



## *Fake News, the Big Lie and Alternative Truth*

By Mark Monday, February 23, 2017

**“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.” – Joseph Goebbels**

News – or non-news – is much in the news today. Confusion over how to deal with Fake News is rife. Defenders of Fake News – some have financial reasons, others see political or social reasons to approve of Fake News – contend we live in a post-factual period. Facts don’t matter they say; “truth” and “lies” are not words in their vocabulary. If something furthers their cause it is “alternative truth.”

In fact, information is of no value if it is unreliable. Facts that are not factual may be good writing, as in a novel, or emotionally uplifting, but they are not an alternative to actionable information. Fake News – often designed to appeal to emotions or the prejudices of the reader, listener, or viewer – may make some people feel good. But misleading information usually leads to eventual problems for the person who accepts it as true and tries to act on it. That "good feeling" turns into uncertainty as to “what went wrong” and self-directed anger over the knowledge of having been royally suckered.

### **Disinformation**

Fake News is hardly new. It is just another name for The Big Lie and Alternative Truth. Intelligence agencies know it by yet another term: Disinformation. Disinformation is a common tactic in the Intelligence world; intelligence agencies such as the FSB use it, but they also guard against it for it can be used equally effectively by any side. Disinformation, to call Fake News by the term intelligence agencies use, can be dealt with by those willing to recognize the dangers it poses. That is not to say dealing with Disinformation is always easy. Those who want a simple, quick, 100-percent solution will be disappointed. But people who want to avoid being taken in by Disinformation have tried-and-true defenses.

GIGO – garbage in, garbage out – is the central issue. If researchers or Internet users take in the Fake News to begin with, it then becomes incumbent upon those people to determine whether the facts are true. Researchers and Internet users open themselves to the Fake News problem by taking in information of any kind from dodgy sources or sources that have an unknown track record.

Slogans aside, there are sources that are generally recognized as “fair,” “non-partisan” or “honest.” Those who want to deceive often attack such information sources. They warn all who will listen, especially the deceivers’ supporters, to ignore the relatively unbiased sources and instead to get their information from sources they control. By only looking for, and accepting, information from resources that are known to be unbiased it is possible to reduce and practically eliminate the amount of Fake News that comes across your doorstep.

Interestingly, resources that identify their mistakes are generally more trustworthy than those where a reader never sees a correction or retraction. The information resources that admit to mistakes are considered more trustworthy than those that do not. Correction notes are usually a sign of good sources.

While Fake News can be found anywhere, it is prevalent in social media postings. That is because people who find some piece of Fake News that supports their beliefs use social media to blast out – to everyone they know and probably some they don’t – that supporting “information.” Ignoring everything and anything sent over social media will generally cut down or even eliminate the Fake News problem for an individual. For those who don’t want to totally brush aside the social media input, generally just doing a web search of the headline, or first sentence of the story, will reveal how many other publications are carrying the same information. If no one is carrying the story, or it is being carried by publications that the reader has not identified as being trustworthy, the story should be written off as questionable, badly flawed, or even Fake News. No one has a monopoly on important information; if the story isn’t published elsewhere – in reliable publications – it probably isn’t true and seldom is of any real value.

### **Fact Checking Sites**

For those who want a little more assurance – or want to return the Fake News to the sender with a note that they need to make certain of the veracity of an their information – a quick pass on a fact checking site often pays big dividends. These sites can generally be found simply by entering queries such as “fact checking sites” in a search engine. Those sites with good reputations include snopes.com, FactCheck.org, politifact and About.com. This “quick and dirty” method to find out if a statement is factual works well in many cases

There are also tools and computer apps such as Hoaxy that can help identify False News. For the Chrome web browser, an extension called Fake News Alert can give Internet denizens a heads-up that a particular piece of so-called information smells as bad as fish left in the sun for three days.

A list of sites known to often post questionable information, developed by a professor at Merrimack College, is used by some who reject everything from sites on the list. There are almost 60 pages, and additional thoughts on how to spot questionable sites at

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V\\_81ZyitM/preview](https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V_81ZyitM/preview) .

When looking at misinformation from any site it is well to remember that not all that is called Fake News is intentional. Sometimes people simply make mistakes.

In the Internet era, for instance, it is not uncommon to see a post about something that happened months or years ago appearing as if it happened yesterday – or even will happen tomorrow. Wrong, yes, but usually not insidious.

Mistakes, even harmful ones, may be no more than mistakes.

And remember that the information in Fake News is not always untrue. Sometimes the facts may be true but may be inapplicable to the situation. It is unquestionably true, for instance, that anyone who drinks water will die. But there is no connection between the two events.

### **Motives Are Varied**

But Fake News can be insidious. Some people who make up stories, stories we may charitably call unlabeled novellas, do it for money. They get a few cents for user clicks on “interesting” stories. They don’t care whether anyone believes them so long as they get their pennies a click. They sell truth out for a lot less than 30 pieces of silver. And there are those propagandists who push out a story to confuse or convince others about some issue. Fake news and propaganda are not necessarily congruent. The best propaganda, for instance, is something that is true, something that cannot be denied. But the facts in propaganda are carefully crafted – like people who drink water will die – in order to get the sought after response. Propaganda outlets are Fake News sites.

Some Fake News sites will pretend that they are really literary in nature. They will try to claim that they produce satire. The Onion is, in fact, such a site. But many other Fake News sites try very hard to appear to be legitimate news. They use names, titles, mastheads and other markers of legitimate news sites to confuse and befuddle readers about their real purpose.

Few safeguards exist to ensure information anywhere on the Internet – particularly that found on Social Media – is accurate. Anyone can – and will – publish anything on the Web. While the Internet did not create Fake News or Disinformation, the technology did make the widespread use of Fake News possible.

Previously, for Fake News to be taken seriously, it had to appear in newspapers, books or on the air – and those media were simply too expensive to set up in order to spread disinformation. Legitimate publishers and broadcasters had a financial incentive to make certain they were publishing facts. They hired editors and fact checkers to make certain their reputation was unsullied and their facts were indeed fact. If the word got around that their product was really verbal baloney their reputation would be ruined, and their financial investment in presses and broadcast equipment would be lost. That changed. Today the cost of spreading Fake News is miniscule.

## Why It Works

Fake News succeeds largely because of two major factors, Confirmation Bias and Lack of Analysis.

We hear or see what we wish or expect to hear or see! That is Confirmation Bias. We look for information that we expect to see in places that we expect to see it, and do not look for contrary evidence, or we reject contrary information when we receive it. Propagandists and other liars use Confirmation Bias as a major technique and tactic. Cognizance of the Confirmation Bias danger is perhaps one of the best defenses against Fake News.

Ferretting out Fake News is far more complex than being aware of our own predilections and leaving the work to fact checking organizations. True information assurance requires careful analysis, skill and much patience. We have to put our own skin in the game

For those who eschew reliance on trusted information sources, or analysis of the content by others, it is possible to assess the likelihood that information is false. But such analysis is not easy. Snap judgements don't cut it. Assessment of information takes effort, thought, and yes – time. Fake News is successful and spreads when it confirms the ideas the reader already holds and when the reader will not or cannot put in the effort, thought, and time to analyze the purported “facts.”

## How to Assess News That May Be Fake

Although there is no foolproof checklist to prove whether something is true, or is a lie, professionals – and smart people – consider these factors when assessing any set of purported facts.

- *Authority, Authenticity, and Competency*
- *Accuracy*
- *Currency*
- *Objectivity*
- *Plausibility*
- *Coverage or Completeness*
- *Appearance*

**Authority** – it is linked to authenticity or competency – is often considered the 800-pound gorilla in the room. Arguments about facts often come down to who really knows. It is important to identify whether an information source is authoritative in the particular field. We can take the word of a chicken farmer when it comes to eggs, but when it comes to nuclear weapons give me a nuclear weapons specialist. By the same token, nuclear weapons specialists – unless they also raise poultry as a hobby – are not usually go-to people on egg-layers. Facts and ideas found on a site should be linked to the author, or if an organization or business to the entity involved. This provides accountability for the facts or ideas. Once the identity of the fact-provider is established it becomes possible to consider additional credibility factors. But until the authority (authenticity or competency) question is answered most reliable assessors look askance at the information.

An author's authority is often evaluated on the basis of authenticity, competency and trustworthiness.

- – **Authenticity:** Is the author who he claims to be? Check domain names and the extension as well as site ownership. Check for academic qualifications (degrees, certificates and formal training) or non-academic qualifications (history, professional associations or family connections).
- – **Competency:** Direct (personal involvement) vs. Indirect (quality of research and use of sources).
- – **Trustworthiness:** May involve sourcing such as links to articles or footnotes, the track record of the individual, evidence of apparent bias, and timeliness (is it dated or overtaken by events).

Other important questions on authority include:

- Does the person, group, or site actually have access to the type of information it purports to present? Put another way, is the source or sources actually in a position to know this information?
- Is the identity of the source or authors clear and, moreover, are they who they claim to be?
- Do authors display a bio that can be double-checked?
- Are the author and publication/medium known by others in the field to be trustworthy, competent and knowledgeable?
- Does the author have a respected following?
- Does the author have other works available, and if so what are they?
- Are reviews/comments posted or available, and are those credible?
- Do all authors have the degree, certification, credentials or background to speak on the topic?
- Has the author accurately drawn upon, and represented, all sources cited?
- Does the publication or site have research and publishing guidelines and if so how strictly are they enforced?

**Accuracy** may be considered the faithful measurement or representation of the truth; it is also correctness and precision. Clues to accuracy include:

- Does the information seem reasonable and does it match information from other sources?
- Have you used the source before with good results?
- Is there an editor or someone who fact-checks the information?
- Are the sources for factual information clearly listed so they can be verified in another source?
- Are there noticeable errors (even with spelling)?

Why might the last point be important? Spelling errors not only indicate a lack of attention and effort, but also can actually produce inaccuracies in information. Whether the errors come from carelessness or ignorance, they both put the information or writer in an unfavorable light.

**Currency** is a question of whether something belongs to the present. With the Internet it is not unheard of for events that happened years ago to be written about as if they just happened. To evaluate currency it is important to:

- Look at the top and bottom of the page as webmasters often include a ‘last updated’ date.
- Read any pages that discuss ‘news’ or ‘press releases’. If there has not been any news briefs posted on those pages in two years, it could indicate that the rest of the site is no longer current.

- Be aware that some sites put the current date on an item when displayed, no matter when it first appeared.
- When all else fails, check to see if links on the page are current or expired.

**Objectivity** – is the information uninfluenced by emotions or personal prejudices – is a vital question. Look carefully to see if the information shows evidence of bias or if the page appears designed to push particular goals.

- Is it a non-partisan research organization, or an advocacy group with a stated agenda?
- Do sites the page links, and any guestbook comments, provide clue to a page's objectivity?
- Is there any advertising on the page that relates to the subject of the page?
- Does the 'About Us' page provide clues about possible bias?
- Does it give information on its resources or research methods?
- Does the domain name and type of site – (gov) rather than (com) – suggest anything about the objectivity?
- Can you corroborate any position you find with other positions published in other sources, such as periodicals or books? In this way you can discover where a position appears on the continuum.
- Does the tone appear to what you expect from an objective source? Good information sources will use a calm, reasoned tone to present information in a balanced manner. Pay attention to the tone and be cautious of sites that contain highly emotional writing. Writing that is overly critical, attacking, or spiteful, often indicates an irrational and unfair presentation rather than a reasoned argument.

**Plausibility** – put simply, it makes sense.

This can be tricky. Confirmation Bias must be taken into account, but the plausibility should always be considered.

- Is it reasonable?
- Does it appear to be true?
- Is it consistent with other background information?
- Is it reported elsewhere by sources that have a good reputation?

**Coverage** is the extent or degree to which something is observed, analyzed, and reported. A rule of thumb is that if it is a "unique" fact or report it is questionable. Someone has to be first, it's true, and everyone wants to "break" a story, but second or third place isn't bad either. If other reputable resources are ignoring the information an analyst asks "why?" Key questions are:

- Is the same information available from reliable sources elsewhere?
- What topics are covered?
- Is the coverage surface vs. in-depth? Ephemeral coverage suggests the source has little information.

- Accessibility may play a role (free vs. fee).

**Appearance** – the outward or visible aspect of a person or thing – is often a factor in determining reliability. This factor should be considered one among many since some Fake News sites appear quite business-like and professional. Factors worth considering are:

- Is the site professional-looking?
- Is it easy to use?
- Is the site look well organized?
- Do the links work?
- Does the site appear well-maintained?
- Do graphics and multimedia obscure content?

Ferretting out Fake News and discounting it in judgement and action is far more complex than being aware of Confirmation Bias. Information assurance requires careful and time-consuming analysis. Those who aren't willing to spend time and energy to question all information they receive are going to be fooled. They will be taken advantage of far more often than someone who is thoughtful and careful in processing information.

Careful analysis is the duty laid on us by the age we live in – the age often dubbed The Information Age.