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# The Medium Is the Fake News

**F**rom a compromised U.S. presidential election [1] to a gun-wielding “self-investigation” of a non-existent child-trafficking ring, the impact of fake news is clear. Yet we have not paused to define exactly what fake news is, although attempts to control it have suddenly gained traction. Facebook, for example, has announced a number of measures aimed at fake news. These have been tested in the U.S. and will be rolled out in Germany, where strict laws against hate speech have put pressure on Facebook’s usual laissez-faire approach to content. Where and whether the policy will see wider adoption remains to be seen.

It seems simple: Fake news is news that is not true, right? But this definition pushes aside the underlying question of what constitutes news. That category has already been stretched beyond limit by the proliferation of sites offering a mix of journalism, journalistic writing, and opinion. On an everyday basis, this is most apparent in the News app on my iPhone, where op-ed pieces from the *Washington Post* appear alongside straight reporting from Fox News. My feed is peppered with stories from other sources, such as Quartz, which informed me today that only 20 percent of millennials have ever tried a Big Mac. There is also a continual slew of click-bait articles from all types of sources starting with some variation on “Five things you need to know...” In a print newspaper, it’s easier to distinguish this sort of not-quite-news. Op-eds, in general, are not on the front page; they’re toward the back, while the front page is reserved for reporting conducted

by the newspaper’s own staff. Wire stories are sandwiched in the middle. Advertising is corralled in boxes and designed to be clearly distinguishable from editorial content. But in the News app and elsewhere online, every story is equivalent. Opinion looks like reporting, which looks like public relations and advertising. For some, the latest speculation about the cause of exploding smartphone batteries is news, while others value reporting on which dusty shade of pink is now in vogue. Add politics to the mix—say, by referring to legislation as Obamacare instead of the Affordable Care Act—and further complications arise in distinguishing between fact, opinion, and advocacy. Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism that the medium is the message rings true.

Not long before presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway referred to mistruths as “alternative facts,” many suggested reframing the issue altogether. For example, the Daily Kos published an article titled “Let’s Call ‘Fake News’ What It Really Is: Propaganda.” The problem with this shuffle is that while some fake news surely is propaganda, not all of it fits neatly into this category, which for me brings to mind a strange mix of an organized network of political operatives combined with the sound of Natasha’s cackle burned in from childhood binges of *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. But some fake news is just opportunistic forgery.

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The *New York Times*, for example, reported on Cameron Harris, who fabricated, apparently without the help of Russian masterminds, an entirely false story about the discovery of pre-marked ballots sitting in an Ohio warehouse. His motivation? Money for student loans, car payments, and rent. And with his fake-news websites pulling in a reported \$1,000 an hour in revenue, it worked [2].

In the field of human-computer interaction (HCI), it has long been a given that the interface transforms the user. We all become quite different humans, with different capabilities, different potentials, and different proclivities when information technology enters the scene. The fake-news phenomenon suggests we might pull back from this user perspective to consider the systemic effects of the supposedly self-regulating systems that we’ve built. The libertarian ethos baked into Facebook’s fake-news solution will require users to flag potentially incorrect content in order for it to be sent to a team of professional fact-finders. This fix is based on the assumption that in a free market, the best information will rise to the top. But the economic forces behind fake news—it’s especially profitable compared with traditional journalism, what with all that costly reporting and fact-checking—suggest that it is here to stay. Furthermore, the low participation rates on collectively edited sites such as Wikipedia indicate that far more people will be clicking “Share” than reporting fake news.

The elision of fake news with propaganda reminded me of *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the*



*Circuits of Drive*, a 2010 book by Jodi Dean that I read shortly after it was published [3]. A dense work of literary theory, its basic argument is that the participation afforded by blogs is the *coup de triomphe* of capitalism. At the time, the argument seemed like an overreach, but now it seems eerily prescient. Users of participatory media, Dean claims, are drawn into a feedback loop in which the production of content—anything from political ruminations to mundane photographs of renovated kitchens—is work no longer performed by established producers, but instead offloaded to consumers themselves. What has happened since the publication of Dean’s book is the further commodification of online content. Blogger and Influencer have become desirable professional occupations [4]. Whereas Dean’s bloggers might have been a bit oblivious to the process, today’s producers of online content are keen to the profits to be made by attracting a large audience.


I was also reminded of my own experience blogging. For about a year, I was paid to write two posts per day for Apartment Therapy, one of the first home-design blogs to make it big. Writing blog posts informed an article I wrote that was later published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, but the demanding publication schedule also changed the way I saw the world. Visiting a friend's house became part social call, part scouting mission. I was always on the lookout for something new, something clever—anything, really, that I could photograph and that I thought people would click on—because page views were the success metric. Lots of page views meant a nice bonus check at the end of the month. My aesthetic experience of the world transformed, becoming useful primarily as an economic resource.

Dean was right. Social media is rewiring us to see the world in a fundamentally different way: as a resource for representations that themselves become a vehicle for value.

Flagging fake news cannot—and will not—fix a problem endemic to the medium that generates it. What will is a question worthy of further debate.

## ENDNOTES

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3. Dean, J. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Polity, Cambridge, MA, 2010.
4. Takahasi, C., interviewed by Simon, S. Using social media, students aspire to become 'influencers'. *Weekend Edition Saturday*. NPR News. Jan. 7, 2017; <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/07/508668030/using-social-media-students-aspire-to-become-influencers>

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