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On News, Fake News and Donald Trump

Allow me to begin by making a straightforward distinction between the more conventional publication of fake news and Donald Trump's idiosyncratic use of the phrase 'fake news' whenever the media reports on a story that he disagrees with or that appears to cast him in a negative light. Trump's use of the phrase 'fake news' is in some ways continuous with the gradual corporatizing, commercializing and sensationalizing of mainstream news. In some measure it is also related to the fact that cable news is driven by ratings rather than recent and important events, to the demise of adversarial news reporting, and to the fact that many mainstream 'inside the beltway' reporters are more than willing to abandon their duty to report the truth for the sake of high salaries and insider access. However, what is distinctive about Trump's shrill repetition of 'Fake News'! is how it has come to symbolize both Trump's narcissism and the degraded state of American politics and the office of the presidency. More ominously it testifies to the fact that we increasingly live under an atmosphere of unpredictability and turmoil which provides the very conditions of possibility for despotism. I want to say something about what *gave rise to* and what *follows from* this state of affairs.

We should begin by exempting from our analysis the publication of 'fake news' by news-satire sites such as [The Onion](#). Anyone familiar with the latter would laugh out loud at their claim to be "[the world's leading news publication, offering highly acclaimed, universally revered coverage of breaking national, international, and local news events.](#)" Yet it is precisely through their careful news fakery that The Onion manages to expose phonies, reveal untruths and hypocrisies and make us smile at our own capacity to

uncritically accept what we read in newspapers and on social media, or view on television. 'News' sites like the Onion play an important critical function. The Onion's managing editor [Marnie Shure](#), is certainly right in her claim that satire becomes even more necessary in the age of Trump: "I'd argue that the world right now is farcical, not satirical. The satire comes in when you can speak truth to that reigning circus sideshow. Our maxim is 'afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted'. That is certainly not something that anyone in the Trump administration is attempting to do." No doubt fake news enthusiasts Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert would agree. However, the obvious difference here is that fake news as 'satire' can be fact-free yet truth-disclosing. It uses fakery not as propagandistic ploy but as critical tool.

The more conventional forms of fake news and propaganda are familiar enough. In general, the publication of [fake news](#) refers to the intentional fabrication of events, situations or states of affairs and the presentation of the latter as the truth or reality of what happened or occurred.

Let's start with what is sometimes referred to as [tabloid journalism](#)—the sort of rubbish that proliferates at the grocery check-out counter in publications such as the *National Enquirer*, *Daily Mirror*, *the Star* and the like. The latter 'newspapers' are intended to lull people into accepting the truth of a false or sensational claim for purely economic or profit-oriented reasons. In other words, outrageous, sensationalist or intentionally fabricated stories tend to be big sellers because, well, they are indeed outrageous, and many of us appear to love gossip and conspiracy! Those who publish and sell such stories know this, and they don't mind a bit that they are engaging in fabrication or myth since this kind of sensationalism has been shown to dramatically boost revenues. With the corporate merging of media and the rise of cable television in the 1970's, what was once understood as serious journalism began the downward trend toward sensationalism, [infotainment](#) and tabloidization—perfectly captured in the brilliant 1972 Paddy Chayevsky film [Network](#). We will return to this idea later.

A second standard of fake news can be discovered in conventional political propaganda. The goal of the latter is to persuade readers or television audiences that an event or action unfolded in a particular way. The public ends up with an abridged or distorted picture of what happened because certain aspects of the story are structurally suppressed or filtered out, and only partial truths are disclosed. This much subtler kind of 'fake news' has been thoroughly and skillfully canvassed by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in '[Manufacturing Consent](#)'. The propaganda model put forward by Chomsky and Herman

“traces the routes by which power and money are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public”. In order to achieve this end newspapers like the New York Times “fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns”.

Finally, a more recent instantiation of the use of fake news can be traced back to the origins of [FOX News](#). As a ratings-oriented cable television show FOX News is also in the game of sensationalist distraction and political propaganda. But it is much more than this. FOX News, the FOX News Channel, FOX Business Network, FOX News Radio, FOX News Headlines 24/7 and FOXNews.com is the most extreme example of a media propaganda machine that intentionally distorts and misinforms the public for unapologetically ideological reasons. The real goal of FOX News (besides profit) is to gradually influence and shape a very selective audience by constantly reaffirming right-wing perspectives, ideas and conspiracies. In so doing it emboldens and legitimates the rank prejudices of a significant number of Americans. What is crucial to understand here is that it could only have been from the cover of a more venerable tradition of news reporting that Rupert Murdoch was able to reconstitute the notion of ‘news’ as little more than a partisan expression of right-wing ideology—ornamented by high heels, short skirts and celebrity ‘news’ personalities, and funded by a deep pocketed chairman and CEO who is able to secure unprecedented access to powerful political and other influential figures.

The FOX News propaganda machine has a devoted and even fanatical viewership. It indoctrinates not merely through the employment of Chomsky-Herman propaganda news filters, but also by using methods similar to those exploited by cult religions in recruiting and programming new members. From the latter perspective FOX News ‘believers’, like cult religion followers, are those who see the world or others as a threat, and themselves as victims or outsiders. They long for the kind of comfortable certainty that truncated explanations and conspiracy theory provide. For the ruse to work, however, there must be scapegoats—persons or groups that can be demonized and blamed for the current state of the world. Very much like the successful cult, FOX News is able to persuade viewers to sever all connection with an outside world of contrary opinion. The strategy is simple: 1. Manufacture or embellish stories that induce panic, disorientation, hatred or fear; 2. Explain the origin of these evils through ideology and conspiracy; 3. Provide a scapegoat that can be hated or condemned—‘government’, ‘liberals’, ‘socialists’, Muslims,

Mexicans, Immigrants etc. The only component missing is a demagogue who can deliver the congregation from evil. For a time, Bush II provided the latter. But it is Donald Trump who has become the true inheritor and avatar of Rupert Murdoch's far-right plunderbund. The bottom line is that for a fairly sizable portion of the American population FOX News and Donald Trump validate and normalize xenophobia, racism, sexism and violence.

So, what is the difference between the publication of fake news in the various guises outlined above and the current situation where we daily witness the POTUS continuously excoriating journalists and repeating again and again 'fake news'? First, we should be aware that all of the above exemplifications of fakery have in some measure contributed to and enabled Donald Trump's unique use of the phrase 'fake news'. Thus, in an important sense Trump is really a 'tabloid' president. He has turned the office of the presidency into a sensationalizing 'reality television show' that merges corporatization with entertainment. Moreover, he has become the perfect medium for the advancement and normalizing of extreme right-wing Republican views and the global neoliberal economic agenda. His constant repetition of the phrase 'Fake News!' has been a fantastic windfall for the sort of corporatized, sensationalized mainstream cable programming that thrives on continuous and breathless exhortations of 'breaking news'. In this sense, the tabloidization of the American presidency is continuous with the tabloidization of news media—or more specifically with the fact that the political sphere and the mainstream media have been profoundly compromised and colonized by sensationalized news, neoliberal ideology and corporate interests.

What is distinctive about Donald Trump's repetition of the phrase 'fake news' is that what is 'fake' is not ultimately measured against truth, reality, facts on the ground or even ideology. Rather, it is uniquely determined as such by only one individual: Donald Trump—and for only one reason: because it does not comport with his idiosyncratic, narcissistic take on the world. To be sure, this state of affairs is troubling enough. But what *follows from it* is even more alarming: The most significant, lasting and devastating consequence of the President of the United States labelling news as 'fake' is that it throws the public into a state of flux or vertigo where it no longer seems possible (or even necessary) to distinguish fake from real or true from false. This has a devastating effect precisely because it creates the ideal conditions for despotic rule.

Think of it as a kind of gradual 'hollowing out' not just of the news media, but of the political sphere and the human mind itself. "You will be hollow" O'Brian tells Winston Smith in Orwell's novel '[1984](#)': "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you

with ourselves”. Trump would love nothing better than to hollow out America and fill it with himself. Two years after the publication of 1984 [Hannah Arendt](#) would situate this ‘hollowing out’ within the historical context of totalitarianism: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule”, [Arendt argues](#) “is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” Donald Trump is our real-world O’Brian (without the latter’s intellect) who through the constant repetition of the phrase ‘fake news’ would like to eviscerate both the reality of experience and the standards of thought.

You might ask ‘how is it that a buffoon—a greedy, dishonest, bigoted narcissist who craves constant praise, wants to ‘win’ at all costs and has no coherent policy goals, plans or strategies’ could have the intellectual wherewithal to create such conditions?’ Trump is not really governed by ideology. He’s happy to leave the deceits, complexities and fine-grained distinctions of ideology to people like Bannon, Pence, Kellyanne Conway, Paul Ryan and Mitch Connell. Moreover, he’s quite content with FOX News doing the propaganda thing. What’s more, at this stage of the game he doesn’t need to appeal to ideology or engage in overt propaganda to get his messages across. In 21st century America what was required for someone like Trump to have faked his way into the presidency was already well in place: a world of celebrity worship, of bread and circuses, of fiction and fabrication, of Wall Street hucksters and hedge fund managers, of the WWE and reality TV shows where ‘winning’ is everything and losers are voted off the island. All he needed to inherit was a population atomized and isolated by the relentless and destructive economics of neoliberal capitalism. In such a world Trump intuitively knew that Americans would not flinch when he told them he “could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone” and “wouldn’t lose voters”. Obama saw himself as America’s exemplary moral ‘teacher’ and cerebral Commander in Chief. Hillary Clinton emphasized the distinctiveness of her supporters from those other ‘deplorables’. Trump’s base raucously cheered him on precisely because he was willing to collapse the conventional distinction between ruler and ruled—‘I am You and You are Me’, he seemed to say to them—or to quote another more infamous demagogue: “All that you are, you are through me, all that I am, I am through you alone.” (Adolph Hitler to brown-shirted paramilitary ‘storm troopers’)

Eventually his followers would come to see him not only as a deliverer but as the only reliable measure of truth and reality. That is what the despot becomes: “He looked up

again at the portrait of Big Brother. The colossus that bestrode the world!” (1984) Amid the ever-changing incomprehensible world, where everything is fake, where what is real is not happening, you can as Arendt might say ‘*believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and nothing was true.*’ When Trump cautions his followers not to believe “[the crap you see from these people, the fake news... What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening](#)”, it is not only his base supporters who nod in agreement. To just as many non-Trump supporters Trump is ‘telling it like it is’—he is simply testifying to what is now a fairly widespread public conviction that most if not all mainstream media cannot ever be trusted.

Arendt [captures](#) the real problem: In such a world “gigantic lies and monstrous falsehoods can eventually be established as unquestioned facts” not just by Trump but by anyone presently in or running for political office. Moreover, “the difference between truth and falsehood may cease to be objective and become a mere matter of power and cleverness, of pressure and infinite repetition.” It is why in our present-day facts about realities such as climate change environmental degradation have no more epistemic weight than mere opinions about the latter. It is also why there is now, more than at any time in recent memory, an increasing distrust of government and contempt for politicians and government officials.

More ominously, it explains why Trump can make decisions not grounded in what might promote good international relations or what could reasonably meet ongoing geopolitical, economic or environmental realities, but, rather, on the basis of whatever might increase the future profitability of his brand or augment his present myopic, self-aggrandizing perspective. If you don’t think that Trump’s characterization of all news that does not comport with his worldview as ‘fake’, his aversion to truth and his desire to register as ‘fact’ only what he agrees with, does *not* raise the potential for nuclear conflict or increase the potential for environmental disaster; if you are not persuaded that it will have a devastating impact on the collective psyche of the country and will open the door to unchecked racism, xenophobia, violence and despotism, then you are not really paying attention. In a [recent poll](#) 48% of self-identified Republicans agree with Trump that the news media is the enemy of the people and 43% believe the president should be given the authority to close down news outlets.

How do such attitudes reflect on the venerable tradition of a free press? How do they impact the physical well-being of journalists? Well, the framers of the [first amendment](#) thought [freedom of the press](#) was pretty important—essential not just for the

‘advancement of truth, science, morality and arts in general’, but also because a free press could hold bad governments to account and when necessary ‘shame and intimidate’ government officials “into more honourable and just modes of conducting affairs”. It is clear that the framers would see the Trump administration and Trump supporters as a threat to freedom of the press—and not merely because he continuously threatens legal action against news organization or because he banned a reporter from a press event for asking ‘inappropriate questions’. Under Trump’s ‘reign’ reporters have been threatened with deportation for reporting on protests and labelled as dishonest and ‘enemies of the people’; the media have been accused of ‘not liking America’ and journalists have been described as ‘sick people’ trying to ‘take away our history and our heritage’. Finally, it is beyond doubt that Trump is putting the safety and even the lives of journalists at risk. Courtney Radsch, advocacy director for the Committee to Protect Journalists warns that when this sort of an attack on journalism comes from the President of the United States “it creates an environment in which attacks on the press, both verbal and potentially physical, could become common”. This is not just a question of a president saying journalists cannot be trusted because they promote fake news. It is the kind of language that could easily trigger increased violence against journalists.

It may be a comfort to some that the Trump administration cannot last. It is certainly historically true that demagogues fail and empires fall into ruin—usually because they are so caught up in the game of fabrication and control that they pay little or no attention to governing on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, it is also true that the havoc they wreak during the time they are in office persists long after they are gone—most especially when they have contributed to the evisceration of what Hannah Arendt describes as the “distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought)”.

From a more philosophically inclined perspective the point I wish to make in closing is simply this: for those who faithfully follow the news (and even those who are occasional listeners and readers) there can be no more indispensable task than the development of a critical consciousness—the cultivation of an enlarged mentality and the advancement of thinking capacities that help us become aware of what has been excluded or left out of an account; that press us to ask ‘In *whose* interest is this or that state of affairs?’; that encourage us to doggedly search for and uncover hypocrisy, biased assumptions, contradictions, fallacies, hidden premises and prejudices (including our own!).

To be able to distinguish reality from fiction, lies from truth requires that we never cease to hold fast to the virtues of sound critical thinking. To do otherwise is to allow ourselves to become what Hannah Arendt most feared: an ‘ideal subject for totalitarian rule’.