

## Not The Nine-O-Clock News (Or Any Other News For That Matter)

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**Last week saw the startling admission that the South Korean spy agency deliberately manipulated the 2012 presidential election, in order to ensure victory for conservative Park Geun-hye. But in a world where misinformation and campaigns of deception are commonplace, should we really be surprised?**



So keen was the National Intelligence Service to ensure that ‘their’ candidate won that they employed an Internet and media campaign of social media and misinformation for two years before the vote – including shouting down any anti-conservative voices by claiming that these were ‘plants’ from the North. Park Geun-hye won – only just, but she won. However, the agency has now admitted its actions, and so narrow was the margin of victory that it is entirely possible the opponent Moon Jae-in would have succeeded had ‘*the facts*’ been allowed to appear without any deliberate provocation.

This is perhaps the most egregious example yet of the manner in which the media can be corrupted, manipulated and the story changed in order to bring about a desired result – even if only because of the virtue of transparency. The NIS has openly admitted what it did, and how. The elephant in the room is the widely-held belief that Russian intelligence organizations manipulated the 2016 US Presidential election in order to bring Trump to power. Whilst not proven beyond doubt, the raft of negative stories about Hilary Clinton on conservative websites (Pizzagate, etc.) are believed to have been planted as part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

Whether Trump, or for that matter Park, knew or sanctioned these activities is, if not quite immaterial, irrelevant to the immediate point at hand: that the Internet is being used to challenge the very nature of ‘*truth*’ and that facts, as we know them, are in danger of being becoming nothing more than ‘*discussion points*’. Certainly, the history of disinformation in politics (warfare by another name) has a long history dating back to the Roman Empire, but has never been more prevalent than now, thanks almost entirely to the ‘*anyone can edit*’ culture of the Internet and the ease with which blogs, forum posts and the like can completely bypass any solid verification procedure.

Quite apart from how it influences and is employed in the political sphere, ‘*fake news*’ will also have a knock-on, negative effect on international business and deals. Put simply, it is now truer than ever that never can one believe what one reads through online media. To rely on this at face value is not only foolish, it is also profoundly damaging – we will never know what percentage of Trump voters genuinely believed in Pizzagate, for instance, or the stories alleged to have been planted by Russian elements, but it is almost certain that some would have taken it as gospel and voted accordingly. Thus, fake news played a direct role in changing the expected course of history

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and the world essentially proceeded from that point on, on a foundation of misinformation and lies.

This is just as true in the business world as it is in politics. A company in a difficult business environment (Iran, Russia and so on) with something to hide is now able, in this technological age, to wipe the bad facts from the web, to supplant or conceal them with new, more acceptable facts (which need be nothing of the sort) – essentially to control the story in a situation where absolute neutrality is needed.

This would not be an issue if the information found online was properly verified and not taken as the be-all-and-end-all, but too often we are content to only rely on what is instantly obtainable on the basis that ‘this is enough’, or ‘the Internet has everything, we would have found evidence by now’. One should never underestimate the lengths that bad actors will go to in order to control the story – and by extension, those that take it as face value. Transparency and openness should be the watchwords, whether in politics, business or any other sector, and to not consider the possibility that information can be manipulated or outright made up is an extremely dangerous position.

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