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Simulacra in the Age of Social Media: Baudrillard as the Prophet of Fake News

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Abstract

“Fake News” has been a frequent topic in the last couple of years. The phenomenon has particularly been cited with regards to the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. The creation of “post truth” reports that are disseminated via the Web and social media has been treated as something new, a product of the digital age, and a reason to be concerned about the effects of online technology. However, this paper argues that fake news should be considered as part of a continuum with forms of media that went before in the 20th Century, and the general trend of postmodernity detailed by Baudrillard. The simulation of communications media and mass reproduction was already evident and has merely progressed in the digital age rather than the latter providing a wholly new context. The paper concludes by asking whether the political havoc caused by fake news has an antidote, when it appears to be a by-product of media simulacra’s inherent lack of connection to the real. In a communications landscape where the misrepresentations of the so-called “Mainstream Media” are decried using even more questionable “memes” on social media, is there any possibility for truth?

Keywords

fake news, post-truth, Baudrillard, simulation, simulacra

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“The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none.

The simulacrum is true.”—Ecclesiastes

Thus, begins Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*. It sounds like the kind of statement King Solomon might have made in Ecclesiastes; except that if you read Ecclesiastes you won’t find anything like this quote. Considering the current debates about partisanship and pure lies “going viral” in new media, from its opening sentence Baudrillard’s 1981 work appears every bit as relevant today as it was nearly 40 years ago, or maybe even more so after recent events.

Politics (and its portrayal particularly in Western English-speaking media) has felt like it underwent a sea change in 2016. The “normal rules” no longer seemed to apply after the UK voted for Brexit and Donald Trump was elected President in the USA. The prominent phrase in this disruption, already a cliché a few months after its emergence, was “fake news” (also known as “alternative facts” by some on the right-hand side of the political spectrum). Pundits and academics were soon describing the new era as “post-truth” (Ball, 2017; d’Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017; Fuller, 2018; McIntyre, 2018), arguing that we have entered a phase where facts are radically devalued in favour of shallow appearances and confirmation bias, fuelled by the meteoric rise in our usage of online social media over the last decade. Some have even argued that truth itself has been weaponised (Merrin, 2019).

Social media is new technology that didn’t exist at all before the mid-1990s, and not in its contemporary form until Facebook went beyond universities and Twitter was launched, both in 2006. But are the phenomena of “fake news” and “post-truth” that are allegedly the side-effect of social media really so revolutionary? This paper argues that Jean Baudrillard was already recognising these trends in the 1980s, based on the media in existence back then, and so what has occurred in the 21st Century should be viewed as a continuation of the same phenomenon. It then asks if there is anything that journalism can do about that situation.

Social Media and the Transcendence of Reality

It cannot be denied that culture has changed with the advent of online digital media. Go back ten years and you would not have found people entranced by their smartphone screens as they spend increasing amounts of time on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and other social networks that come and go with bewildering rapidity. It’s also evident that traditional news media in its multiple forms—particularly print and broadcast—have seen revenues decimated by the arrival of digital online systems. This has impacted the abilities of news organisations to perform their traditional role of telling truth to power.

However, the cultural trends of online and social media were already evident in electronic broadcast media throughout the 20th century. Baudrillard argued that these technologies of communication engendered a media world that exists in parallel to reality, breaking the traditional linguistic relationship of sign and meaning. He talks about the image having gone through successive phases in its evolution into 20th century media:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.
(Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6)

We will address the potential causes of this situation, and whether the hypothesis is valid, later in this paper. However, assuming it is the case, this separation of the image from reality would pose a profound problem when media plays such an important role in contemporary political life. Chadwick et al. (2018) have argued that “The healthy functioning of liberal democracies has long been said to rely upon citizens whose role is to learn about the social and political world, exchange information and opinions with fellow citizens, arrive at considered judgements about public affairs, and put these judgments into action as political behaviour.”

But it’s clear that this civic information process is not what has been happening when citizens engage with news via social media. According to BuzzFeed’s analysis of Facebook data, by the time of the US election, Facebook users were more engaged with fake stories than real ones. Measuring the totals for the top 20 election stories on Facebook (this includes shares, reactions and comments), “fake news” stories received 8.7 million engagements whilst “true” mainstream news stories only received 7.3 million engagements (Silverman, 2016). Here, “engagement” refers to an aggregate of clicks through, likes, shares, comments and other interactions on the Facebook platform.

This phenomenon has been cynically manipulated by political movements on both sides of the ideological divide, but apparently more so by the right (or “alt-right” as it has been come to be known), judging by the successes achieved. The infamous “£350 million a week for the NHS” advertisement on the side of a bus promoting a Leave vote during the UK Brexit campaign was clearly aimed at those who share for emotional reasons without considering the facts properly. US Republican politicians similarly aimed to harness this phenomenon for the Trump campaign. During a CNN TV interview in 2016, US Republican politician New Gingrich argued:

“The current view is that liberals have a whole set of statistics that theoretically may be right, but it’s not where human beings are... I’ll go with how people feel, and I’ll let you go with the theoreticians.”¹

Trump's personal lawyer Rudi Giuliani went even further on August 19th, 2018, claiming that "Truth isn't truth."²

In terms of Baudrillard's progression of the image, this is the final phase where the image bears no direct relation to reality and has become its own pure simulacrum. The logic of political messaging via news media is no longer about "the economy, stupid," i.e. actual material wealth, or whether crime really is worse than it used to be. It's about how those messages fit with a pre-existing idealised world view, or how they provoke an emotional response from those who engage with them. This is the only way human beings have found that they can cope with the deluge of information they are met with every day—by focusing on what fits with how they imagine the world to be, or how they want it to be.

Baudrillard (1994) argues that: "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (p. 79). He suggests three hypotheses as to why this has occurred. The first is that meaning can't keep up with the supply of information; the second that meaning is a separate system to information; and the third that information actually destroys meaning. For example, science takes away the meaning people find in religious belief, which explains why the Christian right in the USA has an ongoing war with scientific discoveries. Further than this, since human beings are required for meaning, the heavily automated production of information in the computer age devoid of human involvement works in parallel, with knock-on effects we will be discussing shortly.

"Fake News" and the Tabloid Press

In their insightful and thorough empirical analysis of UK news-sharing habits, Chadwick et al. (2018) have argued that "democratically dysfunctional news-sharing behaviour is a potential systemic outcome of the tabloidization of the social media environment." Their research has shown that there is a correlation between sharing tabloid news of questionable value and dysfunctional online behaviour such as trolling. Indeed, just as "fake news" was more popular on Facebook than "real" mainstream news in the run-up to the 2016 US election, the most popular story on Facebook during the UK Brexit campaign of the same year was a factually incorrect one from the Daily Express about the European Union planning to kill off the National Health Service (Waterson, 2017).

However, what this implies is that the kind of tabloid news stories that promote the separation of meaning from reality, which Baudrillard discusses, existed well before the advent of online culture. In the UK, and the USA, tabloids already had a long history of publishing journalism of questionable factual quality, a tradition that merely continued into tabloid-like TV news channels such as Fox News. In the UK, the tabloid press has since then made the transition to digital online audiences very successfully, with three of the top five sites in terms of visitor numbers being tabloids (Chadwick et al., 2018).

Sharing these kinds of stories follows a different logic to civic duty. Chadwick et al. (2018) argue that: “The goals that comprise this motivational cluster—to entertain, please or upset others—are all focused on eliciting emotional responses. For these users, news sharing is not about seeking to inform others; the quality of the news they share appears to be unimportant. Indeed, perhaps the more sensational, ludicrous, or exaggerated the news is, the better it fits with the motivation to disrupt the rationality and veracity upon which political discussion must, in the final reckoning, depend.”

The logic of online sharing appears to diverge from the need to inform, or debate with the intention of finding a shared consensus. This was predicted by Baudrillard for media in general. The social media conversation is aimed not so much in the direction of trying to uncover the way the world is, but at promoting the way participants want it to be or find the most entertaining. Confirmation bias reinforces itself as social media users turn away from any messages that challenge them. Chadwick et al.’s (2018) research illustrates that: “The more users engage with politically like-minded others online, the less likely it is that they will be challenged for dysfunctional behaviour. Over the longer term, these people are less likely to encounter the kind of opposition that might make a difference to the quality of the news they share.”

The Simulacra of Confirmation

Political controversies accentuate this separation of a simulated world view from its connection to a more fact-based conception of reality. Baudrillard discusses Watergate as not so much a re-establishment of profound reality, but part of the simulacrum of reality. This is because truth suffocates under the plethora of possible explanations for global events, such as the shooting down of a Malaysian airliner, the poisoning of Russian political refugees, or the destruction of two tall buildings in New York City. All of these events are surrounded by competing conspiracy theories. Baudrillard (1994) asks, “Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or extreme-right provocation, or a centrist mise-en-scene to discredit all extreme terrorists and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario and a form of blackmail to public security? All of this is simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation” (p. 16).

This scenario echoes Deleuze’s concept of the fold, where the same reality is seen in different ways depending on alternative perspectives, none of which fully represents an underlying reality that can never be known in its entirety (Deleuze, 1992). Most people are convinced that their perspective is the “true” one, and it is nearly impossible to convince someone with an opposing perspective to change their beliefs, since these now revolve around a system of meaning that reinforces itself and is not directly connected to reality. There is no common

ground of information during online discussions from which to build a shared perspective, since arguments stem from beliefs and faith, not facts.

The controversy over climate change denial is a case in point. Even when 97 per cent of scientists believe that climate change is a real phenomenon,³ many still refute its human causation. In most cases, they don't want to listen, because believing in climate change would force them to fundamentally alter their way of life, and those companies that rely on this way of life for their income encourage this situation, such as those in the fossil fuel business. Similarly, "anti-vaxers" continue to cling to long-discredited research linking the MMR vaccine to cases of autism. Baudrillard (1994) argues that this is how we deal with the effect of rampant simulation, where we can no longer tell whether anything we hear about in media is true: "'Take your desires for reality!' can be understood as the ultimate slogan of power since in a non-referential world, even the confusion of the reality principle and the principle of desire is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality" (p. 22). The emergence of "deep fake" technology has further accentuated this situation. This is artificial-intelligence-powered software that can make famous people (or, indeed, anyone) appear to say anything you want on video, ready to share online via social media. Even video evidence can no longer be trusted, no matter how real it looks.

Brett Nicholls (2017) has confirmed these arguments, saying that "in the post-truth situation objective facts about the world are less influential than feelings, beliefs and personal opinions." He also points out that the social media detractors against Trump confidently assert "that there is a clear difference between objective knowledge and speculative constructions." However, Nicholls sees in this a fascination with naïve realism, arguing: "Both Trump and his detractors make precisely this claim. Both claim they are the real America!" He then goes on to discuss four critiques of how reality is produced: "the critique of the commodity form, the rise of objective reality, hyperreality and integral reality," with the latter two venturing into the world as theorised by Baudrillard. This reads like a recent socio-political history of reality formation, starting with Marx's view about how commodities are created from their exchange value, which is then abstracted into monetary representation, in opposition to the use value of those items. "In this way of thinking, capitalist exchange is less real than the materiality of utility and social conditions of the working class" (Nicholls, 2017). However, while "there is no doubt at all that the objective and discoverable world exists outside systems of representation," the real question is how we get past those systems of representation. Most of the controversies revolving around post-structuralist and postmodernist thinking such as Baudrillard's comes from the fact that these theorists argue that you can never wholly escape linguistic representation. Because, as Gadamer (2014) has argued, "Being that can be understood is language."

Nicholls understands the implications of this, arguing that Baudrillard's concept of simulation "is not pretending" (Baudrillard, 1994), but actually "threatens

the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard, 1994). He then goes on to explain that: “The problem of Trumpism, from Baudrillard’s perspective as I see it, is thus not is Trump correct or incorrect on established matters of fact (a banal problem), it is what does this phenomenon tell us about the contemporary principle or concept of reality itself” (Nicholls, 2017). He then ventures onto the third mode of reality creation: hyperreality, which is not an imaginary fake but “more real than real.” The spectacle of the US presidency—and the UK Brexit controversy—becomes the key feature. This means that Trumpism’s rebellion against the “deep state,” “MSM” and “Washington elites” is a commodified spectacle in the mode of the Frankfurt School’s culture industry. Nicholls then goes on to quote Baudrillard’s famous statement from *Simulacra and Simulation* that he reiterated in later work in a slightly updated form: “it is not illusion which conceals reality. It is reality which conceals the fact that there is none” (Baudrillard, 1997).

This destruction of the previous notions of the real, finally, leads to the fourth mode of reality creation: integral reality. Nicholls (2017) argues that “Trumpism exposes the ungrounded nature of the political system itself.” This is “inseparable from media spectacle,” where “instead of standing in for an outside object, as in reality and hyperreality, the sign itself ends up becoming the object.” This certainly rings true when you look at the cultish belief of MAGA hat-wearing Trump supporters, or slavish followers of “Get Brexit Done” in the UK. For Trump: “His pronouncements do not refer to a referent, they are the thing itself. He is convinced that there is no distinction between what is pronounced and reality.” However, this is also the logic of advertising, a realm that it will later be argued (with Baudrillard) has become the mode of media in general and therefore journalism as part of that media system. Nicholls argues that: “Branding works without irony via signs with no referent, signs that no longer simulate.” The Nike swoosh is filled with meaning, even if it doesn’t refer to anything specifically real. Similarly, neither Trump nor Brexit have clear real referents, yet they mean so much to their adherents. Before we return to this theme, we need to take a trip back into history to see how journalism cemented its status as part of the advertising-driven entertainment industry.

The Rise of Partisan Media

In the US, a key stage in the demise of news media’s direct relation to reality could be argued to be when the Fairness Doctrine of 1949 was abolished under Ronald Reagan in 1987. This paved the way for the totally partisan news commentators that arose at the end of the 1980s in the USA, followed by the success of Fox News, which ironically described itself as “Fair and Balanced,” in complete contrast to the right-wing pro-Republican stance that the news channel actually promoted. This was exposed in detail in the 2004 Robert Greenwald documentary *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism*. Greenwald

shows clearly how Fox simulates the right to reply by bringing on a commentator with an opposing view, while ensuring that the representative of that view is weak, outnumbered and portrays the alternative perspective in a way that is easily challenged and defeated by the Republican-friendly guests and Fox presenters. Chadwick et al. argue that UK tabloid news media have been partisan in this way for decades and have merely translated this style into digital media.

However far Fox News has diverged from traditional standards of journalistic integrity, the results have fared well with viewing figures. Fox News had beaten its rivals in this respect for 66 quarters in a row by the second quarter of 2018.⁴ This has pressurised other news networks to follow its model of promoting entertainment value and “giving viewers what they want” over presenting information the audience may not wish to hear but is closer to “the truth.” This is in surprising contrast to the ability of modern communications technology to provide a bewildering level of access to information, which common sense might suggest should lead to a better-informed population, not a more ignorant one. But there are systemic reasons why the opposite is the case, which we will turn to in the next section.

Before we get to this, however, we should ask the question whether the loss of neutrality in news media necessarily leads to the end of objective truth. Richmond and Porpora (2018) have argued that this comes from poststructuralist theory based in positivism, because “positivism equates objectivity with neutrality, and since there is no neutrality, it has been argued conversely by poststructuralist theorists that there is no objectivity.” They go on to define this as the basis for a political dialogue where “without a shared commitment to truth, rival factions lose their ability to say anything persuasive to each other.” They cite Donald Trump’s promise to “Make America Great Again” as a reference to a non-existent past golden era that is pure simulacrum, and “Where simulacra dominate, there is no validity in epistemological and ontological claims as there is no real against which to compare them” (Richmond & Porpora, 2018). They then claim that for Baudrillard this kind of situation leads to his conclusion that “there is no way to establish what is real.”

Against this, Richmond and Porpora contrast modernist journalism, characterised by objectivity, value neutrality and “cool style.” The basis of objectivity is a trust in ontological realism, “the belief in an ontologically objective world outside of and independent of the analyst’s perceptions or our ideas about it.” This is arrived at via epistemological realism, which claims that “when the objective world corresponds to our thoughts about it, we have truth.” This ends up in social science and the journalism allied to it with a foundationalism that asserts “strict adherence to their canonical research methods will in principle generate the epistemic certainty that gets equated with truth.” This is based on the age-old fact-value distinction, where facts can be neutral, if only they can be separated from biased values. However, one of the main themes of poststructuralist thought is to question whether this is possible, due to our inability to

escape our own prejudices and biases completely. The “cool style” reporting Richmond and Porpora discuss is related to this need to maintain a semblance of objectivity. They explain that “cool style” is a journalistic approach “which tries to separate opinion reporting from straight news.”

As we have seen from the news examples so far, the era of social media has shown that “cool style” reporting is not what is most likely to gain popularity in this engagement-driven media landscape. Richmond and Porpora admit that there is “no escape from value judgement. An absolute fact-value distinction is a myth.” They then go on to cite Kuhn’s work on paradigm shifts in the world of science to show that even in this supposedly neutral and fact-based realm, experimental results “can always be and generally are rhetorically contested.” However, they misunderstand Foucault’s related critique of how knowledge and power are interconnected via discourse systems as implying that these are regimes of truth that are “various, equally arbitrary, cultural constructions.” They argue that “rhetoric can also be understood following Aristotle as a way to evaluate what is truthful in contexts where proofs or other algorithmic procedures are lacking.” But rhetoric is still the underlying form of politics even in the post-truth era, and it can be argued that this has transferred well into the social media age, because good rhetoric makes for engaging entertainment. Rhetoric can be spectacle too. When Trump promises to “Make America Great Again,” this is a spectacularly powerful rhetoric, and it drowns out any truth about whether America was great in the first place or whether Trump will be able to re-establish this even if it was. But it doesn’t necessarily negate the possibility of truth. Before we return to this notion, we must further delineate the current status of journalism in the digital era.

Promoting the News

One of the biggest problems for news is that it is part of a spectrum of media forms that includes entertainment and news thereby competes with those forms for attention as an impoverished relative. Where audiovisual news formats started life as the newsreels that were an integral part of a cinema programme including A and B movies as well as cartoons, on commercial TV news has had to vie for ratings alongside entertainment formats. In August 2018, for example, only 12 per cent of the TV-watching population were consuming programming in the News or Current Affairs categories, with the rest viewing more entertainment-focused content.⁵ Printed newspapers have also generally been a commercial enterprise, even in the era of “free sheets,” so have had to market themselves to an audience that has a range of choices about which publications to buy and read. In the current digital era, individual stories now fight online for clicks and shares from social media against many other types of content. Media, including news, has been subsumed under what can be most

successfully promoted with viewers. This means that the truth of news has been downplayed in favour of its popularity.

This has been the way tabloid newspapers in the UK have built and maintained their circulation for years. Social media has merely provided a new platform to amplify what they already did. In the US, the end result of the removal of any central governmental oversight over news organisations' requirement to provide both sides of a story is epitomised by the success of Alex Jones's Infowars. This quasi-news organisation promotes conspiracy theories as if they were journalism, with a rapacity that seems unbelievable to those outside its core readership. It does this with some considerable commercial success.

Right-wing sites like Infowars and Breitbart, or the left-wing The Canary, owe their success in large part to their knowledge of how to promote themselves in the contemporary digital context. More "mainstream" news sources that have arrived successfully in the last decade, such as BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and Quartz, also demonstrate the same trend. This should be seen in a more general media context where Hollywood blockbuster movies have tended towards the spectacular rather than complex plot formations, in a quest to lure the biggest possible audiences for each individual release.

The ability of news to be promoted comes first over its truthfulness, and journalism finds itself having to consider how it can be advertised as much as whether the stories are in the public interest. Baudrillard (1994) argues that: "All current forms of activity tend towards advertising and most exhaust themselves therein. Not necessarily advertising, the kind that is produced as such—but the form of advertising, that of a simplified operational mode, vaguely seductive, vaguely consensual (all the modalities are confused therein, but in an attenuated, agitated mode)" (p. 87).

Politics has also been subsumed to the same logic, since our experience of it is primarily via news media. It has been this way for most of the 20th century, with populations controlled via propaganda, which is essentially a political form of advertising that is generated by the same companies, such as Saatchi and Saatchi's involvement with promoting the government of Margaret Thatcher. In Baudrillard's (1994) words: "Propaganda becomes the marketing and merchandising of idea-forces, of political men and parties with their 'trade-mark image'" (p. 88). With so many news organisations espousing political bias unashamedly, and successfully building audiences as a result, politics and journalism have been conflated into one promotional whole.

Data-Driven News

An integral factor in the rise of websites and social media has been the use of data analytics to optimise online media usage. If the age of electronic media tended towards content that lent itself to being advertised, the shift to networked digital distribution has foregrounded the power of data to influence

success. This has resulted in some very strange phenomena, where “fake news farms” in Macedonia chase right-wing eyeballs not because they care about promoting right-wing politics, but purely to maximise profit from Google advertising (Sabramanian, 2017). Essentially, the Google algorithm is calling the shots, and it doesn’t care who wins an election, just how many people click through.

Again, Baudrillard (1994) saw this coming, arguing that traditional advertising was losing its power as digital technology developed: “today this power is stolen from it by another type of language that is even more simplified and thus more functional: the languages of computer science” (p. 89). Data processing is taking over as advertising moves from the creatively conceptual explosion of the 1950s advertising—the *Mad Men* era—towards a method based on behavioural analysis and data matching (Maex & Brown, 2012). Baudrillard argued: “It is information, in the sense of data processing, that will put an end to, that is already putting an end to the reign of advertising.” Essentially, it no longer matters what advertising messages mean, only how people respond to them, and this can be user-tested and mapped in fine detail. If a blue logo provokes a better response than an orange one, it’s not important why. Only the user reaction statistics are important.

However, this doesn’t mean the end of advertising per se, merely its transformation into a data-driven activity, with a knock-on effect on all media forms that have been influenced by advertising, including political messages and news. Propaganda is still advertising; “fake news” is still advertising. Cambridge Analytica is (or was) an advertising company. But instead of using seductive modes derived purely from creative artistry, the seduction is based on what the data shows is proven to work. The content and meaning of that seduction is irrelevant, so long as its numbers are better. Try a range of ideas and run with the one that works. This is a trend that Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has analysed in particular detail down to its most nefarious depths, arguing that the attention economy propagated by companies such as Google and Facebook promotes user participation so that behavioural data can be collected in order to optimise advertising messages and nudge activity.

This is why trying to analyse the social media popularity of a given news story purely at the level of the information it imparts has become so problematic. As the research of Chadwick et al. shows, many people do not share “fake news” because they think it’s true information, but because it conforms to the logic of the social media context they inhabit. That logic revolves around grabbing attention and status within the user’s social network, and posts are primarily shared that will achieve this result. It becomes part of a dynamic of self-promotion and personal advertising. This is not a language in the traditional informational sense of signs referring to phenomena in the real world. A popular Instagram user posts images to present the appearance of a certain lifestyle. They may or may not have that lifestyle, but it only matters that their

followers believe they do. This is very much an advertising business, and they will adjust their activities based on analysis of what has and hasn't been successful in the past.

Although services like Instagram were not even a twinkle in the technological eye when Baudrillard wrote these words, his description of advertising as a mockery of language fits the contemporary context perfectly: "It is useless to analyse advertising as language, because something else is happening there: a doubling of language (and also of images), to which neither linguistics nor semiology correspond, because they function on the veritable operation of meaning, without the slightest suspicion of this caricatural exorbitance of all the functions of language, this opening onto an immense field of the mockery of signs, 'consumed' as one says in their mockery, for their mockery and the collective spectacle of their game without stakes—just as porno is a hypertrophied fiction of sex consumed in its mockery, for its mockery, a collective spectacle of the inanity of sex in its baroque assumption" (Baudrillard, 1994).

Can We Get Beyond the Journalism Simulation Servers?

One of the most prominent messages from evangelists of the Internet and its concomitant digital systems has been that they democratise both production and distribution. In this view, everyone potentially has access to the tools for blogging, producing videos for YouTube, and viral promotion via Facebook. New genres have arisen as a result. The young gaming video producers of YouTube epitomise this conceptualisation, and the hundreds of millions of monthly viewers that some of their channels receive are testament to the impact of what they do. However, Anita Elberse (2014) argues that while the Internet may have given everyone the chance to distribute their material, which fulfils the promise of digital media software tools that allow anyone to create their own content, this doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can now make a living creating media online.

On the contrary, Elberse argues that a few big media franchises and blockbuster stars are using the facilities of social media and online distribution to aggregate bigger audiences than ever before. YouTube celebrities like PewDiePie (the most subscribed-to YouTuber at time of writing) are few and far between, and should be set against the literally millions of wannabes that achieve only limited success, or none at all. Even YouTube channels with tens of thousands of subscribers will most probably only provide enough revenue to remain a hobby or side-line income source, not a living. Marisol Sandoval has argued that social media organisations are no different from the traditional media organisations that preceded them, because they are still driven by the same monetary profit motive and drive to build shareholder value (Sandoval, 2014). The ability of traditional UK newspaper tabloids to become some of the

most successful brands online as well exemplifies this. Their track record for generating profit was already proven during the print era.

For most people, the experience of the brave new consumer-producer world is primarily from a much more passive engagement with social media than becoming a YouTube star. Although it is possible to build considerable influence via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and their ilk, the owners of the networks used to distribute this content are the real winners, as Jaron Lanier (2014) argues in *Who Owns the Future?* He explains how the companies set up to provide information or a service essentially for free (or at least more efficiently and cheaply than what went before) are in fact repositories for the collection of data about user behaviour. “The primary business of digital networking has come to be the creation of ultrasecret mega-dossiers about what others are doing, and using this information to concentrate money and power. It doesn’t matter whether the concentration is called a social network, an insurance company, a derivatives fund, a search engine, or an online store. It’s all fundamentally the same” (Lanier, 2014).

Lanier calls these mega-dossiers “siren servers” and cites retail giant Walmart as an early example of the genre. Certainly, Twitter in particular, due to its openly viewable nature (unlike Facebook), is providing marketers with an unparalleled level of real-time intelligence on public taste and reactions to events, which can be analysed via expensive software tools such as Salesforce’s Radian6 or Meltwater Buzz. This can then be fed back into how new marketing strategies and content are shaped. The most successful content brands of the last few years, for example BuzzFeed, owe their success to precisely this strategy of shaping what they produce through user behaviour data, while “Google can individually target ads, and document the click-throughs that follow” (Lanier, 2014). Despite the fact that participation in these siren servers locks users into their systems, with data contributed often being lost when an attempt is made to move from one company’s system to another, people are still expending huge amounts of time and energy using these services to be creative and formulate their opinions about the world. Zuboff has gone even further than Lanier in her analysis of this, arguing that we are willingly participating in our own enslavement to an algorithm-driven hoarding of behavioural data, about which we know very little.

Although it would be very satisfying to see a global conspiracy behind the rise of “fake news,” there could well be no evil wizard behind this frustrating phenomenon. Instead, it could represent the latest phase in the separation of media imagery from the traditional informative function we have given to language, which was discussed earlier in this paper. Analysing trends in social sharing so that you can take advantage of them creates a massive feedback loop where the representational content of what is being shared takes a distant second place to the popularity figures that have been discovered analytically. As has already been argued, journalism, because it is a mode of communication competing for

entertainment attention like fiction film productions or TV drama, has also shaped itself around what can be marketed. Now that this marketing is being dominated by the real-time analysis of user-behaviour data, so journalism is finding itself influenced by data processing as well, such as search engine optimisation and social media analytics. Simulated news can potentially be even more successful than “real” news in this context, because the factuality of a story is secondary to users’ engagement with it.

This has serious consequences for civic life. The current failure of news organisations to cope with the increased drive towards simulation in media poses an important question regarding political power and our ability to do effective journalism about it. David Ryfe of The University of Iowa argues that, thanks to the circumstances described above, we have moved from an information-centred model of journalism to a group-centred model, where news performs a role within a particular community of interest. He recognises that news now does less to inform than affirm, following emotional and affective motivations, arguing that:

“On a group-centered perspective, new terms like representation, voice, power, and equality come to the fore. In a group-centered world, journalists may have less interest in providing impartial information (which members of different groups may interpret in vastly different ways) and more in ensuring that all relevant social groups are represented in the political process” (Ryfe, in press).

However, whilst it has become clear that relentlessly fact-checking Donald Trump’s statements on Twitter hasn’t convinced many, or even any, of his supporters to turn away from him towards more “rational” political stances, Ryfe’s suggestions don’t promise a return to traditional journalistic values of telling truth to power. Trying to frame news so that it appeals to a tabloid-level online audience risks that news turning into the same clickbait-chasing vacuity that it hopes to combat.

Richmond and Porpora, in contrast, propose a “critical realism” approach to finding a truth that doesn’t have to be certain. They argue: “Without proofs in the mathematical or logical sense, we must follow Aristotle’s Rhetoric and turn to the best argument” (Richmond & Porpora, 2018). They eventually go on to suggest that late night comedians and satirists re-establish a more savvy, critical form of truth that can act as an antidote to what they call “Entertainment Politics” (Richmond & Porpora, 2018). They hope as a result that: “Truth will be recaptured as the pivotal theoretical premise behind critical theory and journalism itself.” However, this still fits within the hypothesis of Baudrillard’s simulacra. Satire isn’t necessarily effective due to it being true, but because it’s funnier than what it critiques, or shows the absurdity of its subject matter in an amusing way. Satire may be a rhetoric that appeals to a more “liberal” audience but it still works at the entertainment level like the form of politics it attempts to critique.

Nicholls (2017), on the other hand, argues that “Trump’s non-dual relationship with the world could be disrupted by rediscovering what Baudrillard calls the vital illusion.” This aims to take “the world for the world and not for its model” (Baudrillard, 2008), but again pushes us back to the problem of how we can escape the fact that we can only perceive the world through our linguistic representation of it. This doesn’t appear to provide an obvious antidote to the popularity of “integral reality” or the spectacle of politics and its consumption through journalism and social media.

As the third decade of the 21st century approaches, the situation seems grave for traditional civic-minded journalism that aims to convey information honestly to promote healthy debate in the public interest. But realising how we got into this situation is the essential first step towards building a way forward. Baudrillard recognised almost 40 years ago that media no longer perform the classic linguistic function of meaningful reference to the real world. Instead, they point towards an idealised simulacrum, an advertising-driven aspirational utopia, but with dire implications for political life. Baudrillard continued to argue this even in his last published work, *The Agony of Power*:

“The most serious of all forms of self-denial—not only economically or politically but metaphysically—is the denial of reality. This immense enterprise of deterrence from every historical reference, this strategy of discrediting, of divesting from reality in the form of parody, mockery, or masquerade, becomes the very principle of government. The new strategy—and it truly is a mutation—is the self-immolation of value, of every system of value, of self-denial, indifferentiation, rejection and nullity as the triumphant command” (Baudrillard, 2010).

This excerpt could very accurately describe Donald Trump’s approach to political campaigning and government, even though it was written more than a decade before his rise to power. It’s clear that the current political turmoil is not a new phenomenon, but the current stage of a much longer trend that predated digital media and social networks. For decades, tabloid news in the UK has fed its readers the “world as people want it to be.” The sharing of “fake news” via social media is merely the latest incarnation of this phenomenon. The process may now have become dominated by the analysis of data on user behaviour, and harnessed by populist political movements, but it’s part of the same nihilistic drive inherent in media for over a century, where truth and meaning become subsumed to entertainment success for economic benefit. The new element is that behavioural analytics has potentially become a law unto itself as algorithms act in a semi-autonomous way to maximise income for the companies with the most influential “siren servers”—the digital technology giants.

News organisations such as BuzzFeed have partnered with the likes of Facebook to produce journalism that successfully takes advantage of social media sharing habits. But until the advent of the Web, it was news publishers

themselves who employed the journalists, owned the printing presses or TV production equipment, and even the trucks that delivered the newspapers or transmitters that broadcasted the news channels. In contrast, today's news organisations don't own the Web, search engines, or the social media platforms that they now rely on for public visibility. Journalists may never again have the power over public opinion they had during the majority of the 20th century, when their employers owned the means of distribution too. Maybe now the algorithms that prioritise one piece of content over another on social networks are the new media barons, and simulated news that appeals to people the most will remain the dominant form of journalism. But these algorithmic barons are generally owned by large, American companies, such as Google and Facebook.

The first step in fighting back against this situation is recognising that this is merely the latest phase of a trend towards simulation that has been going on for decades. Only then can we begin the long process of understanding how these algorithms affect our world view, and how they fit into a much longer evolution of media simulacra. Perhaps this will again give us the tools to do journalism that uses this knowledge effectively for civic benefit, rather than creating a "fake news"-driven dystopia. But the jury is very much out on how that can be achieved, or whether it can be achieved at all. After all, Jean Baudrillard saw this coming 40 years ago, and we still don't know what to do about it.

However, events themselves may have recently provided an alternative perspective. Since work began on this paper, a huge global shift has occurred due to what Taleb (2007) would call a "black swan" occurrence: a global pandemic that has swept across humanity, with virtually no country left untouched. Particularly badly affected have been those states led by right-wing populists like Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. They have found that simply Tweeting a macho message or making a bold statement on TV can't contradict the truth of tens of thousands of people dying from an incurable virus. This is reminiscent of Dr Johnson's refutation of Bishop Berkeley's arguments against the existence of real matter by kicking a stone, and has perhaps been even more viscerally put by the philosopher and sometime boxer Mike Tyson: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." As Virilio (2007) has argued via his concept of the accident, the bubble of simulacra is burst by unpredicted events. This is akin to the process of science, where experimental evidence proves or disproves theory; in a wider social context, a worldwide catastrophe can rupture media dissimulation, as hard as it might try to put an alternative spin on things. So rather than humans fixing the toxic trends in their simulated culture, perhaps reality itself is rushing through to show how far the simulation has diverged from truth, and the most effective thing journalists can do is report on it.

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Notes

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