hardly surprising that such developments raise concerns among Western governments and media specialists.

Spreading Disinformation

During a hearing on the Kremlin's propaganda efforts, Chairman of the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee Ed Royce warned that Russia's manipulation of information 'may be more dangerous than any military, because no artillery can stop their lies from spreading and undermining US security interests in Europe'.[337] Royce's statement reflects the view of many Western experts and politicians, who continuously stress Moscow's determination to create 'manageable chaos' in the global media space. Creating ambiguity serves the strategic advantage of furthering Russia's interests abroad.[338] Determined to maintain territorial disputes in its surrounding nations and weaken public confidence within the EU, most recently the Kremlin has favoured broader agendas, such as immigration and extremism, as targets for its disinformation campaigns.[339] Ultimately, Russia's disinformation is aimed at forcing Western states to concentrate on mitigating the effects of the political damage done by Russian disinformation efforts, as well as at reinforcing popular anti-Western discourses inside Russia.[340]

Probably the most visible 'fake story' that sought to address these goals emerged from Russia's *Channel 1*—the main source of news for the majority of Russians, both domestically and internationally. The story reported on a Russian-speak-

ing girl called Liza who was allegedly beaten and raped by a gang of refugees in Germany.[341] Days after the story broke, it developed into a significant campaign involving the Russian media, Russian-speaking compatriots living in Germany, and Russian officials. All were very vocal in their attempts to expose a German government 'cover up' of the crimes perpetrated by refugees. Yet, in reality the rape never took place.[342] The story was promoted by a Facebook group, 'Anonymous. Kollektiv', and featured on an anti-refugee website 'Asylterror'. Both presented conflicting accounts of the event. Searches for Liza's social media profiles produced no results. Later the Berlin police refuted the story, having found no evidence to substantiate the report of the attack.[343] Still, regardless of the fact that the story was proven to be false, the tale had its effect. Not only did it oblige the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to divert her attention to yet another domestic challenge, it also contributed to Merkel's ratings plummeting to a five-year low. Support for her immigration policy suffered a similar fate.[344]

Russian tactics aimed at spreading disinformation do not stop at the fabrication of false stories. Other approaches have proven to be effective at 'muddying the waters' in the international arena. These include avoiding responsibility (that is, denying the presence of 'little green men' in Ukraine in 2014 or rejecting claims of Russia's interference in the US elections in 2016), and flooding the global media space with multiple interpretations of the same event (the downing of the MH17 airline and the military seizure of Crimea).[345] However, even though much evidence points to the Kremlin's regularly employing such practices, Russian scholarship and wider discourses on information warfare see such measures not as Russia's own, but rather as tactics adopted by foreign states seeking to harm Russia.[346]

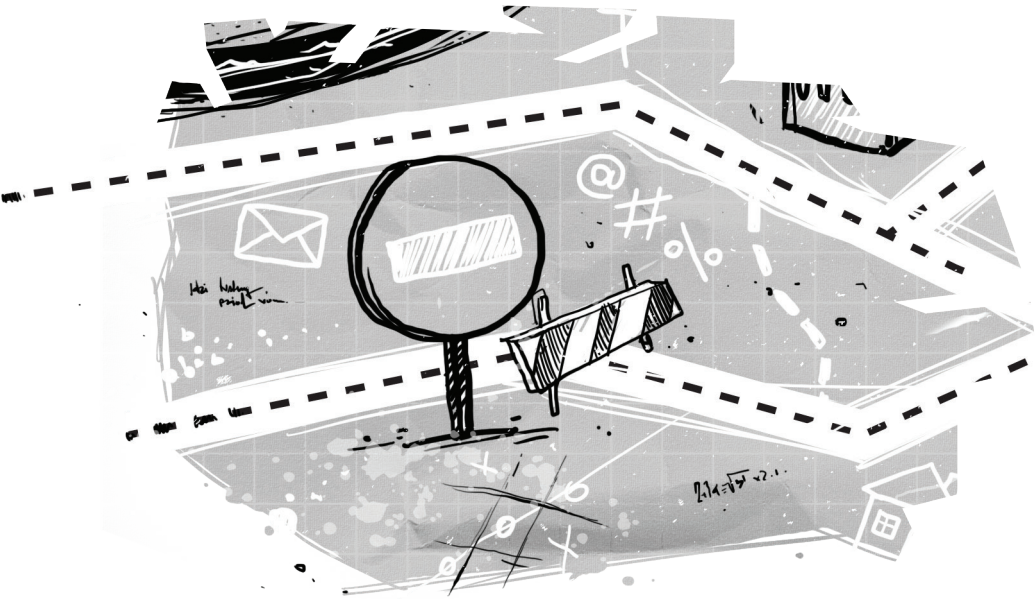
Despite the fact that the Russian state continues to deny its involvement in disinformation activities abroad, it is clear that both the arsenal of strategic tools available to the Kremlin, as well as the influence that they produce in the global information space, are substantial. Relying on methods and practices developed in the Soviet era, the Russian government translates foreign policy successes into greater legitimacy and stability at home by creating 'manageable chaos' in the information spaces of foreign states. Eventually, successful use of the tactics of information warfare helps the Kremlin to accentuate Russia's own domestic stability and solidify its role as the sole provider of order in the eyes of its people, while others—from neighbouring Ukraine to the distant United States—are seen to be facing profound political crises.

At the same time, Russian scholars and policy makers insist that, just like any other actor in the international arena, Russia has every right to freely express its position on international issues—both through official channels and state-sponsored media outlets. As pointed out by political scientist James Rosenau, 'evidence is rarely so airtight as to exclude all but one interpretation. Events are inevita-

bly viewed through cultural and political lenses'.[347] Working from this logic, the Russian government has been raising topical questions pointing to the existing double standards when it comes to news-making and agenda-setting. Most commonly, those include: Why stories promoted by certain outlets are seen as credible and trustworthy, while reports from RT are, more often than not, seen as fabrications serving Russia's strategic interests? Is there just one single truth? Is there such thing as objective reporting? Why are alternative viewpoints that do not fit Western normative paradigms often dismissed as falsehoods?

Questions such as these will have to be considered when discussing how governments and societies should counter fake news and disinformation. Disregard for truth in news practices knows no borders.

A degree of self-criticism and interrogation of Western news practices will therefore be necessary in order to pin down what it is exactly that we are accusing disseminators of fake news and disinformation of, and why it is problematic for society. At the same time, while considering different points of view is important, we should not let ourselves be drawn in by the notion that truth equals interpretation.



COUNTERING FAKE NEWS

Jente Althuis and Siri Strand

The increased presence of fake news is seen to pose a challenge to our democratic society. Consequently, we are seeking to identify, understand, and overhaul the vulnerabilities of the media environment in order to limit the phenomenon and consequences of fake news. This Route evaluates the tools, existing knowledge, and ongoing research useful for countering fake news. It provides an overview of existing initiatives by governmental organisations, media outlets, and civil society, and discusses the challenges and dilemmas each actor faces. Furthermore, it assesses the knowns and unknowns of the impact of fake news and those of countering initiatives. Based on this assessment, it identifies the primary gaps in our knowledge regarding how to respond to fake news, as well as the potential of technological innovation and future research directions to close these gaps. In conclusion, it finds that our largest challenge might not merely be the establishment of efficient counter-mechanisms to fake news, but rather how to implement these without undermining institutions and processes that are vital to our democratic system.

Existing Initiatives in Countering Fake News

As we have seen throughout this roadmap, the concept of fake news is no novelty. However, there has been a significant surge in initiatives aimed at countering misinformation since the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the 2016 US presidential election.[348] Many of these initiatives have been sustained and expanded during the 2017 elections in European countries. The following section will assess some of the main initiatives aimed at countering the factors that drive the dissemination of fake news, and those aimed at strengthening the resilience of the audience. Whilst a successful approach to countering fake news necessarily must involve all parts of society, there are significant variations in the tools available to and used by the actors engaged in countering fake news; there are also differences in their interest, position, and capacity. Hence the existing responders are divided and assessed in three categories: governmental organisations, media outlets, and civil society.

Tools available to governmental organisations in countering fake news

The response of governmental organisations to fake news is primarily concerned with two types of activities. First, it focuses on the implementation of regulations or legal provisions aimed at limiting the dissemination of fake news. Second, it aims to establish support for institutions or entities responsible for coordinating national efforts aimed at raising awareness and increasing public knowledge regarding the impact of fake news.

The implementation of regulations and legal provisions to limit fake news takes place both at the national level and through international organizations. In the United States, former President Obama signed the *Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act* shortly before leaving office. The bill established the 'Global Engagement Center', dedicated to 'lead and coordinate efforts to track foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts intended to undermine U.S. national security interests, and to develop strategies for countering such campaigns'.[349] One of the main tasks of the centre is to strengthen cooperation with civil society, journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private companies and academic institutions to improve US efforts in 'analysing, reporting and refuting foreign disinformation efforts'.[350] Similar initiatives have been established by other governments, including for example the Czech Republic, which set up an agency aimed at countering fake news and the threat from 'foreign disinformation campaigns'.[351] Following these initiatives, the Danish government recently announced that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are strengthening their efforts in countering Russian propaganda.[352]

On the international level, several institutions have been set up over the years to aid NATO Member States' efforts to counter foreign disinformation, including the recently established European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, and the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. Furthermore, the United Nations have launched initiatives aimed at countering fake news, including the *Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda,* issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion in March 2017.[353]

In some cases, government initiatives go beyond facilitating information sharing and increased cooperation. The German government recently endorsed a bill through which social media companies can be charged with fines of up to fifty million euros if they fail to delete 'openly offensive content'.[354] The bill is part of the German government's effort to combat hate speech, but has been criticised by both civil society and social media outlets for limiting freedom of speech.[355] Facebook, for example, has expressed a strong aversion towards any responsibility for filtering content on German Facebook pages based on the argument that it makes private companies, rather than the courts, judge what is illegal in Germany.[356] In April 2014, Latvian authorities used their national Law on Electronic Mass Media as grounds for suspending transmission of the Russian state-owned media channel 'RTR Planeta' for three months, after accusations that it was disseminating 'war propaganda'.[357] Another example of a legislative response is the Indian police warning administrators of social media chat groups that they can be held legally responsible for the dissemination of fake news.[358] Enforcing this, the Indian police have arrested several people accused of fabricating false stories 'with the potential of igniting communal tension'.[359]

The use of legislation to combat fake news is not uncontroversial. Government responses have been criticised for enabling and justifying tighter control on information and restrictions to freedom of expression. Responses have been compared to Chinese authorities seizing on the increase of fake news to promote their system of 'Internet management'. This implementation of increased restrictions in China has been justified by referring to Western democracies as 'incapable to address the problems unleashed by Internet communication'.[360] As part of China's response to fake news, news outlets are no longer allowed to use information posted on social media as a source without prior approval, thus blocking the flow of information between social networks and other platforms.

Fear of excessive regulation of public debate by governments has fuelled a discussion in which some critics argue that identifying and countering fake

news should not be the responsibility of the government at all.[362] There is further reason to question whether the unprecedented level of cooperation between government and media outlets has a potential 'cooling effect' on public debate. The complexity of the subject is well formulated by one commentator, arguing that 'while state-sanctioned control and filtering of news was always associated with authoritarian regimes, these recent developments are, conversely, efforts to help save liberal democratic processes and secure fair elections'.[363]

Keeping this delicate balance between combating fake news to sustain democratic process and refraining from autocratic involvement by restricting the freedom of expression might well be the most serious challenge facing governments in the coming years.

Tools available to media in countering fake news

Social media platforms are often referred to as the primary facilitator of fake news or even the very source of the problem. Nevertheless, the increase of fake news stories also has a negative impact on traditional media outlets. Its proliferation on partisan platforms makes it more difficult for the reader to distinguish fact from fake. This fuels distrust in legitimate media outlets and can reduce demand for high-quality non-partisan reporting.[364] Both out of self-interest and as a result of public and political pressure, traditional media outlets and social media platforms have launched various initiatives aimed at limiting the dissemination of fake or misleading news stories presented as real news.

Traditional media

The traditional media industry has extensive experience with source criticism and ethical journalism; hence the expertise essential to countering fake news is to a great extent maintained in the journalism sector. In Europe, the BBC is among those who have invested in tools to counter fake news. One of their primary initiatives is the platform 'RealityCheck', on which a group of trained journalists exposes news stories assessed to be deliberately fake. The initiative is related to the BBC's recent commitment to generate 'slow news'. More resources will be invested in publishing longer, in-depth text pieces, seeking to explain complex issues in a readable way for the broader public.[365] This approach, if maintained, could offer a useful precedent for the BBC World Service's planned expansion into new languages and regions.[366] Another example of the BBC's global commitment to countering fake news is their effort during the 2017 French presidential election. The BBC employed their fact-checking capacities to analyse dubious news stories flourishing in the media.[367] Data

on the efficiency of these initiatives is, however, limited, as discussed in *The Economics of Fake News* below.

Social media

Even though engagement by traditional media outlets in investigating and debunking fake news stories is important, a sustainable solution must necessarily involve social media platforms. Various approaches by social media companies to limit the spread on their platforms have been suggested. The tools available can be separated into three categories: (i) an increase in the use of human editors; (ii) crowdsourcing initiatives; and (iii) technological or algorithmic solutions.[368]

First, it has been suggested that social media companies should hire trained professionals to assess news articles before these enter the news stream. There are, however, various challenges to this approach, the primary obstacle being the expense of hiring additional staff to oversee the immense news flow on social media. Furthermore, the size of social networks makes it almost impossible for human editors to react fast enough to prevent the spread of fake news.[369] Moreover, this approach might transfer too much power to social media platforms. Readers' inclination towards subjectivity, reinforced by an overarching 'reader's editor' appointed by Facebook, could make the latter a disproportionately powerful position, potentially open to abuse.[370] In August 2016, Facebook announced that they were eliminating human editors as a response to 'the feedback we got from the Facebook community earlier this year'.[371]

Second, the concept of 'crowdsourcing'[372] is often framed as the solution to many of the challenges in today's interconnected society. The idea of engaging a crowd of dispersed people, connected via the Internet, to detect and expose fake news has gained substantial support. Crowdsourced assessment of news operates in a manner similar to the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. Volunteers apply to become 'verified news checkers' and contribute to the process of validating or ranking news based on a story's trustworthiness.[373] Such initiatives have gained widespread support, as they are considered more democratic than the employment of paid editors.[374] Facebook was the first company to implement a solution based on crowdsourcing by introducing an application on which users can flag news feed items as false news stories. If a certain number of users flag a particular story as fake, the item will be marked with an alert that warns readers about the story's falsehood.[375] One of the challenging aspects of a system built on trust and user participation is that it can easily be manipulated. There are concerns that the mechanisms for flagging or ranking news can be misused by, for example, botnets. These

consist of a network of hijacked computers controlled by a third party and can be used to generate 'clicks' to draw attention to an article. It is for instance suspected that such manipulation was conducted by pro-government forces in Syria attempting to shut down Facebook pages by reporting them as abusive.[376] The system has also been criticised for creating a false sense of security, as it could decrease a reader's incentive to verify, assuming that this has been done by Facebook.

Many have argued that the highest likelihood of success in countering fake news is found in the application of technological solutions, involving the use of machine learning and algorithms to identify and examine sources of disinformation.[377] Such methods are already used successfully by intelligence agencies to identify sources of extremism on social media platforms. Algorithms or 'machine learning vetting' is cheaper than human editors, and the idea has been welcomed by social media platforms, including Facebook. The European Union has invested in algorithms aimed at examining and verifying user-generated content through the research project PHEME,[378] which is expected to detect rumours, lies, and misinformation.[379] Whilst there is optimism regarding an algorithmic solution, obstacles remain. Existing systems are criticised for their limited capacity to identify and downgrade hoax news, or distinguish satire from real stories.[380] Furthermore, it has been argued that 'although technology companies often claim that algorithms are free of personal bias, they inevitably reflect the subjective decisions of those who designed them'.[381] Hence, the question of how and by whom these algorithms should be made has to be prioritised in assessing the potential of this response. In other words, we must ask ourselves if we feel comfortable having algorithms deciding what kind of news is provided to us.

Tools available to civil society in countering fake news

The challenge that fake news throws down to society encourages technology enthusiasts, journalists, and academics to join forces. Hence, in addition to the initiatives of government and media, civil society has become an active player in the fight. Such public engagement is exemplified by the creation of an open Google document where experts from various fields of research and practice share thoughts on how fake news can be countered.[382]

Furthermore, several initiatives have been established by non-profit civil society groups. One of the leading non-profit organisations dedicated to the task is First Draft News. The organisation has initiated a collaborative effort between technological and traditional media. Together they comprise thirty-seven major actors, including Facebook, Twitter, Google, *The New York Times*, and CNN.[383] In March, the *CrossCheck* project[384] reported that they had investigated twenty-three

suspect stories about the French election, of which seventeen were subsequently found to be fake. This coalition is a platform for operational work, information sharing, and education. Verification tools include a channel where information and emerging fake stories are shared, as well as tools that can track audience engagement on a topic. Participants can add information to the platform as new articles are discovered. If a number of organisations are confident enough that a news story is fake, they can publicly announce it.[385] The ambition of First Draft News is to create a 'global newsroom' of collaborating journalists, working to counter misinformation.[386]

Furthermore, civil society actors are running several fact-checking initiatives. *Full Fact* is an independent fact checking charity based in the UK.[387] Similarly, *Bellingcat,* an 'investigative search network', specialises in using open source data for verification and investigative journalism.[388] They also produce learning materials, including guides and case studies for their methods to be employed by others in the field.[389] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Voice of America (VOA) all pursue fact-checking activities with a global scope, announcing their assessment of disinformation and misinformation on the platform Polygraph.info.[390]

Countering the Economics of Fake News

Economics is a central preoccupation in this discussion. As we have seen in Route 2, the dissemination of fake news has always been closely connected to its lucrative potential. In November 2016, investigative journalists from the American news outlet National Public Radio (NPR) tracked down the owner of some of the major faux news sites, including NationalReport.net, USAToday.com.co, and WashingtonPost.com.co. The owner, Jestin Coler—a registered Democrat and CEO of a company called Disinfomedia—allegedly derives an anticipated monthly income from advertisements on fake news sites of between $10,000 and $30,000.[391] Coler's company specialised in writing fake news for Donald Trump's supporters. According to the CEO, his writers had tried to write fake news for liberals too, 'but they just never take the bite'.[392] Similar stories have been reported from Macedonia, where high-school students have revealed how they could earn 'thousands of euros a day' from inventing sensational news stories about the US presidential election. One 19-year-old university student interviewed by the BBC put it simply: 'the Americans loved our stories and we make money from them'. [393] This leads to the conclusion that as long as a financial incentive to spread misinformation exists, this problem will persist.[394]

The responsibility for counter-campaigns lies not only with the producer and platform, but also with the user or consumer. As outlined above, several fact

checking platforms and applications can be used to verify the truthfulness of news stories. Nevertheless, it begs the question—to what extent should we expect readers to spend time verifying news stories before they consume and share them? One common proposal is that countering fake news should instead be achieved by increasing resilience through education.[395] While the existing solutions all seem to be vulnerable to manipulation or misuse, education aimed at teaching the public how to spot misinformation suggests a common good for society. School systems should continue to educate children in critical reading and verifying sources. Civil society actors should be encouraged to participate in efforts to educate society.

In conclusion, looking at the range of initiatives introduced in this Route, one could argue that society is more educated and media literate than ever before: with the immense increase of (media) focus on fake news, it is reasonable to assume that mere attention to the matter has contributed to societal awareness and thus resilience in the face of propaganda and disinformation.

Why, What, and How Do we Respond—or Not at All?

Having evaluated current developments and initiatives available to governments, media organisations, and civil society, some general difficulties in counter-strategies may be discerned. Namely, *what* to counter, if anything; *how* to counter; and *how much* to invest in counter-strategies. These questions highlight a range of dilemmas.

What necessarily precedes *how*. Before deciding on how to counter, actors must first decide what is to be achieved strategically by responding. Does one address all fake news encountered because of the conviction that it is inherently bad? Or should one cherry pick, tailoring the response only to fake news that negatively affects policy goals? Whilst it is relatively easy to distinguish which fake news content is and isn't relevant to one's interests, it is difficult to assess whether and to what extent fake news affects an audience's perception of an issue. It is even more difficult to prove whether or not this perception also leads to a change in behaviour.[396] News as mis- or disinformation during elections could spread doubt among voters. It might further lead to polarised opinions in the political arena. But that does not necessarily impact voting patterns to such a degree that the political balance of a nation is adversely skewed.[397]

Decisions regarding which news stories to target, and indeed how, are especially sensitive for government organisations. Not only constrained by limited

financial resources, they are also obliged to justify their spending to the taxpayer. It is open to question whether government should ever become the arbiter of whether or not a shift in political opinion is part of the 'normal' political process or the result of fake news. In particular, if governments engage in fact-checking or in-depth target audience analysis of their own citizens, they more are likely to be attacked for supporting such initiatives. Government interference in the private political opinions of citizens represents a red line for many. A recent project from IBM Watson Research concludes that 'people don't want to be told what to think'. This is especially true for democratic governments, whose legitimacy is rooted in enabling democratic instruments such as freedom of speech.[398] Hence, regardless of whether fact-checking and correcting are effective responses, governments might choose to play it safe, focusing on the resilience of the reader. Better perhaps to teach citizens 'how to think critically' using media literacy programmes.[399]

Governments are not the only organisations faced with this dilemma. Media outlets and journalists receive their legitimacy from unbiased and neutral reporting on what is happening in the world. Extensive debunking and criticising the output of rival outlets could negatively influence their public image and credibility.[400] Even companies such as Google encounter this challenge, which faces criticism of its search engine algorithm and the advertisements it displays. To improve this, Google has launched the little publicised 'Google Ad Grants' project, enabling non-profits to successfully place their ads in the search engine.[401]

Research on the impact of fake news and the effectiveness of countering it is limited if not contradictory, which complicates making decisions. There is little agreement on methods of assessing the causal link between misinformation and misperception and even less in determining the extent to which fake news causes misperception and behavioural change in the reader.[402] Those tasked with countering fake news are already challenged by deciding where and how best to counter it, particularly given that freedom of expression is integral to democratic systems. Our lack of reliable knowledge regarding which audiences are affected by fake news and to what extent adds an additional layer of complexity.

Data on the effectiveness of existing counter initiatives is limited. Initiatives such as fact-checking websites attract their own communities—readers who already engage with the problem of fake news are more likely to use them than readers who are less aware of it. Hence there is a risk of not reaching the right audience.[403] Furthermore, recent research has shown that debunking fake news or presenting information that challenges an audience's current perception can entrench readers more deeply in their beliefs, which results

in strengthening so-called echo chambers and further polarising the political landscape.[404] Finally, repeating misinformation, even if the intention is to correct it, can exacerbate rather than mitigate its impact.[405] This implies that in some cases no response might prove a better strategy than direct intervention.[406]

Government organisations, media institutions, and civil society actors all face dilemmas caused by limited resources, insufficient empirical knowledge of possible counterproductive effects, and the need to uphold the legitimacy and credibility of their own institutions. Nevertheless, rapid improvements in technologies promise to fill gaps in measurement, and a possible move to more audience- and individual-focused research may improve our understanding of the actual effectiveness of fake news. If fact-checking and counter initiatives can successfully put this knowledge and technology to use, then some dilemmas regarding how to reach and influence target audiences might be addressed in the future with a modicum of success. The question remains, however, how and how far these improved technologies and campaigns affect or even undermine the very institutions vital to democratic process. Does shutting down 'fake news outlets' obstruct freedom of speech? Does government use of big data interfere with citizen privacy? With the rapid progress in technologies and tools for countering fake news, the pressure on us to address these questions will only increase.

ENDNOTES

Route 1 – Tell me Lies, Tell me Sweet Little Lies

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Route 8 – North Korea and its Different, Single Truth
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Route 10 – Countering Fake News

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