

INQUIRING MINDS... DECEMBER 23, 2016

MODERATOR... AL KAPLAN

TOPIC... "FAKE NEWS"

The enclosed article by James Tarantino, an admittedly conservative editorial writer in the Wall Street Journal, entitled "Fake News" Fun House.... speaks to a real problem today, for the reader attempting to follow the news in an unbiased, factually honest manner. The titles delineates the problem, and we should look at the problem, if we honestly want to evaluate all the news objectively.

Several questions to consider:

- 1. What responsibility does the media have? To be factual ? To be objective? To be honest?**
- 2. Does a community have a responsibility to ensure a diversity of media opinion, by diversity in media ownership?**
- 3. Does the media have a responsibility to provide a diversity of opinion? And to provide an evaluation of honesty and/ or diversity? E.g. "Pinocchio evaluation"**
- 4. How much responsibility for getting the "facts" and evaluation falls on the reader? Should the responsibility fall on the reader alone? Or should the reader "trust" the objectivity of the media??**
- 5. Publications such as the "national Enquirer" have been around for a while. How much has the Internet, Twitter, Facebook and the like complicated the "fake news" era, and who has the responsibility of separating fake from true?**
- 6. Is there a societal remedy for fake news??**

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‘Fake News’ Fun House

By

JAMES TARANTO

Dec. 8, 2016 1:13 p.m. ET

As the left has searched for answers in the month since Donald Trump’s election, we’ve heard a lot of talk about “fake news.” A [New York Times](#) news story sums the matter up this way:

The proliferation of fake and hyperpartisan news that has flooded into Americans’ laptops and living rooms has prompted a national soul-searching, with liberals across the country asking how a nation of millions could be marching to such a suspect drumbeat. But while some Americans may take the stories literally—like the North Carolina man who fired his gun in a Washington pizzeria on Sunday trying to investigate a false story spread online of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton—many do not.

The larger problem, experts say, is less extreme but more insidious. Fake news, and the proliferation of raw opinion that passes for news, is creating confusion, punching holes in what is true, causing a kind of fun-house effect that leaves the reader doubting everything, including real news. . . .

“There are an alarming number of people who tend to be credulous and form beliefs based on the latest thing they’ve read, but that’s not the wider problem,” said Michael Lynch, a professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut. “The wider problem is fake news has the effect of getting people not to believe real things.”

He described the thinking like this: “There’s no way for me to know what is objectively true, so we’ll stick to our guns and our own evidence. We’ll ignore the facts because nobody knows what’s really true anyway.”

“Fake news” is a problem on the right—but not only on the right. “Real” journalists, most of whom lean left, ought to look in the mirror. Or perhaps they are looking into their own distorted mirror and don’t recognize what they see.

An obvious example is “climate change.” News organizations have internalized alarmist orthodoxy, leading them to be dismissive of facts that call it into question, such as the predictive failures of climate models and the abuses of scientific process revealed seven years ago by the “Climategate” emails.

“You probably are not a scientist, and that means you can’t independently evaluate any of the climate science claims,” observes [Scott Adams](#). “You could try to assess the credibility of the scientists using your common sense and experience, but let’s face it—you aren’t good at that. So what do you do? You probably default to trusting whatever the majority of scientists tell you.”

That’s what most journalists do, but readers may notice the disjunction between facts and “science” and conclude that the latter is bunk. Journalists react by digging in and becoming more dogmatic, and the result is tendentious headlines like this one: “Trump Picks Scott Pruitt, Climate Change Denialist, to Lead E.P.A.”

That’s from a “news” story in the [New York Times](#), the same paper that’s complaining about “the proliferation of raw opinion that passes for news.”

Other examples are legion. In an [interview](#) published last week, President Obama raised the problem: “One of the challenges that we’ve been talking about now is the way social media and the Internet have changed what people receive as news.” High school friends of the president’s political director were “passing around crazy stuff about, you know, Obama has banned the Pledge of Allegiance.”

The interviewer suggests that maybe the free press needs a free lunch: “Maybe the news business and the newspaper industry, which is being destroyed by Facebook, needs a subsidy so we can maintain a free press?”

To which Obama responds:

The challenge is, the technology is moving so fast that it’s less an issue of traditional media losing money. The New York Times is still making money. NPR is doing well. Yeah, it’s a nonprofit, but it has a growing audience. The problem is segmentation. We were talking about the issue of a divided country. Good journalism continues to this day. There’s great work done in Rolling Stone. Yes, Rolling Stone! The magazine that just last month [lost a \\$3 million libel judgment](#) for a fictitious story about a gang rape at a University of Virginia fraternity house. Last year the [Washington Times](#) reported that Emily Renda, who had “been publicly identified in media stories as an adviser to the White House Task Force on campus sexual assaults,” introduced Rolling Stone’s reporter, Sabrina Erdely, to the accuser.

Oh, and the Obama interviewer who asked for a handout? It's Jann Wenner, publisher of Rolling Stone.

Over at the Washington Post, columnist [Petula Dvorak](#) weighs in. "The fake news stuff we've been talking about?" she opens. "That all just got real," with the pizza gunman incident, which reminds Dvorak of something else:

Five years ago, it wasn't fake news but an equally careless use of words that helped incite an equally terrible burst of violence.

Supporters of former Alaska governor Sarah Palin put out a map with crosshairs targeting the districts of 20 House Democrats and urging folks: "Don't Retreat, Instead—RELOAD!" . . .

On Jan. 8, 2011, the consequences were chilling: Jared Loughner showed up with a gun outside a Tucson supermarket where Giffords was greeting constituents and killed six people and injured 20 more, including Giffords.

As the [Associated Press](#) reported in 2014, FBI investigative files showed that Loughner "was unraveling in the months before the rampage, issuing paranoid, expletive-filled Internet rants about government conspiracies, suicide and killing police." He had apparently been unhinged for some time; "a woman who claimed to be a psychic" told the bureau that "Loughner sought out her services in 2005 and that he frightened her, telling the woman, 'I hear voices and they tell me to do things.' "

No evidence has ever emerged that Loughner saw the [SarahPAC map](#), or that he had any comprehensible ideological grievance against Giffords. As we [noted at the time](#), confirmation bias led some liberals to draw a false conclusion before any facts were in. That was a mistake; the Post's treatment of the subject now is a lie. (Also, the text accompanying the SarahPAC map did not say "Don't retreat, reload," although Palin had used that expression in other contexts.)

An even better example also comes from the Post—in this column's judgment the news organization whose standards have fallen furthest since Trump announced his candidacy. In a Thanksgiving-weekend story the paper's [Craig Timberg](#) reported:

The flood of "fake news" this election season got support from a sophisticated Russian propaganda campaign that created and spread misleading articles online with the goal of punishing Democrat Hillary Clinton, helping Republican Donald

Trump and undermining faith in American democracy, say independent researchers who tracked the operation.

This week the Post attached this note atop Timberg's piece:

Editor's Note: The Washington Post on Nov. 24 published a story on the work of four sets of researchers who have examined what they say are Russian propaganda efforts to undermine American democracy and interests. One of them was PropOrNot, a group that insists on public anonymity, which issued a report identifying more than 200 websites that, in its view, wittingly or unwittingly published or echoed Russian propaganda. A number of those sites have objected to being included on PropOrNot's list, and some of the sites, as well as others not on the list, have publicly challenged the group's methodology and conclusions. The Post, which did not name any of the sites, does not itself vouch for the validity of PropOrNot's findings regarding any individual media outlet, nor did the article purport to do so. Since publication of The Post's story, PropOrNot has removed some sites from its list.

So the Post published fake news about "fake news." Welcome to journalism's hall of mirrors.

[Why Do Good Things Always Happen to Him?](#)

"[Sen. Harry] Reid, 77, is leaving with his party in the minority, Republicans in control of the House and Senate, and Donald J. Trump, a candidate Mr. Reid regularly ridiculed, heading into the presidency. In some ways, he said, the defeat of Hillary Clinton, his former colleague, will actually ease his departure. 'I probably would have been more sad had Hillary been elected and we had a Democratic majority,' Mr. Reid said. "With Trump, I am not going to be as sad.'"—Carl Hulse, *New York Times*, Dec. 7

Worst Appeals to Authority

- **"Analysis As an Era Closes, Barbara Boxer Defends Politics as a 'Noble' Profession"—headline, [Los Angeles Times](#), Dec. 7**
- **"Paula Broadwell thinks David Petraeus is "the best person for the job"—tweet, [@VanityFair](#), Dec. 8**

We Blame George W. Bush

- **"Donald Trump's Big Idea: Don't Blame Me"—headline, [New York Times](#) website, Dec. 7**

- “De Blasio Finally Accepts Blame for City’s Homeless Crisis”—headline, [New York Post](#), Dec. 7

Great Minds of the 21st Century

- “Pope Francis Compares Media That Spread Fake News to People Who Are Excited by Feces”—headline, [Washington Post](#) website, Dec. 7
- “Denzel Washington Blasts Media for Selling ‘BS’ ”—headline, [TheHill.com](#), Dec. 6

[So It’s Like ObamaCare](#)

“Pelosi on Ryan’s Medicaid Plan: People ‘Won’t Be Able to Go to Their Own Doctor’ ”—headline, [CNSNews.com](#), Dec. 7

Hypothesis and Proof

- “Suffering Stress And Anxiety? Your Stomach May Be To Blame”—headline, [MedicalDaily.com](#), Nov. 11
- “Valerie Jarrett Says Trump Election Felt ‘Like a Punch in the Stomach’ ”—headline, [Chicago Tribune](#), Dec. 8

[So Much for the War on Drugs](#)

“Drug Stocks Take Hit on Trump Comments”—headline, [The Wall Street Journal](#), Dec. 8

Make That 9

- “7 Pets We Think the Trump Family Should Adopt”—headline, [Mashable](#), Dec. 7
- “ ‘It Was a Dog and Pony Show’: Carrier Employee Feels Trump Lied to Workers About Deal”—headline, [Mediaite](#), Dec. 7

Make That 11

- “My 10 Columns That No One Read”—headline, [New York Times](#) website, Dec. 7
- “My 10 Columns That No One Read”—headline, [New York Times](#) website, Dec. 7

[Hey, Kids! What Time Is It?](#)

“John McCain, It’s Time”—headline, [Boston Globe](#), Dec. 8

Question and Answer—I

- “Why Does SNL Keep Insisting That the Women in Trump’s Inner Circle Don’t Want to Be There?”—headline, [Vox](#), Dec. 7
- “Donald Trump Explains SNL Hate: ‘It’s a Terrible Show’ ”—headline, [Entertainment Weekly](#) website, Dec. 7

Question and Answer—II

- “Relay: Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”—headline, [East Hampton \(N.Y.\) Star](#), Oct. 6

- **“Why Are Leftists Such Pansies?”—headline, [PJMedia](#), Dec. 6**

[News of the Tautological](#)

“Firefighters Extinguish Blaze Inside City Bakery”—headline, [TapInto.net](#), Dec. 7

[Breaking News From Nov. 7](#)

“Michael Moore: It’s Possible Trump Doesn’t Become President”—headline, TheHill.com, Dec. 8

[News You Can Use](#)

“How to ‘Shoplift’ Legally With Amazon”—headline, Forbes.com, Dec. 8

[Bottom Story of the Day](#)

“California’s Ballots Have All Been Counted—More Than 14.6 Million and Most of Them for Hillary Clinton”—headline, Los Angeles Times website, Dec. 7

[Pride and Prejudice](#)

President-elect Trump has announced that he will nominate Gov. Terry Branstad of Iowa as ambassador to Beijing, the Washington Post reports. [PJMedia](#) notes that the news prompted a snotty tweet from Ian Millhiser, “justice editor” of ThinkProgress, a website published by John Podesta’s Center for American Progress: “I’m sure the governor of a small, rural, landlocked state full of white people will totally know a whole lot about China, and stuff.”

Millhiser later followed up: “I deleted my tweet expressing concerns about the Branstad nomination as I’ve been convinced that my concern was not justified.” It turns out Branstad does totally know a whole lot about China, and stuff, as the Post reports:

Branstad has extensive ties to China and a personal friendship with Chinese President Xi Jinping that dates back decades. If his nomination goes through, the move could help reassure China’s leadership that Trump understands the importance of healthy relations with Beijing. . . .

Last month, less than week after Trump’s victory, Branstad paid his seventh visit to China, meeting the country’s agriculture minister as well as officials from Iowa’s sister province, Hebei.

He has described Xi as an “old friend” and, during a 2015 interview with state news agency Xinhua, proudly displayed photographs of two meetings with the Chinese leader.

The first dated to 1985, when Xi made his first trip to the United States as a young agriculture officer from Hebei. The other was from 2012, when Branstad hosted a dinner at the Iowa Capitol for the then-vice president of China. Branstad also met Xi on a visit to China in 2011. He said the pair spoke for 45 minutes as Xi reminisced about the hospitality he had received when he was in Iowa.

The Post adds that “under the Obama administration . . . the post of ambassador to Beijing had declined somewhat in importance,” as “China policy was largely run out of the White House.”

Oh, and the current ambassador to China is Max Baucus. Until 2015 he was a senator from Montana—a small, rural, landlocked state full of white people, and stuff.

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