Between Fact and Fakery

Information and Instability in the South Caucasus and Beyond

Frederic Labarre und George Niculescu (Eds.)

Study Group Information
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16th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
"Regional Stability in the South Caucasus"

2/2018
Vienna, February 2018
Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher:
Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
Rossauer Lände 1
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:
National Defence Academy
Command
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:
PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

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February 2018
ISBN 978-3-903121-33-1

Printing:
ReproZ W 18-0474
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Wien
Disclaimer

The content herein is the result of the collaborative work of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG). The policy recommendations presented here have been produced by, and in consultation with, workshop participants and voluntary contributors. However, opinions, analyses and conclusions found in this and other similar documents produced by the RSSC SG and its affiliates do not necessarily represent the individual, collective or national positions of the co-chairs, panel moderators, sponsors and/or organizers of the RSSC SG workshops, and in no way, shape or form represent the policies of the Austrian Ministry of Defence, the Operations Staff of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes (PfP Consortium), the PfP Consortium itself or any of the positions or policies of the latter's national and international organization stakeholders.
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PART IV: THE PEACE POTENTIAL OF FAKE RY. USING YESTERDAY’S LIES FOR TOMORROW’S PEACE
Fake News: Can There Be a Positive Side?

Gregory Simons

The men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars; the men they detest most violently are those who try to tell them the truth.

H. L. Mencken, US journalist

Introduction

Fake news is firmly in the public’s attention once more, occupying a lot of media space to the presumed unstoppable power and the consequences of this much slated threat to the very fabric of society and the democratic system. It has been projected as a great menace and has gradually snowballed into a moral panic in the information environment. However, in spite of the great deal of recent publicity on the fake news issue, it is far from being a very recent ‘invention’ and problem.

A lot of the blame has been directed at social media and the mainstream media for spreading fake news on an unprecedented level and on a global scale. There is a great deal of divergence among stakeholders on the definition and significance of fake news. In spite of there being relatively little objective comprehensive research done on the phenomenon of fake news, many alarmist assertions point to a massive problem and risk. The overwhelming focus of media reporting and academic research focuses on the insidious use of fake news for narrow and selfish purposes.

This paper shall undertake the ambitious task of investigating whether it is ethically and practically possible and permissible to disseminate fake news. The assumption being that not all fake news is equal, currently there is a concentration on the destructive and selfish forms, but some forms will possibly be benevolent and for a greater good. Therefore, the following question will be asked; under what circumstances is it permissible and possible to communicate fake news to target audiences?
The first step of this paper will be to identify and define the role and significance of news in society. There is also a need to distinguish between the ideal (utopian) and pragmatic aspects of this task as well. After this section, there will be an effort to catch the academic and practitioner debate on fake news, especially with regards to its definition and understanding its significance and implications. Finally, the paper will address the ethical and philosophical question as to whether it is OK to tell a lie in a ‘good’ cause, and by extension of that whether it is theoretically and practically possible to engage in a ‘benevolent’ form of fake news.

Role of News

In terms of an idealised and utopian understanding of the role of journalism (as the professional producers of news) in a democratic society (where persuasion rather than coercion takes place in society between the political elite and the masses), five functions are presumed to exist. 1) To inform citizens of what is happening in their surroundings, 2) to educate the public as to the significance and meaning of those ‘facts’, 3) to provide a platform for open political discussions in the public sphere to facilitate the formation of public opinion, 4) to provide publicity to the governmental and political institutions as a watchdog role of journalism, and 5) as a channel for the advocacy of political viewpoints (McNair, 2007: 19-20). These functions often manifest themselves in the form of news.

News is something that saturates the information environment, and can come in many different shapes and forms from many different kinds of media. So what is news exactly? Denis McQuail provides a concise definition. “The main form in which current information about public events is carried by media of all kinds. There is a great diversity of types and formats as well as cross-cultural differences, but defining characteristics are generally held to be timeliness, relevance and reliability (truth value)” McQuail, 2010, p. 564). News can be found in many different shapes and forms, there are a number of common underlying conceptual commonalities though.

One of the basic underlying assumptions and duties of journalism is to separate “facts” from “values” – i.e. the importance of objectivity in reporting. Having said this, rather than being found in absolute values, objectivity
and subjectivity should be viewed as being in greater or lesser sums. News were something that was seen as needing to be factual and non-partisan (Allan, 1999, p. 18). Therefore, there is an inherent commitment to the truth in news reporting. “The news frame’s tacit claim to comprehensiveness dictates that it must be seen as ‘balanced’ and ‘fair’ in its treatment of counter-positions” (Ibid., p. 64). Thus there are many different automatic assumptions and claims when the word news is evoked. Ties to the producers of the news content can be found in understanding that the ideological power of journalism is what makes it important to those seeking political influence and power. “The ownership and control of print and broadcast journalistic media is presumed to bring with it power in the political sphere because underpinning the ‘truth’ of any successful journalistic account of events is a statement of values and ideology” (McNair, 1998: 57).

However, the format in which the news is told has been changing. In response to changes in the information environment, news is being presented in a more simplified, trivial and entertaining manner. Infotainment, the name given to this process, creates a much more descriptive rather than analytical approach to news reporting (Thussu, 2009). Political news that involves highly subjective value judgements in an environment that requires the façade of perceived legitimacy is especially vulnerable to manipulation in order to strike the ‘right’ tone. Armed conflict is one of those subjects in particular, which can be subjected to the infotainment format. “Covering wars is inevitably a difficult journalistic endeavour but the demand for live 24/7 news, as well as competition among news providers, can lead to the sensationalisation and trivialisation of often complex situations and a temptation to highlight the entertainment value of news” (Ibid., p. 113). Little is done by mass media in trying to adequately explain actual or proposed policy, especially when the element of a crisis laden value conflict is present, instead there is a tendency to entertaining or promoting a certain policy path (Andersen, 2006, p. 82). This has a tendency to make news as a marketable political product, rather than as something to inform and enlighten an audience.

The infotainment format of news lends itself well to supporting a policy position in a political conflict. On the superficial level, news concerns being objective and telling the truth, which can have a legitimising effect in terms of news projecting itself as an objective and enlightening activity. On the
applied level, infotainment brings a level of shallowness to the news through it being very descriptive (and therefore lacking in analysis), which has the tendency to leave the event out of context. Infotainment also has a tendency to assign values to the different parties of a story, which includes identifying the “good” and “bad” sides of a story narrative.

Related to the issue of infotainment, although not the same, is the problem of spin entering the news sphere. Spin is a means and form of rhetorical-based deception. “Spinners mislead by means that range from subtle omissions to outright lies. Spin paints a false picture of reality by bending facts, mischaracterising the words of others, ignoring or denying crucial evidence, or just ‘spinning a yarn’ — by making things up” (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007, p. vii). Mixed in with this problem is the problematic understanding and judging of what is the ‘truth.’ As noted by academics, such as McQuail, truth, objectivity and verification are all essential elements of the news. The contrary has been noted, “…perhaps, they speculate, in the new information age reality is simply a matter of belief, not anything objective or verified” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, p. 6). Ultimately, such as situation as the current one described above, when applied to the news industry leaves the public at risk from interest groups seeking to manipulate and exploit public perception and opinion.

Thus journalism can be caught in a severe dilemma and predicament between ideal public expectations and pragmatic situational demands. Journalism is expected to be the “harness” of the truth, which means adhering to the elements that contribute to journalistic truth — accuracy, context and balance (Bivins, 2010: 122-123). However, this situation can be offset and contradicted by journalistic deception. This is in relation to “using questionable means to gather news deemed of value” although this is normally in the context of utilitarian grounds in order to further public interest (Bivins, 2010: 124). The situation may also see the practice conducted in order to further vested political or economic interests, thereby undermining the spirit and practice of public interest. Therefore, there are some that have seen news as a mechanism to steer the ‘democratic’ process by engineering the consent of the public through the nature of the timing and content of the news (Bernays, 1947). As a result journalism and news becomes a process more akin to persuasion rather than informing and educating.
One period that is more susceptible to abusing the power of journalism and news is during periods of increased political competition (such as during an election), where information is used for the purpose of influencing target audiences opinion and behaviour through persuasive communication. The situation may include news media providing their endorsement for a specific political candidate or political party (McDonald Ladd & Lenz, 2009); a generalised media bias in favour of a particular party by a media outlet to affect voting patterns, such as Fox News coverage (Della Vigna & Kaplan, 2007); news media coverage of crisis events and especially the initial phases of wars, such as the Iraq War of 2003 (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008). The news content coverage of foreign nations can also be used for an agenda-setting influence, where negative coverage can have a negative effect on the perception and opinion among the audience of the country covered (Wanta et al, 2004). The result is a rapidly changing information environment and people’s relationship and reaction to it.

The rapidly fragmenting global information environment that is characterised by starkly diverging projections of reality may be part of a larger picture. This is one “pertaining to a larger crisis of liberal institutions marked by their potential loss of hegemony in deliberative practices and collective truth finding” (Knupfer, 2017: 15). This has had a marked effect upon the news industry in a couple of ways. In a study of recent developments in television cable news in the United States, two trends have been observed—a blurring of soft and hard news, and increasing levels of overt partisanship (Coe et al, 2008). Such developments have led to some searching for answers to the question, what is objective journalism? Media Lens took up this question and concluded that objective journalism must be for the truth rather than subjectively supporting one side or another within the context of news coverage.¹ It has produced a situation where some observers have warned that in the contemporary global environment, the truth is losing.²

An interesting attempt at turning trends and events came with the European Federation of Journalists, which represents some 320,000 journalists across 39 countries, attempt to lobby the European Parliament to declare journalism as a public good. Within the context of this increasing toxic information environment is the issue of fake news.

**Understanding and Defining the Fake News Phenomenon**

The term fake news has been somewhat co-opted by Donald Trump recently, it is global and further eroding an already weakening trust in media. A lot of attention has been focused upon the issue of fake news recently, the level and nature of activity, and the supposed risks and threats that come with it. Blame for the current fake news trends has been levelled at different scapegoats. “Some have rushed to blame technology and the bottom-line priorities of internet and social media giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter for the crisis. Others point to the media’s own failures – a deeply flawed and politicised press and broadcast system stuck in a metropolitan bubble, itself part of the establishment elite, and unable to properly connect with the frustration and anger of people and communities.”

Fake news as a manipulative tool of communication and a problem is not something that is new; President Thomas Jefferson complained in 1807 that someone who does not read a newspaper is better informed on events

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that someone that does read newspapers.\textsuperscript{6} What is new and changing is how fake news is conceived and defined. In a 2017 a British Parliamentary inquiry submission identified a number of aspects associated with the fake news trends:

- Fake news has a broader definition than online media outlets publishing false stories to garner publicity;
- Fake news has been a problem in the news media for a long time and fake news articles can be published by any media outlet;
- Two common sources of fake news are press releases as part of marketing campaigns that are reproduced in the media without due process of fact-checking, as well as reporting on developments in science without a full critique of the scientific research conducted.\textsuperscript{7}

The first point is in reference to the expansion of public relations and lobbying firms inside the news systems of the world, which has resulted in a deliberate form of news management.\textsuperscript{8} This is a basic summary from the point of view and observations of policy makers and practitioners, trying to establish the nature and extent of the problem at hand. Rubin, Chen and Conroy (2015) identified three types of fake news in their research: 1) serious fabrications that are uncovered in the media; 2) large-scale hoaxes; and 3) humorous fakes, such as news satire, parody and game shows. There are some that object to the use of the term ‘fake news’ because they think that it is “unhelpful”, yet feel obliged to use it because there are a lack of alternative means to name it. There is also an understanding that this is not just about news, but the whole information ecosystem. Therefore, there needs


to be a breaking down of that environment into: 1) the different types of content being created and shared; 2) understanding what motivates those who create that content; and 3) means of disseminating that content.9 Fake news has had a long history of use, recently the way in which the term was defined began to change.

About one decade ago, some academics attempted to characterise such media and communication formats and content as satire and talk shows as being ‘fake news’ owing to the aspect of their dependence on the mimicry of journalists and journalism that made up the ‘real’ news (Borden & Tew, 2007: 312-313). More recently, the definition of ‘fake news’ has moved to one that includes the elements of deception and misinformation. Albright (2017) stresses the need for journalists to seek facts and to engage audiences with accurate information. However, it is contradicted by an information environment where fact-based evidence is less relevant for a growing segment of the populace. This is evident where news organisations follow news ‘trends’ and shape the narrative with deceptive statements.

The observation by Albright concerning audiences increasingly seeking opinionated news rather than objective news was in part substantiated in a study on youth news behaviours and attitudes by Marchi (2012). Given the current level of debate and use of the term ‘fake news’ a new turn in the definition and understanding of the practice seems to have evolved, which is fake news is a label to attach to news and information that contradicts one’s world view and beliefs, and within the context of politicised debates where disputed facts surround complex controversies.10 This is seen in the different sides that publicly dismiss news and information, such as Trump’s

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use of this tactic against mainstream reporting on or about him.11 This leads to discussions on the presumed effect of fakery and assigning guilt for it.

The fake news cycle does exert an effect upon people that are exposed to it. Research conducted by Balmas (2014) hints at a trend where people exposed to high levels of fake news and low levels of hard news (as opposed to high levels of exposure to both fake and hard news) perceive a greater level of realism and authenticity in the fake news content. The higher profile of fake news in the global information environment has resulted in calls for creating automated methods for detecting deception and fake news in informational and news content (Conroy et al, 2015; Chen et al, 2015). Social media have taken a lot of attention and blame for spreading ‘fake news’, however, a lack of professionalism by journalists should be taken into account too. Even though social media is a significant source of news headlines for mainstream media, and in some cases at least a third of that information is proven to be false, there are still few editorial guidelines issued on how to verify information from social media sources.12 This has an impact upon how the public view mainstream media content and its reliability. A Harvard-Harris poll conducted in the United States in 2017 saw nearly two thirds of the respondents say mainstream press is full of fake news, which is a sentiment held by voters across the ideological spectrum.13 There are some disagreements and diverging perceptions concerning the issue of fake news and how it should be defined and understood.

However, not everyone agrees on the level of presumed potency of social media and fake news in manipulating people to think and behave in a manner desired by the communicator. Some observers have noted the co-opting of fake news during the 2016 US Presidential Elections as a means to try and put the opponent at a disadvantage, it is a situation where the

mainstream media were not a neutral party, but a highly active part of the process. A Stanford University study of the fake news storm around the 2016 Presidential Elections in the United States revealed a great deal of Measure of Activity in terms of the sheer number of fake news items being published and shared. This did not automatically translate into Measure of Effect though, the study suggesting that it is unlikely that fake news swayed the election result (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Internet researcher William Dutton refers to fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles as being under researched and overhyped, where the panic over these is not supported by the current evidence. He also concludes that like-minded people tend to unwittingly lock themselves into echo chambers that tend to reinforce their own existing biases.

Mission Impossible: “Good” Fake News?

Before engaging in the question as to whether it is possible to engage in fake news with ‘good’ (benevolent intent) fake news dissemination, it is necessary to preliminarily engage in the subject of the ethics of lying. As the heart of this section it is about conscious efforts to deceive an audience through communication. Therefore, is it possible to delineate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ lies? It is a reference to the age-old dilemma of telling “little white lies”. White lies are conceived by some as an act of compassion, in order to avoid a hurtful or uncomfortable situation in a dignified manner in order to calm a potentially problematic situation. This is often thought of as being done on an individual basis, there are other forms of ‘benevolent’ lying too.

There is a stream of thought in psychology that people do not mind lying if they think it is in a good cause. Gentle untruths can be referred to as being “blue lies”, which is used to describe “lying in the name of the collective good.” An example could be when intelligence officials lie for the sake of the nation’s security.18 Thus there is a stream of thought on the practice of “benevolent deception.” But there is a clear distinction to observe: “well-intentioned lies are considered moral, while selfish or meaningless lies are considered immoral.”19 As a summarisation of the philosophy of ‘benevolent’ lying, lies can be seen as being excusable if they are intended as being in the cause for a better world. But then this becomes a highly contentious and subjective, not to mention debatable issue as it involves the use of deliberate deception in order to influence and persuade a target audience.

Historically and contemporarily there have been cases of deception, which have relied on publicity in order to be successful by influencing and persuading particular target audiences that consume news from specific sources. This influence may be intended as a direct or an indirect means, but in all cases the actions are calculated and deliberate and are intended to influence the perception, opinion and behaviour of that audience in such a manner that aids the aims and goals of the originator of the communication. Thus there needs to be present: 1) a conscious and deliberate deception through the communication of fake news; 2) a concrete aim or goal by the messenger; 3) an intended or desired response from the target audience(s); and 4) the message needs to be communicated openly in the public information space. In addition to these requirements as a result of the specific inquiry of this paper, an extra requirement of the fake news must have benevolent intent and be for the ‘greater good’ as understood by the term blue lie.

One of the age old sources of public deception is by the military. From the time of Sun Tzu with the notion of military deception as a means of gain-

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ing advantage over a military adversary has gained greater traction and seen these deceptions played out in news coverage. These events certainly meet Bernays' (1947) criteria that there is no coincidence in the nature of the timing or content of news in this regard. There has been an, at times, uneasy relationship between the journalism and the military and especially during periods of war. This creates a situation where journalism is theoretically guided by public interest that requires critical publicity and the military being guided by operational security that requires the guarding of knowledge and information from public scrutiny. However, mass media and journalism do provide a measure of 'authenticity' for the military's deceptive communications (such as fake news).

In 1990-1991 Operation Desert Storm witnessed the use of operational-level military deception, which involved the United States and its allies funnelling fake news to the mass media and journalists. The intention was to gradually feed the fake news to Iraq's decision makers, who were expected to be reading, watching and listening to media news content. As a result, it was intended to mislead the enemy through that distorted information and therefore achieve security and gain the element of surprise (Ross, 1998). From an ethical standpoint, how does this situation meet the earlier mentioned criteria concerning the requisite conditions needed for benevolent fake news?

This was certainly a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of the military and political hierarchy to communicate fake news. There was certainly a concrete aim and goal by those communicating, namely to deceive and confuse Iraqi military decision makers in to achieve military surprise and advantage. Given that the fake news was communicated via mass media news content, the nature of the communication was very open to global audiences. Finally the issue of the 'greater good' for society, does this in fact exist. Of course, this is a very disputable and contestable point, especially given the fact that in general people do not like the feeling of having been deceived, even if they were not the primary target audience. Having given this caveat, it is possible to argue that the "greater good" was served if the narrative for the war is accepted at face value. That particular narrative being that the war was ostensibly fought in the name of liberating the country of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.
What about other cases of fake news that do not include the aspect of military deception, can they too, be considered in any sense ethically and morally justifiable? A second case to be selected is from Kyrgyzstan where officials lied about cause of deaths in Kyrgyz girl’s boarding school near Osh after the 2010 ethnic unrest. In late 2013 I was engaged in fieldwork after being assigned as one of the external experts by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to investigate and analyse the performance of the Kyrgyz officials (at local, provincial and national levels) at crisis communication.

The background to the situation was the bloody events of the summer of 2010, which saw a second revolution (the first being in 2005), with the lack of a central government the state of law and order crumbled. In the Ferghan Valley, which is very ethnically diverse, a number of inter-ethnic tensions flared between different groups, especially between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. In the wake after the event, when a semblance of law and order was being re-established a group of Uzbek men broke into a boarding school for ethnic Kyrgyz and killed a number of them. During my interview with Kyrgyz officials (shall remain anonymous for security reasons), I was informed that officials made the statement that this was an “accident” and not a break-in and deliberate incident. Although the parents of the girls understood, upon reclaiming the bodies of their children, the official reason was fake and the parents were not happy, there were greater issues at risk. To announce the real reason and to have this published would be almost certain to provoke a reprisal attack that would witness a return to the ethnic bloodshed of the summer of 2010.

Unlike the Operation Desert Storm case, the Kyrgyz case represents a tactical level of fake news. When seeking to apply the conditional criteria as to whether this is a justifiable case of ‘blue lie’ fake news, there seem to be some support for the idea of it being possible as it is not intended as being self-serving or selfish. What is certain is that it is a deliberate and calculated communication of fake news. The concrete aim and goal of the authorities was to prevent further ethnic unrest. There was an intended effect upon the target audience, namely the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities to not know the real reasons and therefore permit a gradual defusing of the hostility and tensions. The message was communicated to the general public through local media outlets. This case is much clearer cut as to whether it
serves the ‘greater good’ of society or not than the last case. It involves attempts to try and prevent inter-ethnic violence and the likely deaths and destruction that would result from such, which involves preventing rather than enabling violence.

Conclusion

Fake news is more generally framed, perceived and understood as being an insidious problem that potentially will undermine journalism, mass media and the very fabric of liberal democracy. This is due in part, how the utopian role of journalism and mass media, particularly within the frame of news production, play in a democratic society. A reference to the notion of the function of the fourth estate, a check and balance against the excesses and abuses of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. It is also a product of people’s aversion to the thought of having their free will and choice being manipulated by another party.

The question posed in the very beginning of this paper was under what circumstances is it permissible and possible to communicate fake news to target audiences? Before arriving at the answer to this particular question it was necessary to delve in to the significance of news and its utopian vision for a democratic society. According to many researchers, objective news is a requirement for an active citizenry to inform themselves in order to make the best possible choices concerning the fundamental issues and challenges they face in their lives. However, a more cynical understanding of news is that it is an instrument to influence and persuade the public in order to ‘steer’ them in a façade of a democratic process. Certainly fake news fits into the second category of the news function.

When entertaining and considering an ethical question, such as the theoretical and practical permissibility of using fake news to manipulate a target public, there needs to be an assessment of the specific cultural and philosophical ethics that surround such a proposal. In way of an initial step, the question becomes is it acceptable to lie and deceive? During upbringing there is a strict taboo in society on lying, however, there is also a scale of lying too. One of these is the concept of the white lie, which is associated with an individual in an awkward social context. There is also the concept
of the blue lie, which is understood within a collective context and the idea of achieving an outcome for the good of society.

Therefore, in spite of the taboos of lying and people’s general dislike for being lied to and deceived, it is in fact possible and permissible to lie. If the lie is for a ‘good’ reason that benefits society as opposed to something motivated by selfish desires. Both of the cases used within the context of this paper use of the concept and logic of fake news being used for the greater good of society. One is done at an operational level military operation, and the other is done at a tactical level civil operation. Although the military case does raise a number of further ethical and philosophical questions concerning enabling the use of military force, at a rhetorical level it is intended to redress the situation where Iraq attacked and occupied the country and therefore this seems to be more clear cut in terms of the blue lie logic than the military operation that was launched in March 2003. The example from Southern Kyrgyzstan is another example of a blue lie, where a lie was circulated via fake news in the local media in order to keep law and order in an environment of inter-ethnic tension.

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