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IPA Webinar and Podcast Series 2022



Fake News:

The Role of Suggestion in a Fast World

**F A K E
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"Fake News: The Role of Suggestion in a Fast World"

David Morgan

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" Audre Lorde.

Audre Lorde's words, from "Your Silence Will Not Protect You", situates thinking and narrative, as central to recovery, of a freedom of mind, from inherited fear and silence.

I surmise that fakery, jiggery pokery, propaganda and downright lies have been a feature of human communication forever. Indeed lies are important, sometimes for survival, eg you wouldn't tell Adolf Hitler you're Jewish, gay or a gypsy.

However the powerful, the deranged and the obsessed have always had the drive and means to proclaim untruths and to manipulate others. It was ever so.

But what was not ever so is the proliferation of means through which fakery can be promulgated and the speed it happens. Even 25 years ago, pre rampant internet social media, the lies had to get into print and be handed out to be read and digested. Many of us trusted our chosen print sources, our esteemed newspapers and commentators the good old BBC. But today we turn to the internet for everything, we have a multitude of news outlets, gossip outlets, we tweet, we FaceTime, we dark web and we chat, proclaim and intervene endlessly. The hierarchy of investigative journalism has given way to a speed of lighting gossip regurgitation from whoever anonymous keyboard warrior who chooses to put out a message, whether the famous Russian bots to the paid for political targeting of Cambridge Analytica.

And our political leading class have of course made use of the opportunity to speak directly with their voters. President Trump conversed with his nation via Twitter (until he was banned). He churned out his tweet fragments with their claims and incitements with uncharacteristic diligence. These brief soundbites laden with insinuation, grievance and promise, gave him the keys to The Whitehouse!

And the UK's own Prime Minister (currently on the way out) Boris Johnson departs from established truths with near impunity. He claims whatever he needs to in the moment, contradictory or nonsensical, his audience swallows his claims.

Trump and Johnson are surfing the waves of social media. They know there is no fact checking of a tweet and any single claim they make will swim instantaneously into a multitude of channels. As readers we have no means of knowing any more what is a Big Lie and what may approximate reality.

Why for instance does Elon Musk want to buy Twitter and re-instate Trumps account because he knows these sound bites are now the seat of power. Tweeting is the new oratory. He who Tweets wins! Like Trumps single boastful sentences.

But I think there is a deep motive beyond the lies and power grabbing.

The fake news and fake politicians use powerful persuasion and suggestion which helps us avoid painful truths, a global abuse of power where the wealthy are basically exploiting the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, women, black people, workers and children and refugees, have under this fake unregulated capitalism, become seen as the weak, disenfranchised other who is exploited.

I believe that misinformation and the plethora of Online platforms are replete with examples of false information – from WhatsApp messages punting some miraculous cure for COVID, to social media posts claiming a politician said something they didn't.

The Whistleblowers I have worked alongside as part of my practice provide an alternative perspective, they talk truth to power and have the courage, they do not remain silent against fakery , Hospital managers exposing fraud, workers who expose faulty workmanship in emergency vehicles, Atticus like lawyers who are straight and interested in something other than just money, who expose fraud, and the wonderful Greta Thunberg.

I might say this is how unfettered unrestrained capitalism works, everything as Marcuse predicted, under this type of economy where everything becomes a one dimensionalised commodity, even truth is commodified and turned into one line. He who Tweets wins!

Fake News is a commodified symptom of our current social malaise providing often superficial and endless options, that become exhausting and like a new opium of the people overwhelm the capacity to think. We drown in information going from one theory to another unable to process anything before another idea arrives adding to the difficulty of thinking.

Omnipotent thinking as a defence against uncertainty

Those who have the most, are the only ones who appear to be free, to have and do what they want, because it's money that has become the only regulator. The fake news that our media pedals is driven by profit margins not a wish to communicate thought.

An economy of sleaze 'led by Trump like leaders, who like Spode in Bernard Shaws 'Man and Superman ' who peddle their simplistic certainties to alleviate deeper anxieties caused by mass inequality.

“when an individual is sick we may call it insanity, but when a society is sick, we call it normal.” Erich Fromm

Fake news and Lies

Trumps and Boris Johnson lies are to legion to go into , a few examples suffice , Trumps current denial of recent allegations, calling Ms Hutchinson's his ex staff secretaries testimony “sick” and “fraudulent.” or his criticism of dead military personnel as losers, later suggesting they themselves are fake recordings Or British PM Boris Johnson “I never misled parliament” which actually has a ring of truth because they all knew he was a fake and a liar and Johnson claims thats what they got.

These big liars expound fake news to bolster their positions having lost any awareness of their own truth, they knows somewhere, they are empty vessels, and fills his emptiness with fake new, lies , rhetoric , to seduce others, the seduction is necessary, otherwise like the emperors new clothes this underlying emptiness would be exposed.

It is us who have to be dispossessed of Truth, our need for serious thought emptied out, which of course we may welcome, like the emperors new clothes story and the emperors courtiers, who know he is naked, but have to collude with the fake news, that he is clothed to maintain their positions.

Is it disturbing to see through the veneer and easier to collude with the fakery. Otherwise we have to face the anxiety that those in charge don't know what they are doing, this uncertainty mirrors the fear of the void that the empty fake leader unable to really think filling the space with his simplistic Tweets, certainties and MAGA baseball hats and Brexit lies.

Lying shields us from our vulnerability to our own unconscious desires, but also corrodes a shared reality. Lies wield the power to create their own reality free of uncertainty. It relieves us of our uncertainty if we just believe (Cohen) and the unpleasant consequences of telling the truth dissolve in the comforting illusions being offered. Eg "There is no climate change it's a conspiracy." Oh good!"

It preserves us from embarrassment of having values that expose and protect our favourable self-image and maintaining a fragile equilibrium in face of potential break down.

People lie or create false narratives, because they' don't believe anyone can tolerate their truth. (Bion 1957).

Politicians like Trump or our mini Trump, Johnson lie, because they know at some level that they are bereft of real substance, victims of an education or upbringing where power and love of it, usually earned, a false self were over valued, were Goebells dictum, the bigger the lie the more people are likely to believe it, rules. They feel they have nothing else I believe they have no truth except that of their lies. It obviates the need to think.

I want to add that for the producer of false news and propaganda and /or lies there is an excitement when they see people trapped by their lies and fake stories.

Eg A journalist I used to see went from serious journalism to the gutter press and became very excited by his capacity to plant stories that he knew had very little validity. They sold well.

He became depressed, developing the belief that there was music emanating from radiators in his work place. It was fairly clear that the music of this man's soul had been externalised into a warm but inhuman place. In his analysis he at first brought his paranoid fear of exposure by his analysis, I was intent on exposing his story in an unscrupulous way , as it transpired many sessions later what he feared was his own internal reportage on his own loss of a serious thoughtful creative aspect of himself, that slowly had insight into the falseness of what he was now doing. He became his own whistleblower. I won't go into his narrative but it lay silent in his enactments via his work.

When faced with insight into their own calumny there is a wish to evacuate any insight into the messenger crying, fake news. In attempt to avoid insight or scrutiny into their behaviour they pathologise. My patient gave me the feeling that his analysis may become a sensational story and exposure of my exploiting him.

This frightening lurch to the right wing in many countries with all its certainties and the accompanying mendacious manipulation of truth to maintain it , is occurring in the face of the huge uncertainties that face us, such as climate change and its accompanying awareness of our mortality and the end of human existence on our planet.

I guess we really wish these unbelievable realities were fake news, but it's the truth and the truth is unbearable and I can really see the attraction of fake thinking and suggestions to the contrary. Like the character in The Matrix film who prefers the illusion of being kept in his delusions rather than face a reality off the machine.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=4YbMqcQK0k4>

This is real life and death anxiety we are facing, and it requires grown ups who can think, not the shallow reassuring infantile certainties of leaders providing their version of fake news, helped by a press and internet intent on garnering easy followers with shallow polemics, that these hollow leaders and supporters espouse. He who Tweets wins wins.

They are the symptom of our fear, whether it's peddling nationalism or simplistic ideas, as did Hitler responding to Germanys depression after the First World War, one antidote to fear are rules to follow, something that offers certainties, particularly if those certainties provide a scapegoat into whom all blame and uncertainty can be evacuated.

We do not have to think because all the fault is in those thoughtless others, the refugee, the victims of our unregulated economics, rather than having to face the complex thinking that insight into the damaging effects of our thoughtless economics requires.

Fake news and propaganda provides the forum for this to happen. It's painful to see the emptiness within, but what gaineth a man if he gaineth the whole world and loseth his soul.

Money Kyrle

“Our politics need to be marked by an abiding commitment to complexity. We must, retain 'a genuinely political and psychic vigilance in the face of the insidious violence of over-simplification.'

“propaganda seems to be a method of inducing a series of temporary psychoses, often starting with depression and passing, via paranoia to a state of manic bliss. ‘

This latter bliss explains why propaganda may be received favourably, as it provides a curative effect, if it finds the propagandee depressed and then leaves him in a state of enthusiasm. Fake News as an animal depressant.

Right now a thoughtless economic market driven economy is destroying our habitat, it's painful to have this insight, as we might have to change our behaviour, but this can be obviated through the big lie offered by those who want this economic rape of our planet to continue, see Climate Change Disavowal. (Sally Weintrobe 2012).

We are provided with false assurances that distract us from the inevitability of our fate. In the same way that religions provide the ultimate false good news of pie in the sky heaven to obviate the painful realities of life and death, many who believe in this fake news are supporters of Trump and supporters of repealing the abortion laws often in the name of their beliefs.

Eg Every life is sacred except when killed by a gun, the gun lobby of course driven entirely by an unscrupulous industry, the lie here is that selling guns, the market, is in reality more important than human life.

“If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.” Hitler

This is an excellent definition of the “Big lie,” The original description of a big lie being used as a way of attacking other peoples truth,

Hitler classically applied this behavior to in a massive projective identification into Jews, a very like Trump, Hitler wrote of the Jews“ ‘unqualified capacity for falsehood” and “that in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie.”

Hitlers primary rules were: never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; never accept blame; concentrate on one enemy at a time and blame him for everything that goes wrong; people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough, fake news, people will sooner or later believe.

' I wrote 1984 as a warning not a guide book! '(Orwell)

At the moment we see a huge lurch toward fascism, a longing for unthinking certainty in the world, where the Machiavellian principle the end justifies the means, fueled by Andre Surkov and Steve Bannon like characters, anti democratic thinkers who are ambivalent about democracy and are only interested in keeping their demigods in power.

False News offers lies in order to forge an alternate reality impervious to doubt or contradiction. Not by coincidence are those political leaders who lie most persistently commonly known as 'strongmen'. In driving truth from public discourse, they can eliminate their opponents 'most potent weapon.

Totalitarian regimes have taught us that it's much easier to wield power when truth has been abolished and replaced with whatever reality the regime choose to impose. They understand that to do this there has to be mass manipulation with fake news to maintain their fake leaders.

Like Borderline patients, my journalist, they have a capacity to maintain their omnipotent belief systems, plastering over huge internal insecurity, this psychic muscle conscious or unc, evacuates anything that might make them aware of emotional insight into themselves, into the minds of others.

There is a reciprocal relationship with their audience who swallow their projections and avoid their own anxieties in the process.

I would say many politicians like Trump are aware that they are empty of any real substance and any adult capacity to think, so they rely on projecting this emptiness into others, seeing others in their own image, through use of propaganda creating false enemies so all badness and thoughtlessness and mendacious behaviour is then projected into this other as a distraction from the actual emptiness of the orator.

It is the other who is thoughtless and has to be resisted. Not a resistance into insight into their incapacity to think.

This appeals to the anxious public also looking for relief from staring into the abyss of our own fate, and the complex thinking required to do something about it, it infantilises us in the face of the infantile parent devoid of any real equipment other than their idealisation.

The Bystander attitude and helplessness of the thinker in the face of such fake news propaganda is rife. Indeed people who think are reviled.

(See Pol Pot's liquidation of anyone who wore specs as intellectuals).

What can we do about these attacks on thinking?

I have found my colleagues Phil Stokoe's talk "Where Have All Adults Gone"(2016) helpful here

<https://vimeo.com/245141670>

He says

“Power creates an extreme experience of anxiety that inevitably pulls the individual into a fundamentalist state of mind from which recovery will depend on the individual’s own internal strengths”

Under the pressure of anxiety we tend to move immediately into a black-and-white state of mind and are attracted to people who espouse simplistic ideas.

We are attracted to black and white characters. Clowns like Trump and Boris, tv personalities are attractive. Their medium is entertainment not thought. Fake news is reassuring in a way that complex thinking isn’t.

This state of mind is aimed at obviating thinking in the same way as the borderline squeezes out emotion.

Stokoe

“thinking begins with not knowing and involves the processing of essentially emotional stimulation which seems to take the form of an internal conversation such that whatever was experienced as not understood or not known gradually achieves a certain level of focus. This process requires the capacity for symbolisation so that raw emotional material can be transformed into a symbolic representations that are available for manipulation”.

The fundamentalist state of mind is created and fed by fake news to avoid this process and fill up the uncertainty with certainty. I can go online and find many views and so called leaders who can assuage my anxiety about climate change and give me conspiracy theories.

Fake news is persuasive, in the face of climate catastrophe being told, it's just normal climate variants and provides a relief a sticky plaster, like a manic defence, that controls fear of death, much like our pie in the sky religions offer a way out of mortality, in this way a lie like a delusion confers advantages over public and personal rivals and adversaries who are truthful.

Stokoe

“Trauma has the effect of disabling the capacity to symbolise. The alternative to thinking which is the fundamentalist state . As long as you have a complete understanding of the rules, all you have to do is follow them. “

I would add We are all traumatised at the moment not just by events like 9/11 but the biggest event is climate change and in the face of it we look for fake prophets and Wizard of Oz like gurus to provide fundamentalist certainty rather than having to painfully think about what we can and can't do. At least the Wizard, when discovered to be an ordinary man , helped his protagonists develop their own authority in relation to thinking and courage.

Indeed some think this apocalyptic climate disaster as an ending is good, as Jesus will appear, and save us like Superman or Batman. So we externalise our own thinking into a saviour so we do not have to think through the complexities involved. The familiar fake news offered by religion which infantilises the disciple.

“Blessed are the meek they will be rewarded in heaven. “

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=4yTT_cQVMOs

Bion saw this unconscious defence against the experience of anxiety, members project their own thinking capacities into the leader, which allows them to be free of the anxiety that they would otherwise feel.

How do we get back from the stultification offered by fake news and its handmaid, fundamentalist thinking and get back to adult thought.

Stokoe again

“ the capacity to think is an achievement that not all of us manage. In other words it is not something natural to human beings but it is a consequence of normal development. Discovering how to think and, particularly, discovering how to recover the capacity to think are the signs of maturity. What is true about the individual appears also to be true about groups, it requires work to achieve and maintain the capacity for thinking.”

Fake news propaganda obviates this need providing a psychic retreat from the pain of thinking.

In common parlance one would say three-dimensionality is difficult. If you want someone to behave thoughtfully toward themselves and others you have to give them the experience of being thought about.

This may arm them to think for themselves as opposed to false news and fakes. The impact of huge anxiety tends to move all of us into a fundamentalist state of mind in which certainty is admired above

everything and the only language available is that of blame. We must resist this with everything we have whilst recognising the seduction in all of us to simplistic answers.

Summary

A fundamentalist state of mind view of the world is essentially paranoid (Stokoe 2016) and the solutions to any problem are omnipotent and find certainty in fake news. My journalist rediscovered his soul at a price the fake news he promulgated was so much easier than the serious work he eventually under took.

Like psychoanalysis writers believe in narrative truth the capacity to put into words experience that risks truth and there dimensionality.

“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?” Audre Lorde.

Very different to who tweets wins thank you.

David Morgan

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