

# Confessions of a Fake News Scholar or “on the study of popular subjects”

*Tommaso Venturini*

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*Should we talk about “fake news”? According to several observers, we shouldn’t as this notion is vague, politically dangerous; indistinguishable from past misinformation; charged with a simplistic idea of truth, and missing the most important feature of the phenomenon it defines. Such feature is not deceptiveness, but virality – the capacity to pollute media public debate by spreading and transforming. But if virality is the defining features of fake news, then isn’t their critique another way of propagating the infection? Yes and no. Yes, if we stop at the critique. No, if we exploit it to encourage a media inquiry. Because of its simplicity, exaggeration, diffusion, rapid reproduction and mutation, fake news may be the drosophila of media studies – the little fly, which revolutionised genetic mapping for reasons similar to the ones just listed. In this paper, I will exemplify the research opportunities offered by viral news by discussing my recent Field Guide to Fake News (<http://fakenews.publicdatalab.org>) and two case-studies from the French election.*

In these pages, for reasons that will try to make clear, I will not talk about fake news. I will, instead, talk about the *study of fake news*. And I will do my best to distinguish as sharply as possible between the two for I believe that, if salvation is possible, it can only be found in this distinction. ‘Salvation’ refers here to the reanimation of public debate in modern democracies, but also (and very distinctively) to our redemption as scholars studying fake news.

Truth be told, I have a love-hate relationship with fake news. While I feel uncomfortable when people treat me as expert on the subject, I have never been so popular than I after I started working on it. When, in March 2017, Liliana Bounegru, Jonathan Gray and I launched the *Fake News Field Guide* as the first project of the nascent *Public Data Lab* (I’ll come back to this initiative later), we could not imagine that we would raise so much attention. In just a few months, we received dozen offers of help by researchers and professionals from all over the

world (so many in fact that we had problems in answering them). Several organisations invited us to use their database and technologies. Dozens of journalists, from all sorts of media outlets (included the most prestigious one), asked our opinions on the subject.

There is a whole tradition of artists feeling overly celebrated for works that they found too mainstream and neglected for what they consider their real contributions. Now I know that this feeling exists for scholars as well.

### Five reasons NOT to talk about fake news

I do not want to sound snobbish, I do enjoy the reputation of expert. I just believe that this reputation is undeserved when it comes to fake news. I am not trying to be modest either. It is not just me – no one, I believe, can honestly claim to be a ‘fake news expert’, for the simple reason that there is no serious way to demarcate such a field of expertise. On the contrary, consensus is emerging among the scholars working on the subject that we should stop using this notion and start actively denouncing it. In the literature, I have found at least five reasons why, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as ‘fake news’ – five reasons why this paper is not about fake news.

(1) The first reason has to do with the awful vagueness of the term. A recent study by Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2017) has reviewed the definitions of ‘fake news’ from 34 academic papers published between 2003 and 2017 and found out that the authors used the term to refer to phenomena as different as satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, native advertising, and propaganda. Ethan Zuckerman, director of MIT Center for Civic Media, in a post entitled *Stop saying “fake news”. It’s not helping* (2017), accuses the notion of being

“a vague and ambiguous term that spans everything from false balance (actual news that doesn’t deserve our attention), propaganda (weaponized speech designed to support one party over another) and disinformatzya (information designed to sow doubt and increase mistrust in institutions)” (Zuckerman, 2017).

(2) Because of its vagueness, the term ‘fake news’ is not only scientifically shaky, but also politically dangerous, because it lends itself to be used as a weapon to discredit opposing sources of information (US President Donald Trump has provided several excellent examples of such use). Since there is not precise way of demarcating fake news, the term becomes nothing more than a rhetorical accusation. Claire Ward, research director of *First Draft* (a non-profit coalition bringing together the most important journalism and media platforms - [firstdraftnews.com](http://firstdraftnews.com)) writes in a report on disinformation for the Council of Europe:

“Another reason why the term “fake news” is insufficient and dangerous to use is because it has been appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find to be problematic. The term “fake news” is being used as a mechanism for clamping down on the free press, and serves to undermine trust in media institutions, hoping to create a situation whereby those in power can circumvent the press and reach supporters directly through social media. It’s also worth noting that the term “fake news” and its visual signifiers (a red stamp across an image, for instance) has also been appropriated more widely by websites, organisations and political figures identified as untrustworthy by fact-checkers to undermine opposing, verified reporting and news organizations” (Ward, 2017).

(3) Vaguely defined as ‘false or biased information spread through the media to influence the public debate’, fake news finishes to be equated to previous forms of misinformation and in particular to propaganda, which has been a major topic of research since the beginning of the 20th century (cf. among many others, Lasswell, 1927, Ellul, 1965 and Chomsky, 1991). Of course, fake news is said to be specifically related to digital platforms and social media (rather than traditional broadcast), yet the attributes generally used to define it are the one usually associated to propaganda – e.g. the fact of containing deceitful or inaccurate content; of pushing specific political agendas; of aiming at emotional reactions rather than rational consideration; of being echoed by different sources; of being amplified by word-of-mouth. This suggests that some of the features of fake news may not be as new as they are presented, but it also suggests that we may be missing the specificity of the phenomenon. Paradoxically, alarms for the *unprecedented* rise of fake news tend to mobilise the same concerns that have long been raised against classic propaganda, instead of focussing on the specific dangers of this contemporary form of misinformation (Jack, 2017).

(4) Presenting the advent of ‘fake news’ as the beginning of a new ‘post-truth era’ (Keyes, 2004) is also misleading because it presupposes that there was a time in which the distinction between true and false was unproblematic. Now if there a lesson to be learned from half a century of *Science and Technology Studies* (the discipline where I come from) is that the separation between true and false has never been straightforward (Lynch, 2017). To be sure, this does not mean that true and false are the same, but it does mean that their opposition is not binary or timeless. As STS scholars have repeatedly shown, a Manichean distinction between true and false is not enough to capture the vast spectrum of reliable-yet-not-without-uncertainties status of scientific theories. Even more important: the true/false dichotomy fails to render the way in which enunciates are solidified through the work of scientific laboratories (Latour & Woolgar, 1979). Far from being established by sheer force of evidence, scientific facts are built and uphold by a complex and patient work of ‘truth-grounding’ – and this applies *a fortiori* to journalism,

whose truth-grounding procedures are less strictly formalised. The notion of 'fake news' is misleading because it supposes that malicious pieces of news are manufactured, while truthful ones correspond directly to reality. This denies the very essence of journalistic mediation, the work to select, combine, translate and present different pieces of information in a news story. The distinction worth making is not between manufactured and unaffected information, but between well-crafted stories and badly fabricated ones.

(5) Finally, 'fake news' conveys the idea that the main purpose of these stories is to trick readers into believing them. While this is sometimes the case, many stories labelled as fake news circulate without asking the 'cognitive adherence' of those who spread them. Some fake stories are published in satirical pages that do not hide their untruthfulness; others are put forward by news outlets that play out front their ideological biases; others are just titles used to lure readers into clicking on banners or opening pages. When it comes to fake news, truth is often overrated:

while fact-checkers belonging to what elsewhere has been called the "reality-based community" (Mankoff, 2016) would define fake news as false, misleading or else unverifiable information packaged as news, fake news might do entirely different work for users who share it on Facebook. This might include acting as monetisable clickbait for viral content pages, doing issue work for grassroots activist groups, grassroots campaigning work for political loyalists and providing humour for entertainment groups (Bounegru et al, forthcoming).

### Eat the cake and critique it too

While the five critiques discussed above may not be exhaustive, they are enough to discredit 'fake news' as a productive scientific notion – and enough to embarrass me for my supposed expertise of it. But there is worse. If these *negative* arguments (these very good claims about what fake news is not) make me feel uncomfortable, there is a *positive* one that makes me feel downright guilty. Because, to be sure, it is possible to talk *positively* about what fake news. It is not because something cannot be precisely defined that its effects cannot be observed and it is not because something has antecedents that its elements of novelty cannot be acknowledged. If the expression "fake news" has become so popular, if dozens of academic projects have been started on the subject, if hundreds of seminars have been organised, if thousands of newspaper articles have treated the question, it cannot only be because of a vast misunderstanding or an effect of fashion. Or rather, it is precisely this effect that is most interesting.

In my experience, I first stumbled on this 'fashion effect' while following the 2017 French presidential election. In order to set up a 'methodological recipe' to study fake news circulation of (see Bounegru et al, 2017), Mathieu Jacomy, Anders Munk and I decided to follow the story

that most resembled to the archetype of fake news – the French equivalent of the ‘Pope endorses Trump’ hoax ([www.snopes.com/pope-francis-donald-trump-endorsement/](http://www.snopes.com/pope-francis-donald-trump-endorsement/)). We settle for a story about Emmanuel Macron (who ended up winning the election) being homosexual and supported by a gay lobby. The most interesting thing we discovered following this story was that its truth was never the question. While dozens of websites and social media accounts retransmitted the story, the vast majority of them did it by explicitly labelling it as fake news. Apart from the original publication on the Russian information agency Sputnik News ([fr.sputniknews.com](http://fr.sputniknews.com)) and from a few very marginal Twitter accounts, few sources credited the story. Most venues cited the story to debunk it and most importantly to exhibit the trophy of a French fake news.

Mindful of the example of the 2016 US presidential campaign, many observers were expecting the French election to become the theatre of a similar proliferation of misinformation. For several reasons (one of which I will discuss below), this was not the case and commentators had few examples to chew on. The best one was the ‘Macron is gay’ one, not because anyone ever believed it (or cared about it), but because the story beautifully incarnated the fake news imagery: it involved the Russian propaganda; had sexual implications; resonated with rumours about Macron’s wedding, etc. While the ‘Macron is gay’ story gained little traction, the ‘Russian propaganda helps French trolls to spread slanders about Macron’ story was a success: eventually, France had its own fake news to be shocked about. Soon even Sputnik News started to publish meta-article discussing the circulation of the story rather than its content.

The example suggests that ‘virality’ – rather than ‘fakeness’ – should be considered the birthmark of fake news. Much more than to classic propaganda, fake news resembles to Internet memes (Shifman, 2013). It does not spread because people believe in it (though this may sometimes be the case); it spreads because people (journalists, bloggers, social media influencers and social media users) like to talk about it. Fake news is the news equivalent of ‘LOL cats’. Its contagiousness is such that it also spreads to most of the initiatives countering them.

I can’t help but laugh at the irony of folks screaming up and down about fake news and pointing to the story about how the Pope backs Trump. The reason so many progressives know this story is because it was spread wildly among liberal circles who were citing it as appalling and fake. From what I can gather, it seems as though liberals were far more likely to spread this story than conservatives. What more could you want if you ran a fake news site whose goal was to make money by getting people to spread misinformation? Getting doubters to click on clickbait is far more profitable than getting believers because they’re far more likely to spread the content in an effort to dispel the content. Win! (Boyd, 2017a)

Fake news debunking is like an autoimmune disease: it starts as a healthy response against a viral infection, but risks causing an exaggerated mobilisation becoming almost as harmful as the

infection itself. Fake news is toxic not because it promotes the believe in false information, but because it saturates the public debate (and to some extent the academic debate) with a deluge of repetitions and variations of the same memes. Fake news pollutes debate like an algal bloom – its proliferation fill up the systems drawing oxygen all other discussions. This reduces the diversity of the public debate and prevent important stories to be heard and discussed.

So, demystifying efforts end up amplifying the problem that they are supposed to solve and, very importantly, this applies both to debunking of specific fake stories and criticizing the notion of ‘fake news’ (as I did in the first part of this paper). Far from redeeming fake news scholars, assuming a critical attitude only makes things worse. Because, by discrediting fake news, we are still talking about it. While it is easy to make fun of debunking initiatives and to demonstrate that fact-checking is counterproductive, isn't this committing the same sin that we are lecturing against? When studying a popular subject, it is too easy to ‘go critic’ – too easy to get the visibility that comes from fashion, but not the shame of being fashionable.

### Gabriel Tarde's dream and nightmare

Critiquing the notion of ‘fake news’, to be sure, is better than hyping it, but it is not enough. If we are complicit in drumming the noise, we should at least try to make some good music out of it. And this is exactly what the *Public Data Lab* (or PDL) is trying to do. The PDL ([publicdatalab.org](http://publicdatalab.org)) is a network of European researchers working on digital data and digital methods. Its distinctive feature is an approach to media studies that is both pragmatic and interventionist. *Pragmatic*, because rather than studying the nature of digital mediation in theory, we are interested in using the traces or inscriptions produced through this mediation (Venturini et al., 2017) to inquire social dynamics in practice. *Interventionist*, because this inquiry is (in a distinctively deweyan way – Dewey, 1938 and especially 1946) not only the observation of an independent state of affairs, but also the deliberate engagement with a social issue with the deliberate agenda of promoting an open debate around it. This does not mean that we always intend to push things in one direction or another (though we sometimes might), but that we strongly hope that our interventions will not leave unaffected the subjects we study.

When we started to work on fake news, we had these two ideas clearly in view. We wanted to draw from its contagiousness and turn it from a curse into an occasion. Two occasions in fact: an occasion to rethink media studies in more *pragmatic* way and an occasion to *intervene* in the debate on the organisation of the media system.

To seize the first occasion, we launched the *Fake News Field Guide* with the objective of displacing the discussion from what fake news is or why it is dangerous to the question of how it

can be empirically investigated. That is why the Field Guide is a collection of methodological 'recipes'. By playing with the cookbook genre, we tried to tone down the fake news drama and suggest that the study of fake news opens interesting perspectives on contemporary media systems. We identified five of such perspectives (but the list is certainly not exhaustive): investigating 'fake stories' to understand how public Facebook pages create different publics and discussion hotspots (chapter 1); following 'fake stories' to trace how viral information circulates by crediting and discrediting actions (chapter 2); looking at the trackers employed by different news websites to trace and monetise their audience (chapter 3); investigating how 'fake stories' are circulated not only in the form of classic news article, but also as memetic images (chapter 4, forthcoming); studying how 'fake stories' are used in the context of online trolling campaigns (chapter 5, forthcoming).

From the list above, it should be clear that we were less interested in fake news itself than in a series of more general dynamics of online media. Because of their relative simplicity (fake stories are usually flatter than ordinary news story), their exaggeration (which makes it easier to detect and follow them), their geographical spread (scholars have identified examples of it in most countries of the world), their rapid reproduction (fake news tends to rise and fall in a few weeks and often of in a few days), their elevated mutation rate (I will expand this argument below), fake news may be the *drosophila melanogaster* of media studies. The drosophila is a little and relatively common fly (often found around ripe fruits), which assumed a crucial importance in the history of genetics. Because of reasons similar to the ones just listed for fake news, the drosophila became the 'model organism' for genetic research allowing to qualify and quantify a series of intuitions about gene reproduction (Kohler, 1994). As the drosophila facilitated the birth of experimental chromosome mapping, so fake news may help the development of new forms of *empirical* media mapping.

Readers will have noticed that none of the reasons why fake stories are interesting research subjects have anything to do with their falseness. I said above that French presidential campaign was characterized by a relatively low level of misinformation. One of the reasons may be that in the months preceding the elections, the French debate was occupied by the so-called 'affaire Fillon'. On January 25<sup>th</sup>, the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* published a piece alleging that Penelope Fillon, wife of François Fillon (candidate of the Republican party and strong favourite for the election), had been paid for years for a fictitious work of parliamentary assistant. The scandal colonized traditional and social media until the elections in April and, according to many, caused Fillon to be excluded at the first round of the election.

While the Fillon affair has nothing of a 'fake news' story (and was instead based on a solid journalistic investigation), it ended up spreading like one and occupying the public debate in a similar way (thereby filling the space needed by fake news to develop).

As the expression goes, the Fillon affair *went viral*. This expression deserves to be questioned. While the metaphor of viral epidemics is commonly used to characterize fake news (I have done it myself just earlier), the similitude is often used for the wrong reasons. As Jenkins *et al.* (2013) rightly pointed out, this metaphor tends to present digital publics as passive recipients of an infection that they cannot but pass along:

“the viral metaphor does little to describe situations in which people actively assess a media text, deciding whom to share it with and how to pass it along. People make many active decisions when spreading media, whether simply passing content to their social network, making a word-of-mouth recommendation, or posting a mash-up video to YouTube. Meanwhile, active audiences have shown a remarkable ability to circulate advertising slogans and jingles against their originating companies or to hijack popular stories to express profoundly different interpretations from those of their authors” (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013, p. 20).

The virality metaphor can be saved, however, by reminding that actual viruses are dangerous not only because they are contagious, but also because they are capable of mutating. While spreading from one organism to the other, biological viruses are transformed by their interaction with other viruses and with their hosts and vectors of diffusion (Sanjuán & Domingo-Calap, 2016). And the same happens to viral news, which is not just passed along by news outlets and Internet users, but actively modified by them. It is through this mutation that viral news (but also image memes, online jokes, buzz advertisements, etc.) can saturate public debate. A news story (fake or true) can acquire a bursting visibility if it is sufficiently eye-catching, but it will not thrive unless it is altered and retransmitted in a swarm of different variants.

This is exactly what happened in the case of the Fillon affair. If the news had stopped at the first article by *Le Canard Enchaîné* and its reprises by other media, the story would not have occupied the French public debate for almost three months. If it did, it is because the first allegation was followed by a proliferation of other accusations concerning different underserved wages of Fillon's wife; different members of the Fillon family; and other questionable conducts of François Fillon. Each of these accusations, and particularly those concerning Penelope Fillon, produced a vast range of reactions, denials, clarifications, comments, glosses, critiques, jokes, etc. which all contributed to maintaining the affair at the centre of French electoral debate.

Not unlike rumours (Morin, 1969), digital viral contents proliferate by transmission and transformation. In this, they provide a perfect illustration of the mechanism through which



social phenomena are constructed according to Gabriel Tarde (1890). In his famous dispute with Emile Durkheim over the fundamentals of the nascent sociology, Tarde refused the idea that underlying or emergent structure was at the basis of collective phenomena and claimed instead that their existence was to be searched in the 'simple' imitation of individual behaviours as well as in the progressive alteration that it entails (Latour, 2002). Tarde, however, found it difficult to defend its position *empirically*, because the research methods available at the time did not allow to follow the transmission and transformation of collective actions at the scale and with the sharpness demanded by his argument. This may be possible today thanks to the capacity of digital technologies to store and retrieve each of these movements of diffusion and mutation (Latour *et al.*, 2012 and Boullier, 2015).

Fake news is both the dream and the nightmare of Tarde's sociology. The dream, because it offers an opportunity to trace the transmission and transformation of collective actions and thereby identify the different 'regimes' of circulation and mutation occurring in the contemporary media systems; the nightmare, because it represents the pathological degeneration of such mechanism.

#### [Pèso el tacòn del buso](#)

But there is more. The study of fake news is not only a methodological occasion for the social sciences, but also and crucially an occasion to *intervene* in the debate on the organisation of the media system. As scholars have not failed to notice, fake news represents the dark side of a quality for which digital media have long been celebrated. As well known, the Internet has a double filiation. On the one hand, the idea of a distributed computation network derived from the need to protect military intelligence from nuclear attacks and found its early sponsor in the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). On the other hand, Internet technologies were developed by circles of fringe engineers inspired by American counter-culture (Cardon, 2010). In these communities, the decentralized nature of the new telecommunication protocols (granting, in principle, the same importance to all nodes of the network) was strongly associated with egalitarian utopias.

"The hacker culture clearly had certain points in common with the hippie counterculture and with Arpanauts' representations. It shared the same refusal of centralized and commercial information technology that IBM symbolized at the time. The main difference between the two cultures lay in hackers' far broader view of the use and future of IT. For them it was not only an intellectual tool for academics but also a device to put into everyone's hands, capable of building not only new invisible colleges but also a new society" (Flichy, 2007 p. 67).

The Internet, indeed, offers something that no media has ever offered before: a 'many-to-many' communication. Before its advent, communication could either be bidirectional but limited to few people (as in face-to-face encounters, letters and telephone calls) or open to many people but unidirectional (as in megaphones, newspapers, radio and television). Digital media makes it technically possible for many people to hold bidirectional discussions with many others, a situation that was promptly associated with that of the mythic Greek *agoras*. In a speech to the International Telecom Union (Buenos Aires, 21 March 1994), for example, Al Gore (at the time US vice-president) emphatically announced:

"In a sense, the Global Information Infrastructure will be a metaphor for democracy itself... it will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making. And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the Global Information Infrastructure will create."

It is important to notice that the democratic promises of digital media are here directly connected to their capacity to remove communication asymmetries, bypass conventional gatekeepers and offer each citizen the possibility to become an independent source of information. Sadly, but not entirely surprisingly, these are the very same features that create the abnormal news virality we are mourning these days. If fake stories spread and mutate cancerously, it is to a large extent because digital media have spectacularly increased the number of potentially contagious interactions.

In its most basic version, this argument is simply a tribute to traditional journalistic institutions. For almost two centuries, since the application of the printing press to the reporting of news, journalism has developed both as an ideology (Deuze, 2005) and as an organisation (Pettegree, 2014). With its increasing professionalization, journalism has also obtained (at least in western countries) a growing monopoly in the distribution of news and, while not without shortcomings and dysfunctions, it has contributed to maintaining a (more or less) functioning public debate, according to the old lippmannian lesson (Lippman, 1922).

Yet, with the advent of digital media, professional journalism has entered a structural crisis. By multiplying the sources of information and entertainment, electronic technologies have multiplied the competing sources of information and entertainment and undermined both its traditional sources of financing (advertising and circulation). According to the Pew Center 2015 *State of the US News Media* report ([www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org)), the revenue of newspapers has constantly decreased in the last decades, falling from almost 50 billion dollars in 2005 to less than 20 in 2014. Television news has done slightly better, but its revenue is also stagnating. The crisis is particularly harsh for local news, with dozens of local newspapers closing their doors

(cf. [www.newspaperdeathwatch.com](http://www.newspaperdeathwatch.com)). To be sure, new forms of reporting are sprouting up on digital media. However, whether these experiments will be enough to support a constant and professional coverage of social debates with adequate human and technical resources is still uncertain. For the moment, the number of journalists employed in US newsrooms has dropped from around 55 thousand in the early 80's to below 37 thousand in 2013 (again according to the Pew Center 2015 report).

The crisis of professional journalism, however, is only one aspect of a deeper transformation of contemporary media systems. The issue here is not simply that traditional newsrooms are suffering the competitions of new information outlets, offering the same 'product' through different distribution channels. The issue is that the very notion of 'news' is fading in the new media environment. Unlike what early observers believed, the many-to-many communication introduced by digital media does not resemble the older forms of broadcast (not only at least). This idea was plausible in the first years of the Internet, when every website functioned as a little broadcasting station, but has been shattered by the advent of the so-called social media platforms. Blurring the distinction between narrowcast and broadcast communication, Internet platforms have also eroded the distinction between private and public life.

Consider Facebook, for instance. In principle, the platform distinguishes between private profiles and public pages (reserved to celebrities, brands, institutions and open groups). In practice, however, the interface and underlying functioning of the two types of "news feeds" are perfectly equivalent. The only difference is that while users can restrict the access to the contents on their profile (selectively choosing what to share with whom), pages are open to everyone. Yet, when you follow a page or befriend a profile, the way in which their posts are channelled in your news feed can be hardly distinguished: your annoying friend from high school and the New York Time speak to you in the exact same way.

Again, the problem is not just that public news and private messages compete for citizens' limited attention (this has always been the case, as Walter Lippmann noted in *The Phantom Public*, 1927). The problem is that the disappearance of the frontier between the private and public sphere challenges the distinction between private and public law that regulates collective life since the rise of the modern nation-states (in western democracies at least). Going back to the Facebook example, when studying the circulation of fake news on the platform, we were constantly frustrated by the impossibility to follow viral contents in all their movements. While users and contents travel seamlessly through the network of news feeds, scholars are blocked at inexistent frontier of private profiles. This is, of course, reasonable and even necessary to protect the privacy of Facebook users, but does preclude the study news mutation and contagion.

A cross-cultural comparison may help put the problem in focus. In a recent study Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts (2017) investigate the strategy of social media influence of the Chinese government (the so-called “50 Cent Party”) and conclude:

“We estimate that the government fabricates and posts about 448 million social media comments a year. In contrast to prior claims, we show that the Chinese regime’s strategy is to avoid arguing with skeptics of the party and the government, and to not even discuss controversial issues. We show that the goal of this massive secretive operation is instead to distract the public and change the subject” (p. 484).

What is most interesting is that the Chinese government decided to respond publicly to the paper in an editorial published in a state-owned newspaper (<http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2016-05/8958840.html>). In its response, the government admits its intervention in online discussions and in fact take credit for it:

“It is obvious that the team doing this research has only the most superficial knowledge of China’s national circumstances, muddling the distinctions between official authoritative information, the official news media, and ordinary online statements; they also fail to understand the legitimacy of “public opinion guidance” within the Chinese system. They take the structures and mechanisms of the Western media field as the standard ...

The Chinese internet media’s largest problem is not being dominated by the “Fifty Cent Party,” but rather the amplification of negative and alternative information on Chinese domestic issues caused by opinion formation mechanisms that have been a part of the Internet since it was invented in the US; Chinese society, in the midst of a transformation, does not have the hedging mechanisms to deal with this amplification, so traditional public opinion guidance systems don’t seem to be pulling their weight when it comes to overcoming these problems. The Internet media space has an infinite capacity but its borders and its core are unclear, so some grassroots social issues are always able to suddenly attract the attention of the entire Internet, creating one hot button issue after another in the online Chinese media” (Appendix B of King, Pan & Margaret 2017).

One can, of course, disagree with the conclusion but the argument is not unfounded. With shocking candour, the Chinese government justifies its intervention by pointing precisely at the blurring of the private and public spheres: if state guidance is desirable and even necessary, they claim, it is because social media amplify private and grassroots issues and allow them to rise to the core of public opinion.

The Chinese strategy provides another example of a cure that turns out to be worse than the disease – or, as in a beautiful saying from the Italian city of Padova, “xe pèso el tacòn del buso” (the patch is worse than the hole). If fake news cannot be solved by fact-checking initiatives, they cannot be solved by an increase of central control either. Such solution is incompatible with

democratic debate when it is implemented by a state, and even more when implemented by a media themselves. It is a very bad idea to ask Facebook, Google, YouTube or any other platform to watch over public debate and it is illusionary to believe that algorithms can be developed to identify and eliminate fake news. Given the impossibility to demarcate fake news, such algorithmic solutions will be at best useless and at worse hide censorship initiatives under the fake premise of mechanical objectivity.

As I tried to show, the problem with fake news comes from their virality and their virality comes from their capacity to exploit the multilateral communication of digital media to spread and mutate. Having its roots in the vanishing separation between public and private communication, the problem runs much deeper than we tend to believe. It is our duty as communication scholars to denounce the reductionist solutions that create more problems than they solve, but also to contribute opening a serious debate about the private and public in the contemporary media systems.

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