

Believe It or Not! (Probably the Second One)

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Presented for your consideration: a recipe for disaster. Take one part secret history and the desire to conceal it, one part the ability to recreate such truths as you may desire, and blend well with an inability or unwillingness to question. Served together, this is a recipe found only in one place... not the Twilight Zone, but The Internet, which in the modern day is very almost as bad.



It seems impossible to escape from the spectre of Fake News nowadays. At its highest level, deliberate spreading of untruths has the power to sway opinions and change elections – something that the Americans and Russians know only too well. While this is a worrying trend the most interesting – if not palatable – consequence is how people react. Not necessarily to clearly outrageous stories like Hilary Clinton and Pizzagate, but in the material that is deliberately designed to be just plausible enough that it either changes your mind or reinforces an already-held belief. And this is a fully-fledged industry now. Not only do we have armies of hackers creating content and planting it around the Internet (and this is a wholly cyber phenomenon – as of yet we do not have a 1984-style ability to rewrite newspapers, although give it time...) but there is also an inbuilt audience for this kind of content. Some want information to reinforce a specific complaint or grievance. Some want to find something and will accept this without reservation. Some want not to find something and will be equally blasé about the provenance of the information, or lack of it.

This last brings us to the exclusively corporate dimension of fake news and the way in which sources can be manipulated to create impressions that can be entirely false. On occasion this may be to boost the image of an individual or firm, to artificially present them in the best possible light: for instance flooding consumer review sites with positive reviews, or attempting to place so many 'good news' stories at the top of search engines that the interesting material gets pushed down as a result. Sometimes, it may be to smear a competitor, to make one believe that Company B could not possibly be a good choice and that Company A should be chosen instead. And sometimes, it may not be a question of planting material at all. We are finding more and more that individuals are attempting to wipe their history from the Internet and any traces of things they may not want you to know about – action that clearly goes far beyond the '*right to be forgotten*'.

The permissive Internet culture has clearly made this a far bigger problem than it would have been in the past. It would be practically impossible to create your own newspaper extolling your virtues, or to destroy

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all editions of the Telegraph that identified you as a rotten egg. But equally dangerous is the attitude of not properly doing anything about it. Believing everything you read at face value is reputationally and economically damaging in the long run – whether the information is planted, incomplete or otherwise doctored, if you rely on it in isolation, or do not question its legitimacy or fullness, your decision will be compromised as a result. But why does this attitude persist? Well as previously stated, some do not want to know about anything that could put a dampener on the deal. Some do not care and are only pursuing the barest minimum of diligence. Some are willing to accept any level of risk. While the attitudes may vary, the result is always the same: a compromised choice and the ever-present threat that a hitherto unknown skeleton in the closet will burst out.

All because the technological world has made it easy for bad actors to misrepresent themselves and the world around them, does not mean we should participate in this. But every decision taken purely on the basis of believing what you read online without any fact-checking, cross-checking or deeper investigation, plays into their hands. As the biggest proponent of fake news would himself say: sad.

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