

# **Fake News, Its Rapid Dissemination and Its Relation to Pseudo-cognitive Authorities**



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# Links



- Link to all the links below: <https://tinyurl.com/ydbhfg2h> OR  
<http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/links/asist.links.pdf>
- Link to previous work on which most of this presentation is based: Froehlich, Thomas. (2017). A Not-So-Brief Account of Current Information Ethics : The Ethics of Ignorance, Missing Information, Misinformation, Disinformation and Other Forms of Deception or Incompetence. *BiD: textos universitaris de biblioteconomia i documentació*, núm. 39 (desembre). Retrieved September 4, 2018, from: <http://bid.ub.edu/en/39/froehlich.htm>.
- Link to a research paper under current review entitled *The role of pseudo-cognitive authorities and self-deception in the dissemination of fake news*:  
<http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/OWLS/pseudo.cognitive.authority.r3.pdf>  
It is an extension and extrapolation of the first paper.

The bibliographic references in this presentation can be found at: <http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/OWLS/OWLS.bibliographies.pdf>

- Here is the link to the video lecture:

# InfoWars



- World War III has started. As much as one would like to rail against the disinformation and conspiracy theories of Alex Jones, he is right about one thing: we are engaged in InfoWars, the title of his “news” program.
- The first major salvo of WW III was InfoWar I, the 2016 election of Trump.
- The war is not trivial. It is for the soul of America. And it is a World War. No matter what the country, it is a battle for science, reason, evidence, and fact (and humanism) to anchor political decision making.
- Violence has occurred and there have been casualties
- It is a war of disinformation, misinformation, lies, absent information, etc. against the evidence and truth, and for power and greed trolling simplistic solutions to complex problems.

# InfoWars



- On the one side, we have cable news channels (e.g., Fox, Sinclair), Russian trolls, conspiracy theorists, social media run amuck with “alternative facts” and a president, an administration, and a political party (i.e., the GOP) committed to the destruction of democratic norms, and the resurgence of racism, sexism, fascism, rampant corruption, climate denial, etc.
- On the other side, we have news channels (MSNBC), news organizations (NY Times), social media, an opposition party (Democrat, not all without taint—they make mistakes but often admit them).
- There is really a third party, the disengaged, which by default supports Trump and his supporters, whether the Republican Party or his hoi polloi.

# InfoWars



- The sides are not balanced, for the one side not only spreads disinformation but actively challenges, abuses and attacks those who are committed to truth, evidence, facts and logic.
- It is not that we have two competing opinions, (say that of Rachel Maddow versus Sean Hannity) but an opinion that declares its opposition to have no valid grounds, that in a supreme example of false equivalences, all opinions are equal but the right's opinion outweighs all others. The real fake news is not that of Trump's critics but of his supporting media.

# Patrick Wilson and Cognitive Authority



- The Infowars are fought on what can be called second-hand knowledge
- Patrick Wilson wrote a work called *Second-hand knowledge - an inquiry into cognitive authority* in 1983 which promoted a variety of notions.
- He argues that we can construct knowledge in one of two ways:
  - (1) we can construct first-hand knowledge based on our experience. Unfortunately, our experience is limited.
  - (2) We can construct knowledge from or through others, second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others
- Second-hand knowledge comes in various degrees – some people know what they are talking about, and others (at the other end) can be self-inflated liars
- Cognitive authority is a phrase that Wilson coined to explain our understanding of others that recognize them as being proper authorities.
- There are two major features to such authorities – credibility and trustworthiness.
- We will explore is how cognitive authority occurs both for real news and fake news, and how it creates and sustains a Trump bubble of propaganda.

# Disinformation and the Varieties of False Information



When we talk about the InfoWars we are concerned primarily with disinformation among the many varieties of false information in the disinformation marketplace, These wars are the result of second-hand knowledge and those who are claimed to be cognitive authorities about such knowledge

- Lies per se
- Ignorance per se
- Misinformation
- Paltering
- Disinformation
- Missing Information
- Self-Deception or Bad Faith
  - Motivated
  - Unmotivated

For explanations and examples see my original paper. I would like to focus on two of these: disinformation and self-deception.

# Two Forms of Self-deception/Bad Faith: Motivated and Unmotivated

Originally I wanted to promote self-deception as another form of false knowledge, but it is really a way in which we embrace any of the forms of false information, whether misinformation, disinformation, missing information, incomplete information or even true information used in paltering. It is a special but widespread approach of the alt-right and Trump supporters in the Age of Disinformation, that dovetails with a form of a cognitive authority, or at least a false form of it. I distinguish 2 types:

Motivated self-deception:

- Pushing a form of self-deception for conscious political, social, ethical or personal gain (e.g., proposing that all Muslims should be quarantined or deported because all of them believe in Sharia Law and support jihad).
- Stephen Colbert's notion of 'truthiness' is probably the best contemporary expression of motivated self-deception, described by Wikipedia as a "belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts" (*Wikipedia, Truthiness, 2017*).
- We practice truthiness when there is something we want to be true despite clear evidence to the contrary. Types of motivations for motivated self-deception or 'truthiness' include political, personal, social, and ethical.

# Two Forms of Self-deception/Bad Faith: Motivated and Unmotivated



## Unmotivated self-deception:

- Succumbing to one's biases, motivated to the degree that it accords with one's a priori biases; confirmation bias.
- In fact, most people are inclined to information avoidance as a technique of confirmation bias.
- Drawing on research in economics, psychology and sociology, George Loewenstein, Russell Golman and David Haggmann at Carnegie Mellon University “illustrate how people select their own reality by deliberately avoiding information that threatens their happiness and well-being. In a paper published in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, they show that while a simple failure to obtain information is the most clear-cut case of ‘information avoidance,’ people have a wide range of other information-avoidance strategies at their disposal. They also are remarkably adept at selectively directing their attention to information that affirms what they believe or that reflects favorably upon them, and at forgetting information they wish were not true” (Rea, 2017).

# Self-Deception - Kinds



After diving into psychological research, various authors articulate varieties of self-deception: They are

- (1) biased information search;
- (2) biased interpretation;
- (3) misremembering;
- (4) rationalization; and
- (5) convincing the self that a lie is true.

# Self-Deception - Varieties



Psychological research indicates that not only do we deceive ourselves, but there is social self-deception and collective self-deception.

When we look at these phenomena we begin to understand the nature of the bubble in which Trump has engulfed his supporters and in which they engulf themselves

# Social Self-Deception



- Self-deception is not only a learned behavior but a socialized and socializing one as well. Roy Ding (2017), in a paper on “Social strategies in self-deception,” comes close to my point, when he claims that self-deception can be “a process that is distributed across the social context of a self-deceiver.”
- We foster our self-deception through deceiving others.

# Collective Self-Deception: Group Self Deception



- Ding sees as a research offshoot for his work the notion of “collective self-deception,” that is discussed by DeWeese-Boyd (2012). While he describes 2 kinds, we focus on group self-deception, characterized “as the holding of a false belief in the face of evidence to the contrary by a group of people as a result of shared desires, emotions, or intentions (depending upon the account of self-deception) favoring that belief.” (DeWeese-Boyd, 2012).
- In short, it is group self-deception. In this case, we have a group of individuals who each share levels of resentment about the status quo and who share “the same belief for similar reasons and by similar means.” One can imagine a group of Trump supporters who share a belief in the success of his presidency by watching the same media outlets (e.g., Fox News) or using the same social media sites.
- Group self-deception is a dialogical process where the group absorbs and perpetuates false beliefs, reinforced by its elements and the collective results. In my paper, I discuss the collective self-deception of white evangelicals, abetted by their leaders

# Motivations for Collective Self-Deception



- As in the case of white evangelicals, we see that their motivation was multi-faceted.
- There are many “theological” motivations:
  - the attempt to overturn Roe vs. Wade in the Supreme Court,
  - appoint other conservative federal judges,
  - push “religious freedom,”
  - erase the separation of church and state by proclaiming America a Christian nation
- There are other tacit motivations: power and greed, as many of these churches are declining in membership and funding.
- We need to look at other psychological factors, for a more complete picture of Trump supporters in other domains.

# Motivations and Psychological Factors



- Throughout the discussion of the methods and varieties of self-deception, the issue of motivation occurs, whether conscious or unconscious.
- What is it that drives such persons, believers of actual fake news? We can talk about the more conscious ones first and then turn the less conscious ones (e.g., confirmation bias).
- At the conscious level, we have many Trump supporters that are driven by hatred, power and/or greed. Certainly, the wealthy 1% seek to keep and expand their wealth. The same can likely be said of the powerful, such as evangelical leaders.
- But the average Trump supporter does not support these goals (at least ostensibly or consciously, because many, if not most, have neither – in fact their presumed lack of power in maintaining the white privileged status quo is a source of motivation).
- To understand their approach, we can look to factors that enhance the acceptance of fake news and Thomas Pettigrew in his paper, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," in the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* (2017).

# Social Psychological Factors in Trump Supporters (Pettigrew)



- **Authoritarianism** is characterized by such traits as "deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups, a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experience" (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 108).
- **Social dominance orientation (SDO)** is related to authoritarianism but is distinct from it. It is characterized as "an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 108).
- **Prejudice.** What is interesting here is that devoted followers of Trump are not just anti-immigrant, but anti-outgroup in general.
- **Low intergroup contact.** Pettigrew (Ibid.) observes that there is growing evidence that Trump's white supporters have low intergroup contact (i.e., little contact with groups other than their own).
- **Relative deprivation** is the belief that others are better off in life and we are short-changed in terms of what 'less-deserving' others are getting in life.

# Motivations and Level of Commitment



- There are a multitude of factors that contribute to the motivation behind self-deception: fear, hatred, ignorance, the search for power and significance, resentment and greed, to name a few.
- Depending on where one is on the class spectrum one factor or set of factors may dominate over another. We should note that Trump supporters are on a spectrum, from vaguely committed to fully committed.
- For many, politics exists at the periphery of their lives, and their engagement is little, and they are likely to be informed by casual hearsay.
- Having noted that, it is clear that many Trump supporters are at the other end of the spectrum, fully engaged, because of one or more of the motivations above.
- We next want to look at what I have called amplifiers/accelerators for these motivations.

# Motivation Amplifiers/Accelerators



Now that we have looked at the kinds of social psychological considerations of Trump supporters and the nature of collective self-deception, there are methods that amplify or accelerate the motivations:

- Repetition
- Dunning-Kruger Effect
- Difficulties in Unlearning Information
- Agnotology

# Repetition of Fake News



Repetition of fake news stories or ‘facts’ increases their plausibility.

- Trump on the campaign trail used such repeated phrases as “crooked Hillary” or “lying Ted” which are not only *ad hominem*s against Hillary Clinton or Ted Cruz, but their repeated use was an attempted serial character assassination.
- His supporters ostensibly (through signs and repeated chants) dutifully repeated and absorbed the messages.
- Fox News spins unverified conspiracy theories from other sources and then other alt-right social media channels replay the same stories. So it appears to the information seeker that the same story arrives from different sources (their social media, their fundamentalist minister, their news channel, alt-right web sites) that makes the story appear to be more substantive and reliable because it is so often repeated from many “reliable” sources.
- Furthermore, researchers have discovered that misinformation and disinformation are transmitted more quickly than correct information on the internet. (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral 2018).

# Dunning-Kruger Effect



- People who are ignorant or unskilled in a given domain tend to believe they are much more competent than they are.
- In psychology this is referred to as the Dunning–Kruger effect. It suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. To put it bluntly, the stupid do not know they are stupid and are not likely to have or get the skills to recognize their lack of critical thinking.
- The first publication in 1999 of David Dunning and his then-graduate student Justin Kruger bore the title "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments."
  - The authors asserted that one needs competence and knowledge to judge the extent to which one is skilled and knowledgeable (Poundstone, 2017).
  - Ironically, on the other hand, competent persons tend to underestimate their own competence and "erroneously presume that tasks that are easy for them to perform are also easy for other people to perform" (Wikipedia, *Dunning–Kruger effect*, 2017).

# Difficulties in Unlearning Information



- Once learned, false information is hard to dispel.
- David Rapp's research on memory and learning reveals that our brains quickly memorize the information that we learn independently of its validity or source.
- If we later discover that it is false, that recognition does not necessarily override the initial impression.
- He suggests that we can guard against this proclivity if our thinking is critically proactive (Waters; Hargadon, 2017).

# Agnotology



- Culturally induced ignorance stimulates doubts about correct views already held by information seekers.
- Robert N. Proctor, a Stanford University Professor, coined a word for the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, *agnotology*, which appears to be a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold.
  - A clear example for Proctor was the fostering of ignorance through the tobacco industry's use of advertising to generate doubt about cancer and other illnesses being the result of smoking. A similar approach is espoused by climate deniers, proponents of fracking, and pesticide manufacturers.

# Real Character of Fake News Authorities



- Believable, trustworthy and informative for pseudo cognitive authorities mean supporting the biases of the president, his administration, the GOP, and the supporting news media and social media promoting a pseudo-conservative agenda (e.g., conservatives used to believe in fiscal responsibility) and group self-deception.
- Instead of promoting second-hand “knowledge,” they promote second-hand opinion, opinion that could rarely, if ever, be converted into fact.
- In fact, what is problematic is that this cognitive state is neither opinion, right opinion or knowledge, but demonstrably false knowledge, paraded as fact. In short, it is propaganda.

# Fake Cognitive Authority



- The general aim of such news producers is deception, promoting at best alternative opinions but at worst lies for knowledge, which facilitates social self-deception and collective social self-deception.
- Fox News pundits convince themselves of their own self-deception while engaging/inflaming the collective self-deception of its viewers. The same can generally be said of alt-right religious leaders, podcasts, social media sites, etc. that reinforce these delusions
- Fake cognitive authorities are pseudo-trustworthy because they repeat or enhance the same news with the same biases as the viewers or information seekers. Trustworthy is supposed to mean “perceived goodness and morality of the source.” (Reih, 2005), but in the case of fake cognitive authorities perceived goodness means coming to support or institute one’s or the group’s bias on particular matters.

# Cognitive Authority



- Genuine cognitive authority involves some intellectual assessment about credibility and trustworthiness of the authority.
- When one thinks of a *cognitive* authority, one tends to think of a rational process, gathering evidence about whether someone or institution is a real cognitive authority.
- In the case of Trumpism, it seems less a matter of cognition, but rather one of emotion.
- Rather than a cognitive authority, Trump and Fox News are emotive authorities deceiving themselves as genuine authorities. In fact, the emotive part (based in resentment, fear, prejudice, etc.) enables the Trump supporters to dismiss at the ultimate limit the meaning of the content of their (FOX's or Trump's) message (e.g., Trump could kill anyone he wanted on Madison Avenue and get away with it).

# False Cognitive Authority



- Pseudo-cognitive authority succeeds because of a combined effects of self-deception, primarily collective, driven by conscious or sub-/un-conscious motivation, enhanced by such things as repetition and the Dunning-Kroger effect, that discards rationality and evidence, perpetuated throughout the internet.
- Because cognition is a neutral mental process, whether of content that is reliable or unreliable, we could make a distinction between cognitive-rational authority and cognitive-emotive authority, depending on how the process is stimulated.

# False Cognitive Authority



- We have argued that there is a range of conscious and sub-/un-consciounesses in social or collective social self-deception, from the very conscious (e.g., those Trump supporters focused on the retention of power and wealth, such as Fox News and the GOP) to the sub/un-conscious (e.g., confirmation bias of “our” tribe), though one suspects that the majority of Trump supporters fall into the latter category.
- Similarly, there is a range of motivations (e.g., greed, anger, hatred, prejudice, resentment, feeling impotent but gaining potency through the ingroup), but one suspects that the majority is preoccupied with impotence, prejudice, resentment.
- It is enhanced by such factors as repetition, culturally induced ignorance (agnotology), the Kruger-Dunning effect, etc.
- All of these threads culminate in a spiraling, dialectical self-reinforcing collective social self-deception.

# Links



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