

The proliferation of “fake news” and how it influences public perception

Name

Academic Institution



Author Note

Class

Professor

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Dean Baquet claims that we live in an “open, wild world,” where traditional news institutions are being challenged by the rise of less established voices of social and alternative media. He says that organizations are being “thrown off their game a bit,” and that perhaps this is a good thing. I find this an untypical response coming from a top editor of the *New York Times*, and I would agree with him on this last point. The idea that we are experiencing an age of fake news worse than ever before is not at all credible. Information, particularly sensitive or politically charged news, has long been packaged for consumption, so that a particular message, or slant, is embedded in the story. The mainstream news has set a precedence of mixing entertainment, propaganda, and advertising with selective news narratives. Consensus truth is determined by whoever controls the message. For years, a select few organizations have served as gatekeepers of information. Part of the fuss from these press organizations over “fake news,” now is that the legitimacy of their own propaganda has been substantially undermined.

Since at least the age of Edward Bernays [see here](#), marketers have developed many psychological strategies to persuade the public to buy their products. In matters of war, politics, or even important economic decisions, truth is often the first thing to be thrown out the window. Even the *New York Times* and CBS have often run dishonest stories over the years. For instance, during the first Gulf War, a 15-year old Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah testified at the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in Washington that Iraqi soldiers were throwing babies out of their incubators at local hospitals in Kuwait [see here](#). This atrocity tale was repeated over and over on the mainstream media, and served as an important public opinion changer. As it turns out “Nayirah” was a member of the Kuwaiti Royal Family. Her father was Saud Nasir al-Sabah, Kuwait's Ambassador to the US. Nayirah was coached by the PR firm Hill & Knowlton. It was

simply a public relations strategy to pull the heartstrings of the American public. At the time, and even to this day, mainstream news agency treat Nayirah’s testimony as if it were accurate and organic, when in fact the whole story was fabricated and her testimony was staged.

Americans have a short collective memory, and most do not possess the critical tools to decipher between credible and incredible information. Mainstream media has played a role in this development. The internet provides a free market for the exchange of ideas. Certainly it has become a place for many misinformed or even bad ideas to be shared. But it has also given people a chance to see things from new perspectives. Some of the information presents a direct challenge to the old guard gatekeepers of the mainstream press. The government is also feeling threatened by this information. This is why we are seeing a contrived backlash against “fake news.” In many ways, the old guard is trying to pooh-pooh alternative media because they feel that they should still be the ones who determine what is newsworthy and is not, and how people should think concerning the issues. They do not like the fact that the internet is uncontrollable.

Businesses have also had to alter the way they advertise in this new communication environment. The world of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has opened up opportunities for marketing, but consumers are more decentralized than ever before, and are less willing to sit through tiresome commercials between television shows. They are reading newspapers and magazines less, and are online more. Businesses have had to crossover into this world, and some are better at it than others. The world of liking and sharing has in some respects brought back the old word-of-mouth phenomenon which, in some form or another, marketers traditionally relied on. Just as the old guard news agencies like the *New York Times* and CBS are now fighting to maintain their positions amidst the information revolution, the internet echo chamber, established businesses also struggle to maintain their brand identity in an age of openness and competition.