

by Derek Morrison

*Fake News comes the Trumpet call
The faithful hear, they are in thrall
Wield Fake News to smite them down
For He now wears the media crown
Apprentice star emits searing light
Troublesome truths now burning bright
Only He could fix all that was wrong
For His people need a leader strong
So Russian Bear now declared no thug
Ursine brothers now embrace and hug.*

*And it's Id and Ego who must be hired
While the unbelievers must be fired
Let 'Art of the Deal' the people inspire
By spectral author not the artful liar
Fake News press 'enemy number one'
For they frustrate what must be done
Fake News is what His people hears
So filter messages and close their ears
No briefings here for the media club
He will forge his own fortress hub.*

*Like like some dark lord in his Tower
From stormy skies He builds his power
Summons lightning bolts to make a hit
On all those 'others' who just don't fit
But yet it was He that took the prize
As mainstream media cast their eyes
On the actors playing by older rules
Rejecting He from different schools
And so Fake News plays useful part
A fearsome weapon for spinner's art.*

*So 'wrong' truths to false become recast
 Impervious armour against enemy blast
 For He knows how to 'drain the swamp'
 Assault their truths, proclaim His pomp
 Globalisation's losers new Lords seek
 For the 'deplorables' see a future bleak
 And an 'elite' class sneering in contempt
 Until 'deplorables' let their anger vent
 Only their Apprentice star felt their pain
 From declining futures of excluded gain.*

*So new narratives found receptive ears
 Post-truth prescriptions to allay all fears
 The Fox now shaping the Trumpet notes
 Sound Spicy tweets to reach His votes
 By claiming conspiracies by the score
 That need rooting out from the core
 Defining new enemies of the State
 Let Him remake the country great
 Fake News comes the Trumpet call
 The faithful heard, He has the ball.*

[To listen to this verse select below]

<http://www.cyberstanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FakeNews.mp3>

Commentary

In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.
 (Winston Churchill 1943, in [The Second World War](#) Chapter 21 (Teheran: The Crux), p. 338.)

Def: Post-truth

Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief ... Rather than simply referring to

the time after a specified situation or event – as in post-war or post-match – the prefix in post-truth has a meaning more like ‘belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant’.

(Oxford Dictionaries, Word of the Year 2016)

At the time of writing this poem Fake News was Thème du jour with the pejorative label being splattered so liberally around that it tended to stain both the deserving and the undeserving. But that was perhaps the purpose. Accusing ‘news’ of actually being ‘fake news’ can seriously undermine confidence in the veracity of a story. That challenge may well be justified but equally it can be part of a defensive measure to sustain a false story until it has diffused sufficiently into its intended audience.

But what exactly is ‘fake news’?

Perhaps a good starting point is to consider what ‘news’ is intended to be, i.e. a ‘true’ story about a ‘new’ incident or event. As social beings humans have a predilection for the absorption and dissemination of stories. Consequently, the production and spreading of news appears to be an important aspect of behaviour in all cultures – albeit with varying national constraints and pressures on the nature of this production and dissemination in different regions of the world. But ‘fake news’ exploits this human predilection for stories by deliberate false reporting via the incorporation of inaccurate content dressed up as real news; the intention being to deceive the readership by misinforming and misleading (Source: BBC Law in Action; see below). This commentary offers the following slightly extended definition:

An invented news item containing one or more deliberate falsehoods which are backed by no – or distorted – evidence. The invention is presented as an authentic news item with the intention that it be absorbed and disseminated by varying formal or informal media channels some of which may not be subject to a recognised reliable and valid curation or editorial process. See also ‘propaganda’ and ‘re-tweeting’.

But why would anyone invent such falsehoods? The motivations of the inventor(s) can range from the mildly mischievous to the subversive or even be outright malevolent. In essence fake news can be employed as a weapon both for offensive or defensive purposes including:

1. disrupting and undermining confidence in well-established and erstwhile respected

sources of news by accusing them of being purveyors of deliberate falsehoods and so making individuals or organisations generating news become the story.

2. distracting media interest away from stories that could cause – or are causing – difficulties for the target of the stories.
3. promoting the false message so that it dominates one or more media channels and – or – the mainstream news cycle with the intention of persuading or reinforcing the existing beliefs of a target audience

‘Fake’ is a relatively gentle word for such a weapon because it fails to convey the potentially serious consequences of producing or disseminating false news or of being maliciously labelled as such. Arguably, it would perhaps more accurate to consider fake news as a pathology or infection that has the potential to invade, embed, replicate, and disseminate throughout one or more target communications systems. When viewed from that perspective ‘fake news’ suddenly doesn’t sound so gentle. It becomes more like a real-world or virtual infection requiring methods of protection, detection, and remediation. As with real and virtual infections it is human behaviours and the environments they inhabit that create the conditions for pathogens to embed and spread. And so what is suggested here is that it is the ascent of social media and networks which has provided both a ready environment and a rich repository of human behaviours for fake news inventors to embed and spread their pathogens (pathonews).

But why?

Firstly, exercising our pathogen metaphor a little more, infection spreads more easily when an immune system is – or becomes – challenged and it fails to adapt effectively. If we consider part of a civilised society’s immune system should be a free press able to make an effective response to social issues or/and the decisions of those in power then the health of traditional news media is certainly being stressed as the digital revolution disrupts both their traditional social role and the very core of their business model. The worrying weaknesses in mainstream media were highlighted in a recent BBC radio broadcast [Breaking News](#) (The Documentary, BBC World Service, 14 March 2017) which explored what has undermined the credibility of all facets of a mainstream media which so publicly failed to detect and reflect the seismic changes in popular opinion, both in the UK regarding Brexit, and in the US where voters mainly outside of the main cities voted for Donald Trump as POTUS. The mainstream

press instead of doing the investigatory leg work on the ground appears to have become as prone to inventing its own 'echo chambers' as the new social media channels have. That weakness has left mainstream media vulnerable to displacement by those who are not constrained by previous conventions and who have developed (or are exploiting) alternative channels of direct communication with their intended audience; thus bypassing any editing, filters or moderation.

Secondly, a successful fake news source aims achieve a critical mass (or perhaps that should be a non-critical mass) of believers in the falsehood so that even when the lies are later detected and challenged the believers remain resistant to changing their opinions. The instant non-curated nature of social-media channels and technologies makes them ripe for would-be exploiters of fake news particularly where recipients tend to lock themselves to limited sources of information which supports and reinforces their current world view. Such virtual ghettos risk becoming echo chambers, magnifiers and amplifiers of messages conveyed by would-be thought leaders whose reach can be every bit as global as the best resourced mainstream media source. Such messengers are not always benign forces for creative challenge, disruption and change. From this critical perspective social media are optimum environments for creating monocultures of thoughts and ideas where the critical skills of analysis and evaluation are discarded, disregarded, dismissed or disrespected. A culture where headlines and soundbites are perceived as the actual news rather than an invitation to engage and where TLDRs (internet slang for 'Too Long Didn't Read') are both a badge of honour for those conveying they are chronically 'busy' – (or should that be chronically distracted?) – issuer, or a criticism/ridicule of content requiring any effort to process.



image 1: Matthew Martin via Buzzfeed

While it's certainly an attractive idea that it is the now ubiquitous smartphone connected to whatever social media service that is providing the gateway for 'pathonews' to spread I suggest that it more our so human tendency for our attention to focus on headlines (or soundbites) that appear to (or sound like they) reinforce our preferred world view. We assume that the headline accurately encapsulates the information contained in the narrative because once upon a time it was just an invitation to explore the narrative. But in a world now drowning in choice the headlines are 'it' with Twitter's 140 characters setting the standard tolerance level. The mobile phone or tablet fed by whatever our preferred information stream is just makes it more efficient to receive the messages we want to hear. But other larger- scale message platforms can also have the same effect. Consider, for instance, the UK's 'Vote Leave' campaign bus (image 1). Emblazoned on its side came the headline that £350 million UK pounds per week was being 'sent' to the European Union. The killer subtext here was that this £350 million would be spent on the National Health Service. The figure was just plain wrong as was the fake promise to spend it on the UK NHS. Nevertheless, the headline played its part in what proved, ultimately, to be a successful campaign for the UK to leave the EU. But was this fake news?

Deciding what is fake news can be devilishly difficult particularly when one or more skilled 'inventors', well resourced organisations, or even complete state systems and its agencies have contributed. And how do we decide just how pathogenic the fake news has been? Was it just a bit of 'naughty' political posturing that stretched or misrepresented the truth? Or did the fake news change state or even world events?

Consider this quote and consequent chain of events which was initiated by one of the now President of the United States (POTUS) Donald Trump which he was still on the campaign trail in 2016 and which became the focus of a 2017 BBC World Service radio broadcast.

You look what is happening in Germany. You look what happened last night in Sweden. Sweden! Who would believe this? Sweden! They took in large numbers. They're having problems they never thought possible. You look at what's happening in Brussels. You look at what's happening all over the world. Take a look at Nice. Take a look at Paris ...

(Donald Trump, Campaign Rally 18 February 2017, [More or Less, BBC World Service 24 February 2017](#)). More or Less is the BBC's popular programme [co-produced with the UK Open University](#) which focuses on the use and abuse of statistics.

Donald Trump's insertion of Sweden into a roll call of places that had suffered terrorist attacks would lead the listener to assume there had been such an attack in Sweden. As *More or Less* pointed out this was indeed news to the Swedes who were somewhat bemused for no such attack had occurred. But the new POTUS had the previous night been watching a Fox News interview with documentary film maker Ami Horowitz about a short film he had made about Sweden. Horowitz suggested that because of large scale Muslim immigration to Sweden that crime, especially rape, had become a big problem. In his documentary film and to an Abba background Horowitz says:

... Sweden is now the proud owner of the title "The Rape Capital of Europe ... Sweden has always had a reputation of reputation for being a harmonious and liberal society. This image has been shattered as rape has sky-rocketed over the last 5 years. At the same time Sweden has been going through a revolutionary demographic shift that has seen the country take in more refugees from Islamic countries than any Western nation in the world. it

Compounding insult to injury the camera pans to its supposed supporting evidence a BBC News item titled [Sweden's Rape Rate Under the Spotlight](#) by Ruth Alexander the BBC's *More or Less* producer/presenter. Yet, Ruth had actually written an article in 2012 (5 years previously) stating that it was wrong to call Sweden the rape capital of Europe. Horowitz had apparently resurrected and recast the message of this article so that it sounded current and supportive of the message he wished to convey. Ruth Alexander's 2012 analysis was indeed investigating why Swedish police were recording the highest rate of sexual violence offences in Europe. In summary, this data actually reflected a 2005 reform in the Swedish definition of rape to include victims influenced by sleep or intoxication, an increased recording rigour on the part of the Swedish police, and finally a change of social attitudes leading to an increased willingness of the part of the Swedish population to report offences. A recording rigour and reporting willingness not yet replicated in other countries thus rendering international comparisons void.

Horowitz's documentary seems to be conflating Muslim immigration to Sweden with an alleged rise in rape. In absolute terms Germany has taken in more Muslim refugees than Sweden but Sweden as a smaller country has proportionately taken in more. But, as Ruth Alexander makes clear, asserting a concomitant increase in rape is:

"... just flat out wrong. Over the last 5 years rape has not skyrocketed in Sweden... The

period it did rise sharply was 5 years before the big influx of refugees, something the documentary does not make clear at all”.

But was the above an example of Fake News? Perhaps, surprisingly, Ruth Alexander appears to think not. She avoids this label because she asserts there are legitimate stories to be told about immigration, integration and crime in Sweden so despite the misrepresentation of her 2012 story she chooses to not label it as fake news.

Hmm. That makes for a worthy point of consideration for all students of media. The Alexander story was misrepresented to amplify and support a desired narrative. That narrative in turn was willingly absorbed and disseminated globally by a receptive vehicle who was in a position to repackage such flawed evidence into his own narrative and so generated news headlines.

While the *More or Less* example above provides many worthy points relevant to a discussion about what and what isn't fake news the next example is perhaps less ambiguous.

In exploring the concept of consent in human affairs episode 2 of the excellent two part documentary [The Age of Consent, Episode 2](#) (BBC Radio 4, 22 March 2017) presented by Helena Kennedy QC includes a startling example of how consent can be manipulated by Fake News invented and employed with the intention of shifting public and public opinion towards an objective desired by the inventors. At circa 6 minutes into the episode the philosopher James Garvey author of [The Persuaders](#) a book about the engineering of consent highlights the Nayirah Testimony given to a US Senate caucus held following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi troops prior to the first Gulf War. The story was heart-rending. Nayirah described how as a 15 year old hospital volunteer she witnessed how Saddam Hussein's troops had flung Kuwaiti babies to the floor to die while stealing their incubators. The testimony played a key part in swinging US political opinion away from the sanctions option and towards direct military engagement by coalition troops. Nayirah (a pseudonym) later turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US and a member of the Kuwaiti royal family. The story was a clever invention delivered with devastating effect ; an example of potent Fake News or atrocity propaganda designed to generate an emotional response in target groups. It succeeded. The story was repeated by then President George Bush and others and so became integrated into the decision making process towards war. And Nayirah? She never was a volunteer at the hospital but was instead part of what proved to be a very effective

Kuwaiti propaganda strategy whose effects still reverberate to this day.

But why are human so prone to stories such as these?

Garvey suggests that the Enlightenment concept of the rational being who seeks facts to inform decisions is deeply flawed. Instead we inherently attracted to interesting stories which have the possibility of truth. We then become inclined to seek evidences to support these desired narratives and possible truths, i.e we incline to post-truth thinking in which we decide (or are helped to) what 'feels' true first. There are people who are very good at constructing such stories and whom are only too happy to furnish subtle 'evidence' to which those who have bought the initial story become vulnerable. In effect, Garvey suggests, people are easily led.

Before rushing to criticism of 'Nayirah', however, let's restate the Churchill quote at the top of this page.

In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.

All sides in conflicts or periods of turmoil/instability tend to employ false news in order to gain advantage from doing so. State institutions have both the capacity and willingness to apply extraordinary levels of resources to building "bodyguards of lies" when they seek such advantages (or to redress disadvantages) either for military or economic reasons. Viewed objectively, Kuwait's invention contributed to the eventual ejection of a much stronger invading army from their territory. The unfortunate consequence of employing atrocity propaganda that is later discredited, however, is to increase the resistance to belief when such news emerges from future conflicts. And that can impede or stop interventions, with potentially horrific consequences for victims. As recent history has shown, however, e.g. Libya, even justifiable interventions to mitigate an impending atrocity can still have unforeseen and very long-term consequences; because equally unpalatable and unpredictable futures then become possible.

(Work-in-progress – to be continued)

Further Reading/Listening (work-in-progress)

[Half Life](#) (Cyberstanza, 3 Dec 2016)

[Fake News](#), Law in Action [0-11m.25s], BBC Radio 4, 21 March 2017

Here was a worthy segment in this excellent BBC legal current affairs programme. The item first of all defines news as a story which needs to be both new and true. If it's not true it can't be news but the growth of social media seems to be making it difficult for people to tell the difference between news, views and propaganda. Some great examples of fake news are provided, e.g. in the lead up to the 2016 US election one headline shouts "FBI agent suspected in Hilary email leaks found dead in apparent murder-suicide" – but it never happened. Or the horrendous so called Pizza Gate where a bogus news item claimed that Bill and Hilary Clinton were running a sex ring from a Washington DC pizza parlour. While assuming that 99.9% of people would see such wild claims for what they are, one of the 0.1% with disordered thinking took it upon himself to turn up with a gun at said unfortunate pizza parlour and demand more information from bemused and terrified customers and staff. The item then explores what fake news is in more detail from a legal standpoint, i.e. false reporting incorporating inaccurate content dressed up as real news with the intention of deceiving the readership by misinforming and misleading. A particularly interesting twist was provided by the Law in Action item when it revealed that fake news is not such a new concept at all, i.e. the first codification of English law in 1275 AD contained an Act pertaining to defamation and "the spreading of fake news". So if fake news isn't new why is it such a burning issue now? It's down to the explosion of potential methods and opportunities for distribution of fake news that has amplified the problem. The internet and its social media services means that fake news is no longer contained (or containable) within the context of its originating source but quickly transitions from one platform to another. That matters because if the originating source was, say, a website with a reputation for publishing that type of content then readers would be able to take that into account when drawing conclusions as to its validity. Once free of that context, however, the reader loses the ability to consider the provenance when judging the information/misinformation, i.e. it's not so

much the posts or tweets as the re-posts or re-tweets that do the damage because the visual cues and symbols of the original context are lost. Once misinformation from an untrustworthy or biased source transitions to other platforms and networks it can quickly be disseminated by unsuspecting consumers and friends who trust each other and so effectively 'launder' the fake news until it is perceived as real because it is now being disseminated by trusted sources. The motivated and cautious may, nevertheless, may wish to validate such 'news' but how are they to do so? A Google search? A Wikipedia search? Wikipedia takes a "wisdom of crowds" approach to editing with around 30 million self-registered editors of its pages although only around 140,000 of the crowd are 'active editors' who create new pages and edit others. Detecting and remedying fake news in this public platform is to say the least difficult. Wikipedia is not a primary source of information. Its pages are derived from and informed by many varying types of secondary sources, e.g. newspapers, magazines, books, authoritative websites. It's better quality pages will backup the information, stories or the assertions within the stories by declaring (and perhaps linking to) these secondary sources. Although as vulnerable to the planting of false stories as any public-access online information service in Wikipedia's case the sheer number of people watching and correcting mitigates the impact of the relatively small number who try and interfere with consensus record. So Wikipedia is probably not the optimum choice for planting a fake news story that will gain traction. For that, one of the many social media platforms is the preferred choice. The laws of libel do apply to individuals who falsely traduce another persons reputation and that also includes those who knowingly forward such false stories, e.g. retweet. Recourse to the law is, however, very expensive and that is made more difficult when false stories originate and are disseminated in varying global jurisdiction. The default defensive posture of social media platforms, e.g. Twitter, or Facebook is that they are mere aggregators of user-produced content and so champions of free speech, and not primary publishers is now being challenged. The counter-argument is that the business model of such social media platforms, however, is much too dependent on computer algorithms for detection and correction. What is actually required is a much higher degree of human inspection and judgement making - preferably pre-publication or dissemination. The Law in Action segment concluded by contrasting how the established news agencies such as Reuters approach their role by verifying the source, inviting commentary from the primary subjects, not publishing what is known to be untrue but being willing to report that someone made an assertion known to be untrue, and finally acknowledging what is not known. In summary, old fashioned journalistic values - the very things that now being lost in the rush to embrace the apparent immediacy

and excitement of being able to 'share' so easily.