

The Real Truth about Fake News

From Central Narratives to Rival Heresies

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Every day, we're treated to another barrage of outright falsehoods from the White House: Trump won the election by a landslide, Sweden is the crime capital of Europe, corpses are piling up in Bowling Green, anarchists are on George Soros's payroll, nobody loves women or Black people or the First Amendment more than Trump.

Corporate media outlets have responded with earnest fact-checking and debunking, as if Trump's untruths were just the result of incompetence. This is a naïve misreading of the terms of the conflict. What is at stake is not this or that fact, but the sources of truth—and what truth itself is.

The Facebook Counterrevolution

In 20th-century democracy, politicians competed for power on a stage set by corporate media. Media conglomerates served as power brokers, just as the bankers who financed emperors at the onset of capitalism once acted as Europe's kingmakers. It was possible to speak of a triangle of interests between police, politicians, and media outlets.

In the 21st century, many hoped that the spread of social media would enable people to outflank this triangle of interests—think of the photos of Egyptians proclaiming “Thank you Facebook!” that circulated after the Egyptian revolution of 2011. But where there can be a Facebook Revolution, there can be a Facebook Counterrevolution. Social media offer a way for politicians like Donald Trump to sidestep the corporate media entirely: if he can shape public opinion via Twitter and Reddit, he won't have to parley with 20th century dinosaurs like CNN and the *New York Times*. The army of internet trolls who identify with the President as a stand-in for their own amputated agency gladly serve as his shock troops in meme warfare. In the new totalitarianism, there is no triangle of police, politicians, and media—they are all one and the same.

So much for optimism about the digital age. In this context, far from backing down, Trump has gone on the offensive, deriding as “fake news” the very corporate media outlets that debunk his lies.

What is at stake here is not just the sources that shape people's beliefs, but the nature of truth itself. It is a mistake to think that all it will take to discredit the President is to expose his mendacity. Liberals already tried to employ this strategy to discredit Trump as a misogynist—but the more flagrantly sexist Trump appeared, the more right-wing voters flocked to his standard. Likewise, it seems that the more brazenly dishonest Trump's assertions, the more they serve to rally his support base. His supporters are only interested in alternative facts.

In this context, Trump doesn't need to persuade everyone that his claims are *more* credible than the news on CNN. On the contrary—to consolidate power, all he has to do is succeed in calling his rivals' veracity into question. If no one considers any source to be credible, preexisting loyalties and balance of power will be the only factors to determine which side people take in conflicts. That would be advantageous for a despot at the helm of the state: it would create the preconditions for the rule of force alone.

“Power can be very addictive and it can be corrosive and it's important for the media to hold people to account.” –George W. Bush

If You Can't Beat Them, You're Condemned to Join Them

How did we get here? After generations of struggling against the hegemony of the corporate media, it's dismaying to witness them being supplanted by something worse.

CNN, the *New York Times*, and all the other outlets Trump is deriding as "fake news" are indeed partisan. They have always sided with the class that provides their funding. Anyone who has ever been subjected to corporate coverage knows it is biased; the more objective it appears, the more dangerous it can be.

Trump has been using the classic despot's tactic of intertwining his lies with truths no other politician dares speak aloud. When people who have no analysis of politics or media hear an indisputable truth—for example, that the corporate media misrepresent things—it softens them up to buy into whatever outrageous falsehood he says next. This is the problem with binary thinking.

Many on the Left are falling into the very same trap. The knee-jerk reaction to Trump's strategy has been to defend the importance and integrity of the corporate media. On the contrary, Trump would not be able to capitalize on widespread distrust of the media if we hadn't already failed to popularize an *anarchist* critique of the corporate media ourselves.

One of the roles that the far right plays is to compel us to side with the other oppressive forces in this society, normalizing them. If we do so, the next generation of rebels will have no reason to trust us—and the next time corporate media outlets attack us, it will be more difficult to undermine their narratives.

"Capitalism doesn't lie some of the time, it lies all of the time. Even if it tells the truth, it's only the result of a double lie." -Kwame Ture

A Brief Chronology of Truth

But let's back up to figure out what we're talking about when we speak of truth.

Two and a half millennia ago, fables and epics like Aesop's and Homer's were passed orally from one generation to the next. Orators would perform them in public squares for crowds ready to interrupt and debate the stories and their meanings. Traveling from one village to the next, you could pass from one conceptual framework to another, encountering very different ideas about the nature of reality. Truth was a matter of contention and differentiation.

A few centuries later, following up on the imperial legacy of the Roman Empire, the Church set out to monopolize the power to determine the perceptions and truths of humanity. If the Athenian model had mobilized all land-owning men to debate the meaning of the stars, the Church mobilized the meaning of the stars to ensure everyone's subjection under feudalism. Truth was not a property that a statement about the stars might hold; it was the property of God himself, as decreed by his earthly representatives. Determining truth was no longer a source of civic vitality, but the domain of official bureaucracy.

This model sustained the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the expansion of European colonialism from the so-called "New World" to India, China, and Africa. Meanwhile, the Reformation and the wave of democratic revolutions that began in the United States established additional rival bureaucracies, but they did not break with this vertical and monolithic model of truth.

As the successor to the Church, science introduced a more robust and participatory means of creating consensus, while serving to *monopolize the power to determine the perceptions and truths of society* more efficiently than religion ever could have. In the same way that capitalism stabilized the hierarchies of feudalism by offering more individual mobility within them, science stabilized the monolithic notion of truth advanced by the Catholic Church by offering a means by which a much wider range of people could participate in shaping that truth. Today, it is impossible to conceive of reality outside a scientific framework, in the same way that even the fiercest revolutionaries of 16th-century Europe still understood their revolts as an expression of Christian theology. It takes centuries to get perspective on frameworks that seem eternally and inescapably true in the moment.

This is not to say that the facts deduced via scientific inquiry are not true within the framework that it presumes, but rather that this disembodied way of describing the world omits—for example—the subjective elements of experience that are better expressed by hip hop and other forms of poetry. And this way of seeing has consequences for the objects observed. Over and over, pretensions to pure scientific objectivity have concealed and legitimized the imposition of social and ethical frameworks alongside supposedly neutral technological innovations.

At the turn of the 20th century, commercial radio broadcasts began in Europe and America, followed soon by television programming. Families everywhere sat and listened to statements from presidents, journalists, and advertisers. These unidirectional “communications” technologies enchanted millions. From the capitalist USA to the Soviet Union—from *The New York Times* to *Pravda* (Russian for “Truth”)—the news media was the primary tool of ideological indoctrination.

Consumers of 20th century media valued nothing more than information that properly *described* reality. If the world is simply a series of objects and settings that pass before one’s eyes, what could be more important than getting a clear view? Regardless of ideology or content, these centralized media presumed a unified base of consumers. For the moderns, truth was unitary, as God’s word had been.

The United States established unipolar global hegemony following the fall of the USSR in 1991, establishing free-market capitalism as the only imaginable reality. Yet no system of control survives victory. From the moment of its triumph, it begins to fracture.

With no space left to expand, capitalism could only deepen, cannibalizing its host body and disrupting the consensus it had achieved. Tax cuts, corporate welfare, environmental and health deregulation, and technological innovations have transferred a tremendous amount of power to non-state sectors; but even as governments feed everything into the fire, it has become impossible to preserve the illusion that capitalism will steadily improve everyone’s lives and unite all societies in an equal-opportunity global marketplace. Neoliberalism is dragging us with it into its death throes, throwing truth itself into crisis.

In the current economic and political conditions, the world is splintering into pieces. The promise of a single integrated global society has evaporated; only a few left-wing cosmopolitans still cling to it. The new arrangement, from Jerusalem to London, from Facebook to VK, is a kind of zone-by-zone control. Social programming and safety nets are being gutted wherever they existed, and nothing new is replacing them. Everywhere, there is Paris and *Paris*, Baltimore and *Baltimore*, Oakland and *Oakland*. Manhattan for the fortunate; favelas, banlieues, and trailer parks for the disposable.

Reality is described in very different ways in each of these zones. Yet all of these ways of perceiving the world are enclosed, amplified, and shaped by social media algorithms; even the unemployed can produce valuable data with their government cell phones and free public wifi. The ersatz freedom and communication offered by these technologies do not represent gains towards a truly horizontal and participatory world, but an expression of the new “polycentralization” of control. Where social movements once faced off with official institutions, today we face additional forms of governance organized by technology specialists, credit card companies, global real estate firms, and machine-learning information management tools like Google that act directly on our perceptions of reality.

In this context, the meaning of truth is not determined via public and participatory civic engagement, as in ancient Greece; nor by a central authority ordained by God, as under the Catholic Church; nor by scientific consensus alone, as fantasized by the proponents of the Enlightenment; nor by the kind of spectacle described by Guy Debord. Truth is produced by and perpetuates an immense self-ordering machine for binding life to reality as it is, ensuring that there is no friction between what is permitted and what is conceivable.

“In a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false.” –Guy Debord

Where Control Ends and Meaning Begins

Once again, no system of control can cope with success. Its undoing begins at the moment of its triumph. Even as they are unified into a single power structure, politicians, corporations, news media, and police are all facing a tremendous crisis of legitimacy. The recent victories of far-right demagogues like Donald Trump owe as much to this crisis of legitimacy than they do to any deep-seated commitment to nationalism and xenophobia. Autonomous social movements and forms of resistance have more purchase on the popular imagination than they have in decades. This is not simply a consequence of favorable reporting, nor because their slogans and visions describe the world *more accurately* than the ruling ideologies do. Rather, this is because people are desperate for a way of thinking and acting that points beyond the impasse of a totally controlled society.

In these movements, we can experience a glimpse of a different way of relating to each other and to ourselves in which truth and meaning cease to be the province of the authorities. Every occupier, Black insurgent, water protector, and black bloc militant has witnessed and contributed to the emergence of new sensibilities—new ways of articulating rage and sorrow—new experiences of joy and tragedy and desire. In these experiments in collective living and decision-making, in self-expression and sharing and destruction, we discover our own truths and learn how to defend and extend them.

From Bernie Sanders to *Jacobin* and Podemos, the Left are scrambling to channel this energy back into the small world of social climbing, non-profitteering, and electoral politics. If they succeed, resistance movements will be doomed as sure as Trump defeated Clinton. Devoid of vital energy and alternative proposals for what life should be, they will not even deserve to succeed.

The far right understand this clearly enough. On the other side of the battle lines, they are utilizing identity politics to mobilize their base around their own subjective notions of truth.

Some envision all-white ethnostates excluding or subjecting nonwhites, “communists,” and Muslims; others wish to divide the world into a million “libertarian” fiefdoms, each with its own strongman; still others, such as the militants of the Islamic State, make religion the criterion of inclusion and exclusion. But horizontal borders between peoples, nations, and faiths are only three out of many more ways to shore up the vertical borders that they all desire to implement between castes.

Trump and Bannon have been great boons to these movements, helping to reconnect the institutions of the state with the ethnic organization of life upon which it has always been built. They offer the exhausted traditions of the prevailing order as a form of rebellion against the same system that implements it. They may yet succeed in hoodwinking another generation.

Their strategy cannot be defeated by mere fact-checking or debunking. The only way to outflank them is to articulate and demonstrate a contagious collective ethos—an ethos that disperses power to destroy authority, that is more loyal to desires than to identities, that connects all the atomized individuals of this society to the resources and togetherness we all need. We are in a war of truths, a war pitting one way of conceiving and experiencing the world against another.

“If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’” –Wittgenstein

Many Worlds, Many Truths

The collapse of monolithic notions of truth does not necessarily set the stage for a new form of tyranny to assume control. Nor will it automatically bring about a world with space for many worlds, many truths. But as universal consensus breaks down, our rebel visions will no longer be doomed to compete powerlessly on the marketplace of ideas; they may finally threaten the marketplace itself. We have to fight in ways that spread a different way of being, not to impose our own frame of meaning but to render it impossible for anyone to impose theirs. The stakes of this conflict spill over into every aspect of existence: into love, learning, thinking, life and death.

Like it or not, you are the bearer of your own truth. No holy book, scientific consensus, or demagogue’s patter could be truer than your own direct embodied experience of reality—than the testimony of your senses, memories, and longings. You don’t need the kind of legitimacy that is bestowed by the permits of the police or the findings of the best-funded researchers or the reporting of the most assiduous journalists. Only by sensitizing yourself to your experience, affirming yourself as your own center and recognizing your desires and perspectives as legitimate in and of themselves, will you be able to act boldly on your own terms from where you stand. When everyone approaches life thus, there will be no ground on which the likes of a Donald Trump could find his footing.

In her memoir “Recollections of My Life as a Woman,” poet Diane di Prima recalls a speech given in Italian by her grandfather Dominic Mallozzi at the onset of the Second World War. He tells the crowd that if “man cannot learn how to love, he will perish.” The crowd cheers, but Diane recalls another conversation with her grandfather about love. He tells her that “love is the struggle for truth between two people.” In a century everything has changed, but nothing is different.

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