
David Olliver

Political news, Tech news and much more

The Art of the Fake: How Intelligence Agencies and the Media Are Elevating Fake News into an Art Form

David Olliver · Friday, March 31st, 2017

David Olliver via [David Olliver](#)

The “Word of the Year” for 2016 may have already been crowned by the various entities who have granted themselves the authority to decide such things—a cursory search turned up “surreal,” “xenophobia” and “dumpster fire” as a few of the winners; taken together, these three form a perhaps not-unfair snapshot of the past year.

However, there is another word of the year candidate that is continuing to cause repercussions across the interconnected fiefdoms of politics and journalism, one that goes far beyond being a clever turn of phrase or a popular bit of snark.

It is a phrase that may even strike at the very notion of what we consider to be truth itself: “**fake news.**”

The president is fond of the phrase, as are other politicians, and it continues to cause no end of consternation and defensiveness across the media. But what are we talking about when we talk about *fake news*? It’s easy to dismiss the phrase as signifying “information that has been spun in a manner with which we disagree,” or “state-sponsored propaganda” or “flat-out lies”—and indeed it can be any or all of the above.

But there is something happening in the realm of fake news: it’s getting more sophisticated. Much in the way that ham-handed early advertising attempted to nakedly gull consumers into buying snake oil cure-alls, then became more sophisticated through the Mad Men era, finally emerging as full-on, algorithm-based psychological warfare in the 21st century, fake news is in the process of undergoing a metamorphosis.

It is becoming an art form. And it is an art which we would do well to examine more closely.

Where Does “Fake News” Come From?

Journalists have clamored to get out in front of the fake news train, attempting to

define each other under its umbrella when it suits their needs—and of course to absolve themselves of such a label. A year-end string of articles published on mainstream websites purporting to help the reader determine what is fake news and what isn't was particularly instructive—just not in the ways that media outlets like [CNN](#) and [The New York Times](#) meant for it to be. (Hint: if the article was published on CNN or the New York Times, at no time ever in the history of everything has fake news ever been published on that site and how dare you suggest otherwise.)

Indeed, when the Washington Post's media columnist Margaret Sullivan decided she'd had enough of the epithet fake news back in January, [she wrote a column](#) about it—as columnists are wont to do. But what made this particular piece stand out wasn't what Sullivan said but what she chose to leave out.

While she saw fit to call out people from former Congressman Jim DeMint to talk radio's Alex Jones to the president himself for using the term “*fake news*” in order to blithely dismiss information that runs counter to their worldviews, she failed to call out her own organization for essentially creating the term.

The phrase “**fake news**” has come to signify everything from foreign intelligence-created propaganda, to partisan bias in reporting, to paid sock-puppet tweet-storming, to Macedonian teens manufacturing BuzzFeed-clickbait stories, to simply anything with which the speaker of the phrase disagrees. But what is undeniable is that the current prominence of the term came about as a result of a hugely controversial news piece published in Sullivan's very own Washington Post in the wake of the election in November of 2016.

Curious, then, that professional media critic Sullivan fails to mention this piece at all, given the enormous impact it has had on the media.

In the original piece, authored by reporter *Craig Timberg*, the same news organ that famously spoke truth to power back in the 1970s by publishing the Pentagon Papers and helping to force the ouster of the corrupt Nixon Administration saw fit to publish a list of some 200 news outlets that Timberg's sources deemed “fake news” of a particularly insidious sort.

The blockbuster headline read “*Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News’ During Election, Experts Say.*” (The prominent use of the phrase itself makes it even more difficult to understand how columnist Sullivan might have neglected to reference it in her piece, but oh well.)

In Timberg's piece, websites as well-known and politically diverse as The Drudge Report, The Ron Paul Institute, Wikileaks, Truthout and Counterpunch were tarred with the same brush as actual Russian state-funded organs like Russia Today and Sputnik News. And all of this was published on the say-so of a self-appointed group of “experts” at a publication called PropOrNot, a site that apparently didn't exist prior to August of 2016.

What's more, we still don't know who runs the site, or who these “experts” are. The Post saw fit to grant anonymity to these shadowy operators arrogated themselves to sit in judgment on a vast swath of the modern media landscape as being either overtly

treasonous operatives, or at the very least unwitting stooges for Russia.

Nonetheless, the Post ran with the story, earning itself plenty of clicks. At the same time, it earned heaps of opprobrium for publishing an incendiary article that critics called irresponsible, rife with sloppy reporting, and even McCarthyesque.

The irony of course is that the Post was forced to walk back major portions of the story—although never outright retracting it—and issue a half-assed denial of PropOrNot’s information and methodology by claiming that Timberg was simply reporting on the report, and was not to be held to account for the veracity of the accusations.

Thus, the blockbuster story naming the scourge of fake news was reduced to admitting—albeit in a backhanded way—that it was itself fake news.

To be sure, false and misleading news reporting is in no way a new thing. Statistics and damned statistics are abused for political gain as often as “experts” are quoted out of context and facts are twisted to suit various agendas.

However, what we may be witnessing—much like the development of advertising into the frighteningly predictive, algorithmic science it is today—is a turning point in the history of fake news. Perhaps this is the moment when fake news makes a jump in sophistication from clunky early claims like William Randolph Hearst’s using his newspapers to foment the Spanish-American War in 1898, the Gulf of Tonkin incident in Vietnam and yellowcake uranium in Iraq into something far more dangerous and sophisticated.

So who are these people, and what do they want?

Sock Puppets, Spooks and the State

Of course, the days when a man like Hearst or his competitor Joseph Pulitzer could literally change the course of history via what they chose to print in their newspapers are long gone. These days there are so many conduits of information that no one actor can sway the public quite so easily.

But that doesn’t mean people aren’t still trying to do so.

If you’ve ever been jealous of how many Twitter followers a friend of yours has, don’t despair. The sad truth is, a not-insignificant portion of Twitter users are likely to be bots.

Turns out millions of Twitter “users” are in fact fake. A recent study in the U.K. showed that a single network of fake accounts alone accounted for some 350,000 “users.” Other networks of bots and fake accounts are thought to be much larger. Some have estimated that as many as 40 to 100 million Twitter “users” may be bots.

The point of course is to drive traffic and thus to make money. It’s well known that companies and individuals often pay to boost their Twitter follower count as a means of acquiring prestige or creating a bigger media footprint for themselves.

However these networks of automated users posting tweets and commenting on others' tweets are one thing; there is also the related problem of sock puppets.

Sock puppets are a similar phenomena, in which a single operator will create a number of profiles that he or she uses to comment, drive traffic, or otherwise draw attention to a particular post or website in an attempt to steer the conversation in a certain direction. Reddit, the famously self-proclaimed "Front Page of the Internet" has had huge credibility problems in the past year or so, due to a seeming influx of suspicious similarly-worded comments and arguments being made on various subreddits (specific topic boards) having to do with the election, conspiracies and genetically modified foods, to name just a few. Long time users have accused the Conde Nast-run site of gaming a formerly anarchic and open system in order to promote certain views, and the evidence is compelling.

But hey, who really cares if a bunch of basement-dwelling, Guy Fawkes mask-wearing nerds are being manipulated, right?

Well, it gets worse, and it is likely to be a much more insidious problem.

There are scenes in the latest season of "Homeland" (minor spoilers) in which a high-ranking CIA operative turns out to be running a sophisticated off-the-books operation on U.S. soil. In a massive basement command center sporting the latest technology and massive computing power, we see hacker/spooks operating thousands upon thousands of sock puppet accounts on various forms of social media. These men and women are hard at work 24/7 posting propaganda on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and other comment boards across the internet, tasked with pumping up a negative story about the president-elect-with whom the aforementioned CIA sub-director has a beef.

And while that might sound on the face of it like some paranoid conspiracy nuttiness, it's actually uncomfortably close to the truth.

Consider for example one story that emerged from the original Snowden document dump having to do with four classified documents the British secret intelligence agency GCHQ presented to the NSA. One of these documents was titled "The Art of Deception: Training for Online Covert Operations."

If you think that sounds eerily like what "Homeland" depicted, you are correct.

Created by the GCHQ's Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group, these documents were nicely dissected on Glenn Greenwald's site [The Intercept](#) some years ago, although this particular piece of the Snowden saga has largely flown under the radar of the mainstream.

But in this bright, new dawn of ubiquitous fake news, savvy readers would do well to go back and have a second look at the piece. Here's a snippe:

"Among the core self-identified purposes of JTRIG are two tactics: **(1)** to inject all sorts of false material onto the internet in order to destroy the reputation of its targets; and **(2)** to use social sciences and other

techniques to manipulate online discourse and activism to generate outcomes it considers desirable.”

Sounds an awful lot like the textbook definition of spook-created fake news.

But the tactics the JTRIG documents outline are hardly limited to passively planting false stories on the internet. They diagram methodology for creating internet-based “false flag operations”-that is, posting incendiary material and falsely attributing it to a target; falsifying victim posts-i.e. attacking the reputation of a target through sock puppets who would post claims of injury or harm by that person; posting negative information on forums and comment boards about the target, and even hacking a person’s email and spoofing damaging messages to people in their contact list.

But the “**fake news**” outlined in the JTRIG playbook aren’t limited to operatives saying nasty things about their targets online. There is a section titled “Discredit a Company,” which has subheadings like “Leak confidential information to companies/the press via blogs etc.,” and “Stop deals/ruin business relationships.”

Where do we go from here?

Clearly, this is no game. These people in government as well as the corporate world have seen fit to grant themselves the authority to not only poison political discourse, attempting to influence, control and redirect popular thinking as they choose-they are talking about using their power to destroy the lives and livelihoods of people who have been convicted of no crime, or even accused of doing anything other than voicing opinions that run counter to the accepted mainstream pabulum we call “news” these days.

Knowing how widespread, ubiquitous and pervasive the art of fake news is is the first step; understanding how good its purveyors are getting at creating their dubious art form is the second huge leap the world needs to take next if we are to continue to live in a civilization in which truth counts for something other than a word used in a slogan or an advertisement.

This entry was posted on Friday, March 31st, 2017 at 5:14 pm and is filed under [Politics](#), [Trending](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. Responses are currently closed, but you can [trackback](#) from your own site.