

Information War: The War for the "Truthful" High Ground



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The historically strained relationship between Russia and the United States (US), has attracted great attention in the wake of the recent US Presidential election. Shortly following the announcement of the election result, allegations of Russian hacking activities in the 2016 US election, surfaced. As a consequence of these allegations Barack Obama¹ commissioned an investigation by various US intelligence agencies. The joint report by all the agencies, titled “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections” was issued on the 6th of January², right before Trump’s inauguration. Once again, all eyes were on Russia and the US, as the topic of election hacking monopolized media coverage.

¹ Spencer Ackerman and David Smith, "Barack Obama Orders 'Full Review' Of Possible Russian Hacking In US Election," *The Guardian*, 9 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/09/us-election-hacking-russia-barack-obama-review>

² "ODNI Statement On Declassified Intelligence Community Assessment Of Russian Activities And Intentions In Recent U.S. Elections," *Dni.Gov*. Last modified 10 January 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/224-press-releases-2017/1466-odni-statement-on-declassified-intelligence-community-assessment-of-russian-activities-and-intentions-in-recent-u-s-elections>

The publicly released findings of this report state with “high confidence” that the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, had personally launched an “influence campaign” to help President Trump win the election.³ The report found that Kremlin combined covert intelligence operations “with efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries and paid social media users,” to influence Russian and US public opinion and sentiment regarding both Presidential candidates.⁴ Additionally, the report suggests these activities form preliminary steps in wider efforts by Russia to expand its influence worldwide.

The contents of the report are classified, preventing their public disclosure. In the absence of their release, the general public will never know how the US democratic system is vulnerable to cyber-attacks, and arguably there would be less likelihood of public support for measures to be taken against future cyber-attacks. If the premier intelligence organisation will not disclose details, is there any possibility that the public will receive a statement on what they intended to do with the evidence that they have collected?

On January 11th, and after denying any truth to the widespread rumours about Russian involvement, Trump dominated media attention when he conceded that Putin was behind the cyber-attacks aimed at interfering in the election.⁵ However, he also insisted that Russia was not the only country who had hacked the US, claiming the system is vulnerable to cyber-attacks from all manner of actors. Cyber experts explained that unless policymakers are willing to spend millions of dollars to address significant digital vulnerabilities, simply condemning cyber-attacks would not solve this issue for US sovereignty and democracy.⁶ In reality, it is virtually impossible to address this issue by purely technical means, because in today’s ‘post-fact’ world, it is only necessary that the information disseminated to the public regarding such issues serves to maintain pre-existing ideological views amongst Trump’s core supporters.⁷ The disseminated information does not need to be proven to be ‘factual’– it is only necessary to raise a doubt in perceptions amongst the relevant public regarding an issue so that it then can be converted into something quite different. For example,

³ "IC ON THE RECORD • ODNI Statement On Declassified Intelligence...". *IC ON THE RECORD*. Last modified 10 January 2017,

<https://icontherecord.tumblr.com/post/155494946443/odni-statement-on-declassified-intelligence>

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Maxwell Tani, “I Think It Was Russia’: Trump Finally Concedes Russia Responsible For Election-Related Hacking,” *Business Insider Australia*, 12 January 2016,

<http://www.businessinsider.com.au/trump-russia-election-related-hacking-2017-1?r=US&IR=T>

⁶ Cory Bennett, “U.S. Elections Are More Vulnerable Than Ever To Hacking,” *POLITICO*. 29 December 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/election-hacking-vulnerabilities-233024>

⁷ Anne Applebaum, “Opinion | Fact-Checking In A ‘Post-Fact World’”, *Washington Post*, 19 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fact-checking-in-a-post-fact-world/2016/05/19/d37434e2-1d0f-11e6-8c7b-6931e66333e7_story.html?utm_term=.943bea2b45a5

from alleging the US intelligence agencies of leaking hacked emails, slamming journalists and the intelligence community as being part of the Washington ‘swamp’.⁸ Trump’s standard practice of propaganda is to pose an outrageous question without any evidence and pretend it wasn’t fully misconceived to obscure the underlying issue.⁹

The irony is US intelligence and politicians are accusing Russia’s propaganda campaign of influencing US citizens, when in fact, they too have been influencing both domestic and foreign audiences with similar methods for decades. During WWI, the US saw the advantages of using propaganda as part of the war effort, thereby creating large-scale propaganda campaigns such as those conducted by the Committee on Public Information (CPI)¹⁰ in order to manipulate citizens into conforming with the government position. The CPI was run by agencies that were responsible for communicating patriotism through posters and films that were produced to encourage domestic support for the war.¹¹ After WWII however, the US Congress passed the US Information and Education Exchange Act of 1948, also known as the Smith-Mundt Act, to prohibit the State Department from the domestic use of propaganda intended for foreign audiences.¹² More recently, in 2012, Congress sought to establish the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act in response to questionable tactics used by the Bush administration to gain support from the American public for the Iraq War in 2003.¹³ The fear was that future US administrations could use disinformation created for an international audience for domestic purposes when it was, in fact, a fabrication to further that administration's own interests. Traditionally, US propaganda was largely targeted at these foreign audiences, but in a digital era, the division between foreign and domestic holds little validity in a world of new media. The underlying issue is

⁸ Michael J. Morell, "Trump’s Dangerous Anti-C.I.A. Crusade," *Nytimes.Com*, 6 January 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/opinion/trumps-dangerous-anti-cia-crusade.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FCentral%20Intelligence%20Agency&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=8&pgtype=collection

⁹ Alan Yuhas, "Smoke And Mirrors: How Trump Manipulates The Media And Opponents," *The Guardian*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/18/donald-trump-media-manipulation-tactics>

¹⁰ Marcy Leasum Orwig, “Persuading the Home Front: The Communication Surrounding the World War I Campaign to “Knit” Patriotism,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 41, Issue. 1, 2016, pp. 60 - 82.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.61.

¹² Weston Sager, "APPLE PIE PROPAGANDA? THE SMITH-MUNDT ACT BEFORE AND AFTER THE REPEAL OF THE DOMESTIC DISSEMINATION BAN." *Northwestern University Law Review*, Vol. 109, No. 2, 2015, pp. 511- 46.

¹³ *ibid*.

that there is no acceptable or established policy for what is objective truth in a ‘post-fact’ world where governments use propaganda to further their own agenda.¹⁴

It was supposedly illegal for US government to propagandize domestically but enforcing this seems very difficult in a digital age where the Internet is easily accessible and the users are just a few clicks away from the information that they want to consume. George Friedman has provided an influential discussion about ‘The Internet and the Tragedy of the Commons’.¹⁵ He believes that, “the anonymity of the web allows people to act without shame and to tell lies without fear.”¹⁶ He urged readers to recognise that such attitudes exist in people both on the left and right side of politics. Friedman used, as a case in point, the fact that during the George W. Bush administration there were “preposterous claims about him from people who appeared to be liberals... also made by their right-wing friends.”¹⁷ Friedman emphasised that on the internet, “there is no accountability for what people say or do, no shame attached.”¹⁸ He argues that, “Twitter is the place where malicious people with time on their hands can tell lies”¹⁹, and when we get our information from Facebook and Twitter, tracking the legitimacy of the news is challenging.

The rapid advances in technology, almost universal access to the Internet or parts of it make it increasingly easy for individuals, political organisations, or governments to upload objectively false information onto the Internet. Most particularly in democratic countries with relatively open access to the Internet, it is virtually impossible to restrict access to even demonstrably false information – and it is typically argued in any case that to do so contravenes core democratic principles.²⁰ Trump's Twitter account²¹ provides a clear illustration of how modern technology allows opportunistic politicians to directly communicate with their followers and create an alternative universe of ‘facts’. However, before the Age of Information newspapers were our primary source of information and journalists would report on the same issue with a set of similar facts. As technology speeds up communication, there are challenges to

¹⁴ David Ignatius, "Opinion | In Today's World, The Truth Is Losing," *Washington Post*, 29 November 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/in-todays-world-the-truth-is-losing/2016/11/29/3f685cd2-b680-11e6-b8df-600bd9d38a02_story.html?utm_term=.4567f987fb4b

¹⁵ George Friedman, "Friedman's Weekly: The Internet And The Tragedy Of The Commons," *Us11.Campaign-Archive1.Com*, 4 January 2017, <http://us11.campaignarchive1.com/?u=781d962e0d3dfabcf455f7eff&id=3217c53d5b&e=7e1b92dffid>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Eric Schmidt & Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, pp. 57- 81.

²¹ Donald J. Trump's Twitter Account. Accessed on 21 January 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump>

consuming and retaining the amount of information one receives.²² It is our human desire to be informed and we like to feel included in things, but today much news is not only biased and partisan but also faces rapid changes within the conversation as events shifts quickly. Learning to decode and cope with data is something to practice as a smart news consumer; this skill is needed to recognise the truth or otherwise of the information we consume.

In 2016, 'post-truth' was named the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionaries.²³ Commonly compared with Brexit, the Trump victory, due to its controversial nature, has propelled the phrase 'post-truth' to a peak in the political realm. The term describes a phenomenon where public discourse is largely framed by emotional reactions and personal beliefs rather than objective facts, enforcing the idea of "Truthiness" as playing a dominant role. Comedian Stephen Colbert trended the term "Truthiness"²⁴, meaning as long as it feels true, the truth itself becomes irrelevant. In today's world events unfold quickly, because we are required to react instantly and we heavily rely on social media to find answers that we need without realising that the very information is already been manipulated, twisted and have been placed in sets of different player's agenda. It could be argued that while certainly providing unprecedented access to factual information, the Internet has been foundational to establishing a 'post-truth' and 'post-fact' world.

Politicians, no matter from left or right, have always looked for compelling stories to further their ends. If they fail to find evidence to substantiate their assertions, then they will manufacture untruths and claim they are truths. The most obvious recent example concerns how Trump has successfully played the post-truth card throughout his campaign, calling Muslims terrorists, Mexicans rapists who bring drugs, and the most iconic mistruths would be his determination to question the legitimacy of President Obama's birth certificate.²⁵ For Trump, the truth-building process does not require facts or the common knowledge of agreed values, but rather it is the reaction towards that issue that counts. This is a dangerous precedent to set as it will reinforce the post-truth ideology where the truth or facts have become irrelevant as general information, and it is hard to look for the truth and facts when our least honest politicians tell blatant lies and the media declines to correct them or is coerced into not doing so. Such inaction has helped give rise to a dangerous new form of politician, a politician who remains unchecked and is conveniently provided space

²² Eric Schmidt & Jared Cohen, op.cit. p.85

²³ "Word Of The Year 2016 Is... | Oxford Dictionaries". *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, 2016. Last modified 20 December 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Stephen Collinson and Jeremy Diamond. "Trump: 'President Barack Obama Was Born In The United States'". *CNN*, 16 September 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/15/politics/donald-trump-obama-birther-united-states/>

and the chance to manipulate the public into believing in their least public-profitable policies.

Right Side Broadcasting Network (RSBN), is one of several pro-Trump TV networks and is one of the few conservative media startups that heavily broadcasts Trump-related news. RSBN now boasts 116 million viewers and over 246,599 subscribers on YouTube.²⁶ Due to RSBN's willingness to broadcast favourable coverage of Trump, RSBN has been rewarded with massive numbers of new viewers, a front seat in press conferences, and currently works very closely with Trump's social media team.²⁷ This raises the issue of the role of the media in a democracy when the government works closely with the press so that it is little more than an arm of government propaganda. I would pose this question: Can an organization really be called a credible news agency when it is staffed exclusively by Trump loyalists, radical conservatives, or extreme right/left wing bloggers? Lastly, how can a democracy function when its citizens are people who blindly believe everything or believe nothing?

Oligopoly plays a vital role in the media industry where only about five or six companies control the vast majority of the western world's media, work collaboratively with each other, and share many of their directors.²⁸ This small set of companies and individuals thus has the power to directly or indirectly control the information reaching vast numbers of people across many countries. As a news consumer, one has to understand more than an article's subject matter in order to be able to evaluate the degree of truth in the news information. Generally speaking, a large portion of people only concentrate on news headlines instead of understanding the actual news. The underlying issue is not that the press is purposefully printing manipulated headlines to turn a profit, but rather who owns these news services. The issue of media consolidation is of critical importance but has not been raised sufficiently within the public community.

The latest US intelligence report emphasized the fact that fake news has been used heavily as a main propaganda tool by the Russians to influence the US public discussion.²⁹ Fake news comprises stories circulating on the internet that look and sound like legitimate news stories, but is rarely from credible sources and is in fact

²⁶ "Right Side Broadcasting," *YouTube*. Last modified 10 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/user/rightsideradio>.

²⁷ Maxwell Tani, "Meet The Man Behind Right Side Broadcasting, The Network That Live-Streams Every Donald Trump Speech". *Business Insider Australia*. 19 September 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/what-is-right-side-broadcasting-2016-9?r=US&IR=T>

²⁸ John Downing, Ali Mohammadi, and Annabelle Sreberny, *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995, pp.83-4.

²⁹ "IC ON THE RECORD • ODNI Statement On Declassified Intelligence...". *IC ON THE RECORD*. Last modified 10 January 2017, <https://icontherecord.tumblr.com/post/155494946443/odni-statement-on-declassified-intelligence>

often entirely manufactured.³⁰ There is a great need in pushing for credible news sources as there is tremendous fake news within the arena.³¹ There are examples of how fake news can whip up the nation instantly, especially if the influential figure takes on the conspiracy to its highest levels.³² The dilemma is perhaps in today's world there is a deafness to truth in information because the media is an unreliable arbiter of information.

There was a widespread proliferation of fake news regarding Hillary Clinton but her supporters also endorsed one fake news story that could further their own position in 2016 election campaign. Since last year, Trump's future National Security Adviser's son, Michael Flynn Jr., has been accused of giving legitimacy to fake news stories about Clinton and her campaign's involvement with the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington D.C.³³ These fake news stories asserted that Clinton and her team were running a child sex trafficking ring operating underground in a Washington, D.C. pizza joint.³⁴ An armed man named Edgar Maddison was searching for the paedophile ring in the restaurant because he believed these online fake news stories. Not only did this man reportedly truly believe this fake news story but also felt the need to investigate and fired his gun in the Comet Ping Pong restaurant. No one was hurt and Maddison was arrested. However, this incident did not stop Michael Flynn Jr. from giving credit to more fake news stories.³⁵ This clearly illustrates how our society lacks an accepted formula for what is agreed truth.

What we have been witnessing is a fake news domino effect where politicians themselves criticise media outlets for uncritically reporting fake news, while simultaneously asking followers not to listen to certain media outlets. This is of great concern as the left wing media outlets criticise right wing media and mainstream news services call out the independent news press printing fake stories and vice versa. We live in the age of information warfare in which there is no conscience and little integrity.

³⁰ Elle Hunt, "'Fake News' Named Word of the Year by Macquarie Dictionary," *The Guardian*, 25 January 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/25/fake-news-named-word-of-the-year-by-macquarie-dictionary?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Messenger

³¹ Meital Balmas, "When Fake News Becomes Real," *Communication Research*, Vol.41, No. 3, 2014, pp. 430-54. Accessed on 12 January 2017. ProQuest.

³² Sapna Maheshwari, "How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study," *Nytimes.Com*, 20 November 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/business/media/how-fake-news-spreads.html>

³³ Politico Staff, 'Incoming national security adviser's son spreads fake news about D.C. pizza shop', *POLITICO*, 4 December 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/incoming-national-security-advisers-son-spreads-fake-news-about-dc-pizza-shop-232181>

³⁴ "The Saga of 'Pizzagate': The Fake Story That Shows How Conspiracy Theories Spread - BBC News". *BBC News*. Last modified 20 December 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38156985>

³⁵ *ibid.*

There is no practical possibility of having information fact checked before it is published, especially on the Internet, and nor would doing so be politically acceptable. In history books, there were no pre-written examples of how to adopt online media and the repercussions one will face. Facebook and Twitter have helped users to create separate online domains where they either forget or ignore the reality of other similar camps, which led to opportunistic politicians to take advantage of the widened gap to create false truth for vulnerable and poorly educated and gullible populations to advance their own political and economic positions.

What we are facing today is more than an information war, more than a simple crisis in confidence. In many instances when reasonable doubt rises against fact, public opinion can turn instantly in a political context. All we can say with any certainty is that ‘the truth is out there’.

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**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
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