Fragility of Truth

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What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed?

If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.

Hannah Arendt
Interview, 1974
1. What happened in 2016?
An implosion of trust

- Incumbent party or elected leader in 5 of top 10 global economies is deposed or defeated (US, UK, Brazil, Italy, S. Korea).
- UK votes to exit the EU.
- Populists leading or gaining in France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Turkey.
- Panama Papers revealed tax evasion on a global scale by both business and government officials.
- Mainstream media continues to lose audiences, advertisers, and revenue. Dramatic decline in advertising revenue.
- Global rise of fake news, disinformation and propaganda campaigns.
This includes trust in media...

- It’s not just the US. Distrust in the media is a global problem.
- Out of 28 major countries surveyed, 23 had a majority that distrusted the media.
- 17 saw an all-time low in levels of trust.

Percent trust in media, and change from 2016 to 2017

Distrusted in 82% of countries

- All-time low in 17 countries
...But also trust in the system as a whole

- Western democracies have the most acute crisis of confidence.
- This includes mainstream media, business, government, NGOs.
  - As well as immigration, globalization, social values, innovation, and fellow citizens.

1 in 2 Countries Have Lost Faith in the System

Percent of population who believe the system is not working
Fears of systemic failure have proven conducive to populism in the US —

- Trump Voters: 42% System Failing and Fearful, 25% Fearful, 67% are fearful
- Clinton Voters: 34% System Failing and Fearful, 11% Fearful, 45% are fearful

— and in the UK.

- Leave the EU: 44% System Failing and Fearful, 10% Fearful, 54% are fearful
- Remain in the EU: 7% System Failing and Fearful, 20% Fearful, 27% are fearful

Source: 2017 UK Trust Supplement Q15, Did you vote...? Audience: UK General Population, grouped by “system failing” segments and level of fear from the Trust Barometer. For details on how the societal fears and the “system failing” measure were calculated, please refer to the Technical Appendix. Respondents were labeled as “fearful” if they were fearful of at least one of the following societal issues: corruption, immigration, globalization, eroding social values, and loss of innovation.
Was social media to blame? Many say yes.

- Social media helps spread misinformation and fake news.
- Filter bubbles deepen partisanship, strengthen confirmation bias.
- Echo chambers foster extremism among voters.
- Objective / moderate / accurate / voices get lost in the noise.
Even if only a small group of people promote mis/disinformation, that small group can still have a disproportionate impact.

Philip Howard, 2017
(sociologist, Oxford University Internet Institute)

Focus: Social media use in Michigan during the presidential campaign.

Findings:

- Trump-supporting hashtags were used more than twice as often as Clinton-supporting hashtags.

- Professional (real) political news was drowned out by junk news:
  - Extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, masked commentary, fake news

- The proportion of professional news content getting shared hit its lowest point on the day before the election.

Study of the media’s coverage of the 2016 election, both mainstream and social:

- Coverage of Trump overwhelmingly **outperformed** coverage of Clinton on the whole.
- Clinton coverage focused on **scandals**, Trump coverage focused on **his core issues**.
- Mainstream media largely **followed Trump’s agenda** (although it was negative for both candidates.)
How election-related news were shared on Facebook:

- **Principal poles** of the media landscape are the **center-left** and **the far right**.
- **Breitbart** emerged as **nexus of conservative media**, comparable to the *New York Times* in the number of Facebook shares.

Yochai Benkler, Nikki Bourassa, Rob Faris, Hal Roberts, Ethan Zuckerman, “Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, August 2017
“You’ve been hacked.”

— Yochai Benkler to journalists
(Columbia, March 2017)

How stories related to immigration were shared on Twitter
Node size = number of shares
Benkler, cont’d:

We don’t yet know the relative influence of the five groups spreading disinformation:

- Russian trolls/bots
- Bannon/Breitbart
- For-hire content writers abroad (such as Macedonian teenagers)
- Formal campaigns using behavioral marketing (the Cambridge Analytica concern)
- Distributed peers: the far-right activists of 4Chan and such

Additional research is imperative.
Fake news isn’t all the same, and the term itself is unhelpful.

A taxonomy proposed by **Claire Wardle** of First Draft (Harvard / Shorenstein):

**Mis-information**: false information, shared with no intent to cause harm.

**Dis-information**: false information, knowingly shared to cause harm.

**Mal-information**: genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving private information into the public sphere.

![Venn diagram showing categories of false information and intent to harm.](image)
Wardle, cont’d:

To develop interventions, determine what type of mis- or disinformation you’re dealing with.

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**7 TYPES OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION**

- **SATIRE OR PARODY**: No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool
- **MISLEADING CONTENT**: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual
- **IMPOSTER CONTENT**: When genuine sources are impersonated
- **FABRICATED CONTENT**: New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm
- **FALSE CONNECTION**: When headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content
- **FALSE CONTEXT**: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information
- **MANIPULATED CONTENT**: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive

How social media algorithms skew the conversation rightward:

- **Most** people who vote democrat *post little to nothing* about politics on social media. One reason: fear of getting trolled.
  - Conservatives do more trolling than liberals, so many liberals “silence” their views.

- But Facebook measures posting/sharing frequency to determine how far and wide content should travel on newsfeeds.

- Result: **digital silence**. Algorithms assume that liberals aren’t interested and don’t circulate news written from a Democrat perspective.

- **Rise of predictive news:** As soon as content hits a threshold of relevancy, it is shown not only to its immediate target audience, but also to outside people if they did not “like” it.
August 2016: Facebook fired editors responsible for its *Trending* feature. It decided that algorithms (like those Carusone criticizes) have made human intervention obsolete.

Within 3 days, its Trending list was headed by a hoax claiming that Megyn Kelly had been fired by Fox for being “a closet liberal who actually wants Hillary to win.”

Facebook faces backlash, experiments with ways to label and down-rank fake news.

“It was beyond predictable by anyone who spent time with the actual functionality of the product, not just the code.”

— Anonymous former Facebook employee to *Washington Post* (October 2017)
Wael Ghonim (Egyptian social activist)

Argument: Today, social media newsfeeds serve to verify people’s beliefs rather than provide constructive or enlightening content.

(Big evolution of perspective from Arab Spring, when Ghonim was a leading online organizer.)

Social media algorithms and machine learning:

- The code to “exploit” optimizes the algorithm to maximize social media users liking and sharing content. Today’s platforms do this too much.

- The code to “explore” shows users a wider variety of content that is not guaranteed to be shared, but that exposes them to something new. Today’s platforms do this too little.

- Optimizing algorithms primarily for engagement is dangerous. It rewards outrage, drowns out moderate voices and eliminates productive discussion.

“We wanted democracy, but got mobocracy.”

— Wael Ghonim
Interview, 2017

Donald Trump’s Twitter post from November 2012
Ghonim, cont’d:

Recommendations: **combat mobocratic algorithms**

- Algorithms should embed credibility features to up-rank content that is vetted as truthful or constructive.

- Google PageRank algorithm already does this: takes credibility of a web page into account when deciding whether to feature it as a top search result.

  BUT: more difficult to do on Facebook, where the crowd is influenced by peers.

- Facebook should radically step up transparency: disclose info on how content travels, label bots and fake accounts.

- End goal: Create algorithms that get people engaged in conversations, have civil debate.

“People will be as shallow as platforms allow them to be.”

— Wael Ghonim
Interview, 2016
Example: Twitter account of “David Jones,” a self-described “passionate Brexit supporter” with 100,000 followers, operated by someone paid by the Russian government to conduct a disinformation campaign.

- “Why would somebody living somewhere in the Solent [be] getting up before 5am in the morning and spending 12 hours tweeting far-right and Kremlin talking points seven days a week? ... What kind of human being does that?”
  — Ben Nimmo, Atlantic Council fellow, Digital Forensic Research Lab

- “Russia has a long history of propaganda and trying to influence various nations' cultures and elections and so forth. ... But they seem to have stepped up their game and they are using cyber and they are using sophisticated methods now that they didn't have before.”
  — Dan Coats, Director of National Intelligence, June 2017
Russia and French May 2017 elections

- Following the release of 9 gigabits worth of stolen campaign documents, French authorities threatened media outlets with criminal penalties for republishing the material.
- Authorities were also concerned that the presumably Russian hackers had altered some documents in order to spread disinformation.
- The media held off reporting on the story, and it had no discernible effect on the May 2017 elections.
Why is this important?

- Information important for well functioning of society/economy
  - Asymmetric information can lead to exploitation, corruption
  - Transparency is name in political life to “good information”/absence of information asymmetries

- Possibilities of exploiting asymmetric information leads to incentives to create asymmetric information
  - Taking actions which would impede transmission of information and create poorer information

- New issue: providing disinformation and malinformation
  - And destroying institutions for assessing truth and context
Broader perspective

- Enlightenment basis of advances in our society
  - Notion of progress
  - Notion of reason/rational
  - Scientific method—trust with verification
    - Science can’t survive if there isn’t a common understanding of the truth
    - But neither can democracy/notions of “due process”

- Main dangers of Trump and similar demagogues elsewhere
  - “epistemology”: what they are doing to undermine our institutions, including our institutions of science and ascertaining the truth
2. But did it make a difference?

The “Brexit Bus” used by the Leave campaign grossly exaggerated the cost of EU membership for Britain while ignoring the benefits it was receiving in return.
New age of uncertainty

- Challenge: Mis/disinformation makes it **all the more difficult** to establish **what truth is**.
- Proliferation of fake news and alternative truths often creates information overload that complicates one’s search for a personal and social platform.
- A new, more **fragile relationship** between **truth** and **politics**.
- A new age of “**epistemic insecurity**”: To act on a fact, how much confidence do we need to have that this fact is correct? What scale to use?
Fake news is **real**, but does it really matter? Some say no.

- Fake news itself is not new.
  - **Great Moon Hoax** (1835): New York *Sun* and others claim that a new powerful telescope picked up a Bosch-like scene on Moon surface.

**Hunt Allcott** and **Matthew Gentzkow**, 2017 (economists, NYU and Stanford)

- Argument: Fake news had no bearing on the 2016 election. Social media was important but not dominant.
  - “For fake news to have changed the outcome of the election, a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads.”

- Examine how many falsehoods people saw on social media, remembered and shared in a controlled experiment.

- BUT: Assumptions behind the study are not too scientific. 36 to one? “Placebo” headlines? Attribution?
TV remains a far more important news source for Americans.

- 62% US adults get news from social media. But only 18% of this group report that they get news from social media “often,” 26% say “sometimes,” and 18% “hardly ever.”
- By comparison, the shares who “often” get news from local television, national broadcast television, and cable television are 46 percent, 30 percent, and 31 percent respectively.
- Social media have become an important but not dominant source of political news and information.

BUT: Social media is quickly catching up to television as a news source (Millennials!) so this advantage, too, might soon fade.

Sensationalism + opinion-laced analysis: a formula popular long before clicktivism.

- In the early 1990s, Carole Kneeland (news director, Austin KVUE-TV), tried putting a stop to sensationalist coverage.

- Carole’s checklist for any crime stories that go on the air:
  1. Do viewers need to take action?
  2. Is there an immediate threat to public safety?
  3. Is there a threat to children?
  4. Is there a crime-prevention aspect to the story?
  5. Will the crime have a significant impact in the community?

- KVUE-TV was briefly #1 in the ratings, but the trend did not take across the industry.
Jonathan Ladd, 2011

(political scientist, Georgetown University)

- Days when US media was trusted (Walter Cronkite era) were a **historical anomaly**.

- Then: **party polarization** in the 1950s–70s, proliferation of **partisan media outlets**, new competition for audiences.

- **Partisanship fuels confirmation bias**: people trust the news they already consume.

- They then become more partisan and vote accordingly.

- Economic competition fuels **move to soft news** because that is what people want, but consuming these soft news makes them trust the media less.

- **Declining trust in media** is both a consequence of polarization and a **contributing factor**.
Marc Hetherington, 2004
(polynomial scientist, Vanderbilt University)

- **Public opinion** has not grown more conservative, but the government has.
- Research question: Why has support for redistribution fallen since Nixon? Looks at why, uses **survey data**.
- Argument: Public support for **progressive social programs** is weakened by the public’s **falling trust** in federal government.
- When people trust the government, they have confidence in gov’t ability to administer programs. When they don’t, they only trust programs that go to everyone.
  - Case in point: **Social security**—but not welfare.
  - Clinton healthcare defeat was due to lack of trust.
- Opposition to redistributive spending is higher among people who would have to pay for the programs—not those who would benefit from them.
- Political leaders get scared of supporting programs, as people attack “big government.”
3. Solutions, problems, hopes

Chequeado, an Argentinian media organization, conducted live fact-checking during Argentina’s presidential election debate in October 2015. These cards summarize its examinations of each of the five candidates’ statements.
What to do about it?

Understand **motivations** and **mechanisms** by which effects are felt

- Herding/social media
- Exploiting consumer irrationalities (behavioral economics)
- Undermining trust in institutions
- Undermining truth (shed doubt)

Key challenge: doing this while preserving human rights
Incentives for disinformation

- Corporations attempting to sell more (but not always fraud)
- Electoral politics
- Especially strong incentives when there can be corruption
- International politics
Media innovators everywhere are testing ways to combat fake news.

In the United States:

Listening Post Collective, launched in 2013

- Seeks to foster **new level of connection** between **newsrooms** and the **local publics** they serve.
- Defines **reader engagement** in more than page views.
- Aims for news **more responsive** and **relevant** to community priorities and needs.
- Founder Jesse Hardman takes strategies he used as a media trainer abroad, applies them to the US.
- Started in New Orleans to cover post–Katrina development. Has since worked in New Jersey, Baltimore, Omaha, Georgia and Minneapolis.

Below: The Listening Post’s playbook for anyone starting their own project
The News Literacy Project, launched in 2013

- Focuses on the demand side for quality news by teaching news literacy to school students.

- Offers classroom programs in NYC, Chicago and Washington DC

- Founder Alan Miller, former Washington Post investigative reporter, got the idea from addressing a group of enthusiastic school children on the importance of journalism.
In the UK:
Bristol Cable, launched in 2014

- Citizens’ media co-operative: one potential solution to revenue shortage in media.
  - 1,850 members and counting, each paying membership fees.
  - Each owns a democratic stake in the company, shapes what gets covered.
- Reports **local news only**, focuses on the narrow niche of Bristol and its communities, many of them **marginalized** by mainstream media.
- Focus on **slow news**, important local matters that affect daily lives; strong investigative angle.
- Leads **campaigns to implement solutions** to problems its reporting uncovers.
- **Con**: Does not scale.
In Argentina:

Chequeado, launched in 2010

- Fact-checking organization with a growing international fan base
- Aims to be a nonpartisan moderator of public debate.
- Does painstaking verification of statements across the political spectrum.
- Conducts live fact-checking events that encourage and address readers’ queries.
- Staunchly defends its political neutrality, does not solicit or accept government funds.
- BUT: Relies on foundation grants to operate.
Examples of actions

Supply and demand measures

- Delay: hinders herding, time for verification
- Disclosure of purchases of who has purchased ads (providing insights into incentives)
- Create verification institution—and attach verifications to messages
- Restrictions of hate speech
- Other restrictions
  - Restrictions on targeting—knowledge has to be put into public space
Menu of potential solutions: Supply side

- Make it **less profitable** to produce and disseminate patently false information.
- Tweak **social media algorithms** so individuals don’t get as much extreme news in their feeds.
- Use **human editors** to curate social media newsfeeds.
- Return to **fact-based reporting**. (The conservative *Weekly Standard* announced its return to this method.)
- **Browser extensions** that can flag false information or suppress it.
- Government-issued **takedown notices** (already used in many countries).
- **Regulation**, including requiring more algorithmic transparency (under discussion in many countries but debatable).
Label fake news. (BUT: What labels to use? How to establish the credibility of labelers?)

Hire fact-checkers to label mis- and disinformation to encourage readers will reject it.

Encourage the use of browser software that would insulate Internet users from mis- and disinformation. (BUT: Is there good software that can discriminate it from other news? If it were possible to do it, it would mean that we had found an easy answer to the question of what mis- and disinformation really is.)

Newspapers can offer “burst your bubble” options, where readers can see articles they might not normally read because they are written from a different political perspective.

Adapt techniques from campaigns to counter violent extremism, such as deploying good bots to counteract trolling and junk content spread by “bad” bots. (Beware of questionable techniques though.)

Bolster media literacy efforts. This has been tried for decades and the academic literature on the effectiveness is fragmented and inconclusive.
Legislature

Germany’s approach

- Oct. 2017: New law against hate speech
- Provisions: Hate speech gets flagged. Social media sites must remove it within 24 hrs or pay fines up to €50 million.
  - Hate speech means Nazi symbols, Holocaust denial
  - Sites affected: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google, others
- BUT: Restrictions upset human rights groups, quickly produce backlash.
- Concerns about “over blocking” and “over censoring” free speech.
- Approach not feasible in the US?

"With this law, we put an end to the verbal law of the jungle on the internet."

—Justice Minister Heiko Maas
Unlike Europe, the US can’t regulate hate speech; must rely on social media corporations to do the right thing.

- Facebook has **audience data crucial for research into fake news** but refuses to disclose it: How people get micro-targeted and exposed to information, whether they chose to share, etc.
- It also provides **no public record** of the political advertisements it serves to users.
- It has launched new programs and partnerships to **flag and down-rank fake news** on its algorithm. But it needs to do more.

Ongoing bipartisan congressional effort to pass **“Honest Ads Act”** that would regulate advertising on Facebook and other social media (a response to allegations of Russian interference).

Yochai Benkler’s recommendation:

- “The problem is potentially sufficiently serious that we should spend a lot of money quickly to figure out what is happening so we know what measures to take.”
- “At a minimum, we should support transparency in political advertising. That should include anyone paid to comment online or spread political information (even if it's marketing companies or 50-cent bloggers and their ilk).”
Social media feeds off and deepens confirmation bias.

Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone Cannon, David Rand (psychologists, Yale University)

- Fake news headlines that are familiar are perceived as substantially more accurate.
- This is true even when people are shown headlines that are implausible or that contradict their own beliefs.
- Warning labels about the news headlines being incorrect have no effect on perceptions of credibility.
Rebuilding trust in media will take reexamining many old assumptions. Example: Factual corrections and the risks of excessive accuracy.

Michael Karlsson, Christer Clerwall, Lars Nord (media researchers, Karlstad and Mid Sweden universities)

- “It is only those who already trust the media who appreciate corrections.” Some readers actually distrust media outlets that point out their errors.
- It might be better to withdraw flawed articles than to call attention to mistakes.
- Professional codes of conduct might not help improve trust in media, in part because journalists and citizens have different ideas as to what constitutes proper conduct.

Another question: Can trust in media be generalized?

- Trust in news media depends on **which news media** you mean.
- Distinction between **diffuse** trust (individuals trust the system) and **specific** trust (individuals trust specific members of that system).
- Just because you trust your favorite outlet does not mean you trust other outlets.

Chart: American Press Institute, “‘My’ Media versus ‘the’ Media,” 2017
Briony Swire, Adam Berinsky, Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich Ecker
(psychology and political science, MIT, University of Western Austria, University of Bristol)

- Compare Trump voters to others in the American electorate.
- Finding: the perceived credibility of the individual promoting misinformation mattered more to voters than the credibility of those correcting it.
- “People use political figures as a heuristic to guide evaluation of what is true or false, yet do not necessarily insist on veracity as a prerequisite for supporting political candidates.”

4. Where are we going?
Several overlapping issues at play:

- Corrosion of trust in traditional institutions, incl. mainstream media
- The rise of social media and misinformation shared on social media  
  - Including the use of social media misinformation as a weapon between states.
- While still unclear if fake news itself decided the 2016 election, it sits at the nexus of all these issues.
- Restoring trust in traditional media and in the day-to-day functioning of government may go a long way toward ameliorating these issues, but such trust must be earned, and we are a long way from that.
- Debate as to whether trust even relates to professional practices of the media, or more to the innate experiences and biases of the reader/viewer.