

## Fake News and Our Crisis of Authority

By Martin Gurri

The term “fake news” was born out of a need to explain the impossible: the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. The phrase lacked salience before November 2016. Eight days after the election, *Buzzfeed* published a sloppy analysis piece asserting that “fake news stories on Facebook generated more engagement” than stories from *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. The slant of the fake news heavily favored Trump.<sup>1</sup> Four days later the *Times* published a story titled, “How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study.”<sup>2</sup> There followed a vast outpouring of articles about fake news in the US and global media, capped, on November 24, by a *Washington Post* article purporting to show that the fake pro-Trump and anti-Clinton stories on Facebook had been the work of “sophisticated Russian propaganda” intent on “undermining faith in American democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

This narrative became canonical. It comforted the political and media elites to believe that Donald Trump had triumphed because of falsehoods manipulated by that arch-villain, Vladimir Putin.

More than two years later, however, the accumulated data points in another direction. A multi-author study from Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center concluded that “fake news... had a minor effect on the media ecology during the presidential election.”<sup>4</sup> Another extensive study, conducted by Brendan Nyhan, Andrew Guess, and Jason Reifler, came to even more categorical conclusions: “Relatively few people consumed this form of content directly during the 2016 campaign, and even fewer did so before the 2018 election. Fake news consumption is concentrated among a narrow subset of Americans with the most conservative news diets. And, most notably, no credible evidence exists that exposure to fake news changed the outcome of the 2016 election.”<sup>5</sup>

Every other study on fake news that I am aware of has arrived at a similar place. The notion that Trump was elected by sophisticated Russian machinations on Facebook, as Nyhan writes, is more a form of “psychological refuge” than an accurate account of the events leading up to November 8, 2016.

The impulse to explain an impossible electoral outcome has obscured the most fundamental question about fake news: why on earth should anyone consume them? The answer is not difficult to obtain. Among large sectors of the public, trust in “mainstream” news media has evaporated. In the US, according to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, trust in news as an institution had fallen to 19 percent by the autumn of 2016.<sup>6</sup> In France – according to a Pew Research Center survey in April 2019 – just 35 percent of the public trust the news media, and only 4 percent said that they trust it “a lot.”<sup>7</sup> There are many reasons for this, but one strikes me as decisive. Much of the public perceives the news business as a game played by arrogant elites for the benefit of the established order. In the anti-establishment fervor sweeping the democratic world today, the news media has become a favorite target. This is certainly the case with the French gilets jaunes movement: here distrust has curdled into loathing. The protester who stated, “They tell nothing but lies,”<sup>8</sup> expressed a generally held belief.

Like every other institution we have inherited from the industrial age – very much including government – the news media has lost its legitimacy. The tsunami of digital information that has swept the world since the turn of the century has brought about a sort of cognitive chaos and a profound crisis of authority. The attention of the industrial-age mass audience has fractured like a fallen mirror. The public inhabits the broken shards. To be heard today, a voice must scream louder, and be more aggressive and outrageous, than the competition.

In such an environment, we must be clear about what constitutes the opposite of “fake.” It isn’t “objective,” or “scientific,” or “Platonic truth.” It’s “trusted.” Truth pertains to the source. We accept or reject information depending on our judgment of the speaker. That is the social and psychological reality regarding fake news. The elite class, including the purveyors of mass news, has lost all authority with the public. To restore that authority, the elites must, at a minimum, radically reform their behavior and rhetoric. Interactions with the public should be, and sound, more like useful Amazon transactions than the dictates of the voice of God. Should the industrial elites prove unable or unwilling to reform, I suspect that a mutinous public will drive them out of their high places, to make room for new people.

[Martin Gurri is a former CIA analyst and the author of *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* (Stripe Press)]

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Silverman, “This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook,” BuzzFeed (November 16, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> November 20, 2016. By Sapna Maheshwari.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Timberg, “Russian propaganda effort help spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say,” *Washington Post* (November 24, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Faris, Robert M., Hal Roberts, Bruce Etling, Nikki Bourassa, Ethan Zuckerman, and Yochai Benkler. 2017. *Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*. Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society Research Paper

<sup>5</sup> Brendan Nyhan, “Why Fears of Fake News Are Overhyped,” *Medium* (February 4, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey, Study #16804 (September 16-19, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Amy Mitchell, Nami Sumida, and Mason Walker, “News Media Attitudes in France,” Pew Research Center (April 23, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Evie Burrows-Taylor, “‘They tell nothing but lies’: France’s ‘yellow vests’ reveal their hatred of the media,” *The Local.fr* (January 13, 2019).