

WHAT'S THE TRUTH IN A POST-FACT WORLD?

Nick Lacey explores the role of misinformation in recent electoral campaigns, and asks who is responsible for gate-keeping online news.

Filter Bubble

A filter bubble is a result of a personalised search in which a website algorithm selectively guesses what information a user would like to see, based on information about the user (such as location, past click behaviour and search history). As a result, users become separated from information that disagrees with their viewpoint, effectively isolating them in their own cultural or ideological bubbles. (Wikipedia)

Donald Trump is now President of the United States. You couldn't make it up. (Well, *The Simpsons* did, back in Season 11, in 2000 – but that was meant to be a joke.) So how did a narcissistic, sexist, racist get votes from over 60 million Americans? From a British perspective the result seems to be bizarre. Are there really that many misogynistic and xenophobic Americans?

Last year there was another surprising vote: the decision for Britain to leave the European Union. This dismayed millions of young people – 75% of 18-24 year-olds voted to remain.

What links these elections is the degree to which misinformation or, in other words, propaganda, potentially influenced the outcomes. While neither the Remainers or the Leavers dealt exclusively in the truth, the 'Leave' campaign's most notorious lie (among many) was that the UK paid £350 million a week to the EU that could be spent on the NHS. Similarly it was estimated that 78% of Trump's statements were lies (Pomerantsev, 2016). You might expect that the internet would make it easy to check up on the truth; however it is clear that the net's existence has created more problems in the production of news than it has solved.

News Values, Gatekeepers and Online News

Galtung and Ruge's (1965) classic work on the ideology underpinning the selection of news stories showed how the production of news is influenced by news values, such as 'ethnocentricity', whereby 'home' news (either regional or national) takes priority over international stories. Their work was crucial in understanding how news is constructed and, although initially based upon fact, how mediation is necessary between the 'reality' of the news event and the audience.

This mediation is facilitated through 'gatekeepers', such as editors, who decide what news to cover, and with what emphasis. Newspaper owners or proprietors influence the way news is reported by ensuring their own interests are prioritised. When asked why he was anti-EU, Rupert Murdoch, the *Sun's* proprietor, notoriously said: 'When I go into Downing Street they do what I say; when I go to Brussels they take no notice.' So, for example, as part of its campaign to persuade readers to vote for 'Leave', the *Sun* (19 May 2016) claimed 'Brits not fair! 4 in 5 jobs go to foreigners'. By November it was forced to admit, in a small print correction

buried inside the newspaper, that this front page was a lie. Clearly the press has its own strategies for generating false information; it doesn't need the world wide web for that.

Since the early 1970s, newspaper circulation in the UK has been in decline as alternative sources of news have appeared – firstly 24-hour news channels, and latterly the internet. Last year the Reuters Institute reported that 28% of 18-24 year-olds used social media as their main source of news, with Facebook their main source (<http://www.digitalnewsreport.org>). In Galtung and Ruge's terms, Facebook is now acting as a 'gatekeeper' for news. So who edits Facebook news?

Answer: nobody.

Well 'nobody' is not quite true. Of course humans do design the software (an algorithm) that determines what links are put on Facebook's 'trending' column; but their human editors were sacked last August, amidst claims that they were censoring right-wing Republican sites. Whereas the human editors rejected stories for being 'biased', 'clickbait' (news stories designed purely to generate advertising income) or 'irrelevant', the algorithm doesn't. As a result, fake stories, whether propaganda or satire, can appear

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Donald Trump on the campaign trail, 2016



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in the newsfeed amongst genuine stories. For example, the 'Real News Right Now' satirical site stated that 250,000 Syrian refugees had been placed on Native American Indian reservations. This 'story' gained visibility on Facebook, and was picked up by the right-wing Fox News, as well as by Trump himself; both repeated the figure as an example of the 'fact' that too many migrants were being allowed into the country. On a more trivial note, the lie that Taylor Swift had voted for Trump was seen 250,000 times in three days on Facebook; what proportion of those viewers realised it wasn't true?

The Filter Bubble

It is not social media alone that potentially guides us towards consuming fake news. Since 2009 Google has tailored our search enquiries based on our search histories. Its algorithm predicts which sources of information we're most likely to be interested in, so we might miss out on material that challenges our existing worldview. Internet activist and Aavaz co-founder Eli Pariser has described this as a 'filter bubble' (see page 6), and an example of how the internet is no longer an independent medium but corporate-controlled.

We create our own filter bubbles on social media by choosing who to friend and follow. We are, in effect, placing ourselves in a silo where

we might only have access to worldviews similar to our own. In an interesting experiment, the *Guardian* created two fake Facebook accounts, one supporting Trump and the other in favour of the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Five Trump supporters and five Clinton supporters volunteered to be Friends with the account that was the opposite to their own political persuasion. Both sides were incredulous about what they saw, and surprised by the level of hatred they encountered. By living in our social media silo we restrict our access to the views of others and, consequently, reduce our ability to understand the other side's argument.

Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics

Fabricated Facebook news stories aren't the only reason for Trump's victory in the US election. For example, his campaign spent \$90m on Facebook advertising, and the director of its digital strategy claims that this won the election. However, the impact of fake news must be taken seriously. When lies are taken to be truth, we become victims of propaganda; and when opinion leaders then state that the fact their claims were false didn't matter, it would appear that we are living in a 'post-truth' age. An example of this is when, the day after the election, Leave campaigner Nigel Farage referred to the £350m NHS claim mentioned above as 'a mistake'.



Mistake indeed – if that is what it was. If the truth isn't important then we cannot hold politicians to account and democracy is a complete sham.

A post-truth world throws up some challenging claims. Leave campaign co-leader, Michael Gove, for example, said that the British people 'have had enough of experts'. Why would a former education secretary devalue expertise? Could it be that he feared that the use of facts in the Brexit debate might show that many of the Leave's arguments were lies?

Did Trump become President because of lies? It might be comforting to believe so; and if we, as media experts, believe in the power of the media to influence, then it is reasonable to assume that lies promoted on social media platforms played some part in his electoral success. However did 60m Americans really vote for him because of what they read on the internet? Probably not. It is much more likely that many millions suffering economically did not so much vote for Trump, as vote *against* the 'status quo', represented by Clinton.

The best advice for you *MediaMag* readers now is to be careful where you get your news from, and to get involved politically to help create a future based on embracing humanity's diversity, rather than hating difference.

By living in our social media silo we restrict our access to the views of others, and reduce our ability to understand the other side's argument ... we live in an increasingly polarised world where conflict between people becomes more likely.

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Follow It Up

'Facebook has repeatedly trended fake news since firing its human editors', *Washington Post*, 12 October, <http://wapo.st/2e5wU2U>

'Here's How Facebook Actually Won Trump the Presidency', *Wired*, <http://bit.ly/2gTtfCn>

'Bursting the Facebook bubble: we asked voters on the left and right to swap feeds', the *Guardian*, 16 November, <http://bit.ly/2eEPleI>