

The normalization of fake news

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In 1940, a nondescript organisation operated out of the Rockefeller building in New York. It may have been officially dealing with British passports, but in reality The British Security Coordination was designed and set up with the express intention of promoting the British war effort, spreading anti-Nazi propaganda across the States and hopefully convince America that it should join the war.

This was the first mass-produced *'fake news'* factory. A few stories seeded here and there, just on the right side of plausibility, to push sentiment – and worries – in a particular direction. While the work of the BSC may ultimately have been proven immaterial by the attack on Pearl Harbour, its work and its foundations stood the test of time so well that its lessons have been re-established for the information age – but with substantially less noble a goal than the salvation of the world at hand.



One would imagine that it is easier in the modern age to crack down on fake news. Not only is communication instantaneous, but with 'facts at our fingertips' we can verify and check much more easily, and the market for agenda-based, ideologically-driven stories should arguably have lessened, given the demise of regimes and a period of something approaching an 'uneasy peace'. How should it be possible in this day and age to not only push a story that has zero basis in fact or sanity (Pizzagate, for instance), but to have it taken as gospel by thousands?

But this is a normal occurrence, and far from enhancing journalism the web-based lifecycle of news has arguably seen a doubling-down of the days where anything went. In the late 19th century, media mogul Randolph Hearst used deliberately faked pictures to stir up the looming Spanish-American war. This couldn't happen today? Only last month UK Parliamentarians were found to have considered a faked picture of a bombing raid in the Middle East to have been genuine. Quality control procedures obviously sadly absent. And obviously fake news is most commonly associated with stories: published with seemingly little to no oversight, or promoted by those with such an inherent bias that they should not be given any thought of credibility whatsoever.

But aside from the obvious outrightly political bent of fake news, just as worrying is the degree to which it is now 'just' another service offered by criminals for corporate purposes. Alongside industrial espionage and hacking-for-hire, we can add a new string to the bow: image and narrative manipulation for profit. This is after all a major focus area for bad actors: make yourself look good, or make someone else look bad, in order to sway a deal a certain way. Carry out a program of seeding stories to create the narrative that your client wants: just as big a threat in the world of big business as it is in politics. Not so much how to win friends and influence people, but how to target everyone who might have a reason to look into their paymaster and guide their thinking along a certain route.

Certain organisations on the 'dark web' are now offering these manipulation services for comparatively small fees (a few hundred dollars) and enabling a whole new frontier in online criminality. Now, anybody who knows where to look can employ some faceless individuals to change their entire lives: add information that casts them in a good light, remove all derogatory reporting, create entirely fictitious persons/organisations to support the intended story, and conduct long term 'expectation management' with regards to the Client's intentions.

Immediate problems are twofold. Not only does this risk normalising disinformation in the business world, whereby the truth risks becoming swamped by the intended truth on the part of bad actors who know that their aims and objectives can only be achieved by creating an entirely false impression or by gently squeezing a few pressure points of publicity, it adds an extra layer of complication in stopping this. With the work able to be carried out by third parties who have little to no ideological intent – they are purely mercenaries for hire – the true bad actors are able to anonymise their work but still reap the rewards.

Getting inside these marketplaces is still the best solution to discovering and stopping the flow of fake news. But for those who cannot, don't believe everything you read – and certainly keep an open mind even if you do.

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