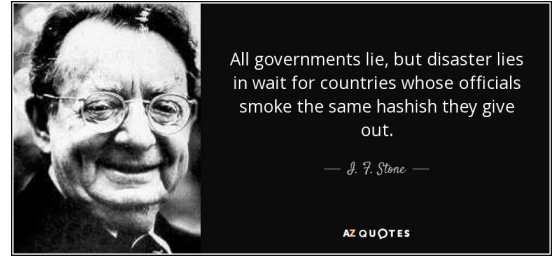


Beyond Fake News

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1. “All Governments Lie”

As 1950s investigative reporter I.F. (“Izzy”) Stone famously stated: “All governments lie.”[1] Fake news has historically been the weapon of the rulers, especially when in need of excuses for military aggression.

The mainstream media have traditionally gone along with the official line. For example, in 2003 in order to invade Iraq, the Bush administration falsely asserted that Saddam Hussein was complicit in the September 11, 2001 attack on the U.S. and that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. Despite public evidence to the contrary, the mainstream media propagated what was soon revealed to be fake news. Fifteen years later, the U.S. is still mired in Iraq.

Similarly, in August 1964, the Johnson administration deceived Congress into voting a blank check to escalate the war in Vietnam by playing up a fake news story about two North Vietnamese naval attacks. This emergency “Bay of Tonkin Resolution” was the legal basis for eleven more years of particularly bloody, unwinnable war wreaking havoc on millions of Vietnamese civilians North and South. Only two Senators, and writers like I.F. Stone questioned the fake news.

The first North Vietnamese “attack” was a brief skirmish between U.S. destroyer Maddox patrolling close to the territorial line. It later came out that the U.S. vessel fired first damaging the smaller two Vietnamese PT boats, which may have fired back as a single bullet hole was found in the hull of the Maddox, otherwise undamaged. Since this incident failed to generate sufficient war hysteria, LBJ came up with a second attack, this one, as Sec. McNamara, later admitted, was entirely imaginary. But it did the dirty job.

The classic historical example of fake news is the famous “Ems telegram” of July 1870 when Prussia’s Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck tricked French Emperor Napoléon III into declaring war on Prussia, by leaking to the newspapers a provocatively insulting telegram addressed to the French Emperor. The Prussians were already mobilized and prepared to fight; the French, hardly at all. France was soon over-run and Napoléon III captured.

The paradox of today’s situation is that Donald Trump, arguably the world’s biggest liar, has appropriated the term “fake news” to discredit the *New York Times* and other “legitimate” mainstream media. Up until Trump’s declaration of war, the “failing” *Times* had consistently backed up the U.S. government’s lethal lies, including Bush’s WMDs, JFK’s “secret” Bay of Pigs attack on Cuba, and LBJ’s fake news Bay of Tonkin attack. Today, since Trump declared them “public enemies,” they are at least fact-check official pronouncements more, and Trump gives them plenty of opportunities. At least as far as the Administration is concerned, the mainstream media have stopped acting like lap dogs, although they are still hardly watch dogs on issues like “national defense.” Long before Trump came along, people were growing more and more cynical about the

establishment press' elitist bias, and Trump's accusations of "fake news" seemed plausible to many.

To add to the confusion, foreign governments like Putin's Russia have injected fake news stories designed to spread confusion, discredit the Democrats and aid Donald Trump to win the 2016 election. *The Kremlin's propaganda machine has also managed to bamboozle a large section of the western Left into supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine and Syria with fake news characterizing the White Helmets volunteers in Syria as CIA operatives and presenting Bashar al-Assad as a progressive anti-imperialist leader.* Amid all this confusion, who to believe? Many Leftists active in the blogosphere have naively assumed that if the U.S. imperialists are lying, the Russians must be telling the truth. In their indignation at frequent U.S. aggression, they have succumbed to the fallacy that "the enemy of our enemy is our friend."

But I.F. Stone had it right in the first place: "*all governments lie.*" In 2016, Putin's Petersburg troll factories obviously *did* inundate U.S. social media with disruptive posts designed to discredit the U.S. system and help Trump win the election. This is just business as usual. Remember that in 2014, it was the U.S. under Obama who massively intervened during revolution in Ukraine in order to impose hand-picked candidates on the new government. What's new? Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and America are back to playing Cold War propaganda games. Back then, America sponsored Radio Free Europe and the CIA financed anti-Communist intellectual journals, while Stalin's Communist agents financed *The Daily Worker* and influenced a whole generation of writers including Hemingway. During the 1930s Hitler had supporters all over the U.S., and Mussolini's fascist government spent millions buying up French newspapers and flooding them with Italian propaganda designed to soften up France for the coming invasion.

Today, Putin's trolls manipulate social media and the blogosphere. Big deal. How many Americans actually believed the crude, ungrammatical, mechanically-produced Russian postings on which the Kremlin spent a few million dollars during a campaign when U.S. billionaires, using the most sophisticated PR firms, were spending billions? Few today believe the Russians actually succeeded in influencing the outcome of the election.

The real scandal behind the release by the Russians (among others) of the Democratic National Committee's secret emails was the truthful news that the Clinton leadership was secretly sabotaging the primary campaign of Sen. Bernie Sanders, the surprisingly popular socialist insurgent threatening their neo-liberal hegemony. Ultimately, the DNC's vicious and ultimately fatal interference in the U.S. electoral process, the open Primary, did more to get "President" Trump elected than Russian interference. How many voters who went for Bernie Sanders in the primaries ended up voting for Trump?

With his hypocritical accusations of fake news, Trump has seized upon a classic populist demagogue's bullying tactic — ridiculing his critics, accusing them of lying, and discrediting their liberal world-view as an elitist conspiracy. By declaring war on the mainstream press (which remains devoted to the 'normal' capitalist political establishment in whose name it excoriates Trump's excesses) and by raising the issue of "fake news" perhaps Donald Trump has inadvertently done the American public a favor.

Is "cynicism" about governments (which all lie) and the media (which generally support them) all bad? Maybe the public will start thinking more critically about what we're told by T.V. 'experts' (always the same ones). Maybe we'll start taking seriously the warnings persecuted whistle blowers like Chelsea Manning and marginalized investigative journalists like I.F. Stone (whose writings have been anthologized), Noam Chomsky[2] and *The Intercept*.

One can hope, for example, that the next time a U.S. administration goes to the brink of war over

some phoney pretext backed up by fake news about inexistant WMDs or imaginary attacks, people, and even the media, will start asking questions before it is too late. And if the truth is revealed before the blood starts flowing, the chance are that it will be thanks to the Internet and sites like WikiLeaks.

2. Fake News and the Internet

Mainstream media pundits frequently blame the Internet for this latest epidemic of “fake news” that is allegedly destroying our democracy. As we have seen, to some extent this is just “the pot calling the kettle black.” On the other hand, the algorithms that control the flow of information on Internet social media tend to favor sensationalism and exaggerate the importance of the two ends of the political spectrum.

Let’s look at one obscenely egregious example of fake news concerning the grieving teenage survivors of the 2018 Parkland, FL. Valentine’s day shooting, many of whom had spoken out in favor of gun control. On Feb. 20, a homemade video accumulated more than 200,000 views overnight by slandering David Hogg, the handsome, articulate student spokesman and his fellow-students as “crisis actors” hired to do the bidding of left-wing activists. Of course many of these “hits” were propagated by the pro-gun, right-wing, viewer networks and conspiracy sites like *Infowars*, which went one step further by suggesting that the mass shooting itself was a “false flag” operation orchestrated by anti-gun groups. Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing radio pundit, took up the accusation: “Everything they’re doing is right out of the Democratic Party’s various playbooks. It has the same enemies: the NRA and guns.”

So yes, social media, eager for maximum number of clicks, does encourage sensationalistic fake news and wild conspiracy theories, but they are part of a continuum which includes right-wing pundits and highly organized, well financed, propaganda machines from think tanks like the American Enterprise to *Fox News* to far-right Sinclair Media’s billionaire buyout of local radio stations and newspapers across the country.

It has now been revealed that billionaire Republican donor and Steve Bannon acolyte Robert Mercer gave \$15 million to Cambridge Analytica, a voter-profiling company which promised to give him Internet tools “that could identify the personalities of American voters and influence their behavior [...] the firm harvested private information from the Facebook profiles of more than 50 million users without their permission.”[3] Their idea was that the Trump campaign could target specific messages to specific profiled by analysing this Facebook data.

Again, I doubt this tactic won many voters for Trump, but it reminds us that Facebook and other social media get rich by selling advertising space to anyone who’s willing to pay. To quote the *Times*: “Facebook makes money by profiling us and then selling our attention to advertisers, political actors and others. These are Facebook’s true customers, whom it works hard to please.” The beauty of this lucrative business model is that unlike the press and broadcast media, who must pay writers, actors, reporters for the content they broadcast, we users supply Facebook with all its content — and our personal information — for free.

To what extent do the thousands of internaunts who click on these fake news stories actually believe them? Impossible to tell. Many of these clicks simply reflect the extent of existing networks — whether of gun lovers, racists, or Putinite anti-imperialists — acting as echo chambers. Others merely mirror the momentarily curiosity of folks who like to surf the Net. In any case, according to the latest studies, the largest influence on people’s beliefs remains personal conversations with their family, friends, neighbors and colleagues.

3. Fake News and the Big Lie

As Hitler proclaimed, if you repeat a big lie over and over again, people will believe it. The bigger the lie the better:

“The broad masses of the nation in the primitive simplicity of their minds more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. Even though the facts which prove this to be so may be brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some other explanation. For the grossly impudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down, a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world and to all who conspire together in the art of lying. These people know only too well how to use falsehood for the basest purposes” (*Mein Kampf*, 1925).

By “these people” Hitler meant the Jews. The irony is that Hitler’s first and biggest lie was that the “Jewish conspiracy” was responsible for all of Germany’s problems, including military defeat in WWI. When you tell a big lie, it helps if you accuse your opponent of doing the same thing. Stalin for example accused his rival Trotsky of conspiring with the Nazis at the very moment he himself was preparing to sign the notorious 1939 Stalin-Hitler Pact. In our time Trump, who proclaimed that Barack Obama was a Kenyan and calls global warming a “Chinese Hoax,” delights in re-tweeting all kinds of fake news items while delegitimizing the fact-checkers and blanketly accusing them of propagating “fake news.”

Of course the Big Lie technique works best when the Big Liars have the power to dominate the media — plus gangs of bullies on the street to back it up, as Hitler proved in the 30s. Today such bullies can also dominate social media and intimidate others through threats and the use of trolls and bots to amplify their voices. Trump’s labeling of the mainstream media as “fake news” is a bullying tactic designed to disrupt reasonable discourse and discredit all attempts to bring out factual truths that contradict the rulers’ Big Lies. It also lends credibility to all kinds of far-out secret conspiracy theories. But there are conspiracies, powerful ones, and most often they are hidden in plain sight, right out in the open.

Let’s take one example. What is the biggest Big Lie of the past half-century? Climate denial: the persistent fake news that global warming and catastrophic climate change are myths cooked up by a conspiracy of liberals, left-wing scientists and/or the Chinese. Of course today, the visible effects of global warming (droughts, floods, forest fires, ice melts) can no longer be hidden. So we have Scott Pruitt, the head of Trump’s Environmental Protection Agency, proclaiming that global warming is good for us (as he removes environmental regulations). So since global warming has actually appeared, the updated Big Lie is that human activity — specifically burning coal and petroleum — has no negative effect on the climate, despite increasingly pessimistic and near-unanimous testimony of climate scientists predicting imminent catastrophe if we don’t cut back.

This is a life and death, existential question for the future of humanity. Yet the independent scientists are not believed, and their conclusions routinely dismissed by world leaders who continue to push for more fossil fuel production, to block even the feeblest attempts to limit it (e.g. the Paris agreement), and to fight bloody wars over the domination of petroleum-rich countries. As Hitler reminds us: “The grossly impudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down, a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world and to all who conspire together in the art of lying.” The “conspiracy of expert liars” in the case of climate change includes the petroleum corporations, the government and the mainstream press who have been suppressing or obfuscating the truth — although the facts have been “nailed down” for nearly half a century.

Already in the 1970s, scientists working for the petroleum giant Exxon were warning management in private memos about impending climate catastrophe, as was recently revealed by the nonprofit news organization *Inside Climate News*. “More damagingly, the company set a model for the rest of the industry. Today, scientists who say the exact same thing are ridiculed in the business community and on the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*.” [4] Exxon, rather than change its business plan, chose the path of disinformation, denial and delay – just like the tobacco industry faced with the evidence of cancer. But the petroleum lobby proved to be far more powerful than the tobacco lobby.

Like Hitler’s Big Lie about the Jews, big petroleum’s climate denial lie is backed up by bullies who intimidate potential truth tellers. For example, the geology departments of the major research universities are largely funded by petroleum money, and so professors who want to keep their jobs and their grants are hardly encouraged to speak out on the necessity to stop burning oil. Similarly the major media, dependent on advertising revenues from petroleum and related industries (auto, highway construction, agrobusiness, shipping), are roped into the climate-denial “conspiracy of expert liars.” So it is hardly an accident that although weather reporting fills up more than 20% of news broadcast time in the U.S., TV “meteorologists” avoid such tainted “politicized” expressions as “global warming” and the “greenhouse effect” and devote almost no air time to the causes of the increasing climate chaos whose consequences they are describing.

As for government, oil states dominate the U.S. Congress; the White House has been controlled by oilmen since at least LBJ; Exxon CEO Tillerson was Trump’s first Secretary of State; and Oklahoma oil-lobbyist Pruitt rules the EPA. Pruitt, who made his career as a paid “expert liar” for the oil companies and who is not very bright, apparently actually *believes* climate denial, and so this month he naively proposed a “public debate” on the forbidden topic. Pruitt’s great idea was promptly quashed by the White House as such a public debate would be a “damaging spectacle, creating an unnecessary distraction from the steps the administration has taken to slash environmental regulations.”[5] Any such public debate would inevitably implicate the military, a major consumer of petroleum, whose primary mission has long been to protect (and if possible expand) U.S. petroleum interests around the world and whose massive budget depends on serving the global interests of the petroleum lobby.[6]

4. What is it about oil?

Why do these powerful leaders, special interests, and institutions conspire to lead the planet to self-destruction by any means necessary, including war and fake news? Alas there is only one possible answer to this question: to preserve the wealth and power of that fraction of the capitalist 1%-ers whose wealth is tied up in carbon deposits beneath the soil.

Why, since they are so rich and powerful, don’t they even now reverse the course of denial and domination they chose in the 1970s and invest their capital in renewable energy sources? The answer is that their vast wealth takes the form of fossil minerals in the ground whose value can only be realized when they are burned. At the pump a gallon of gas may be worth two or three dollars. In the ground it is worthless. As with all commodities, the value of carbon deposits is based on what financiers call “futures” – the expected price they will bring when brought to market at some future time. If governments make the decision to save the planet by going renewable before it is too late, that “future time” of sales and profits will never come. The buried minerals will become what economists call “stranded assets.” Their monetary value, on which the wealth and power of the petroleum corporations depend, would rapidly sink and with it the price of petroleum shares. Petroleum shareholders would soon be as broke as the owners of buggy whip factories the year after Ford introduced the Model T.

Naturally the carbon interests are desperate. For them — and for the military industrial complex

which they dominate — there is no turning back. They can only go forward into increased petroleum production, taking their profits now while leading the rest of us like lemmings over the cliff of climate catastrophe. They can have no thought for the human future. Only for petroleum futures. Hence the need to keep repeating the same Big Lie of climate denial. Hence the need to silence all opposition from what the Bush administration — on the eve of invading oil-rich Iraq — disdained as the “reality-based community.”

So, as we have seen, behind the hysteria around an alleged fake news epidemic – popularized by liar-in-chief Donald Trump – and behind the mainstream denigration of so-called “conspiracy theorists” there is a very real and very powerful capitalist conspiracy, perfectly legal, “hidden” in plain sight. But rather than denouncing it, most liberal pundits tend to blame fake news on the ignorance of the masses and the evils of social media which they accuse of destroying liberal democracy. As if the liberal imperialism of so many Democratic administrations under the thumb of the petroleum lobby had not already discredited that notion.

Today’s anti fake news campaign is so much the signature tactic of the Trump administration, that the Republican Party is actually sponsoring the annual presentation of the Fake News Awards, attacking journalists from the *Times* and *CNN*. Meanwhile the liberals in the mainstream press, blind to the big picture, wring their hands and blame the unwashed public for its cynicism and susceptibility to sensational tales.

5. Back to cyberspace

Once again, we observe that the Internet is a two-edged sword with advantages and disadvantages for the two opponents in the class struggle: the 1% and the 99%. On the one hand the Internet is so vast that you can find any amount of far out political opinion and crazy conspiracy on it, and well-heeled right-wing groups in particular can manipulate the algorithms of social media in such a way as to appear more popular and influential than they may actually be. These deceptions are small potatoes compared to the mammoth decades-long conspiracy of silence imposed by corporations, governments and major media, in order to suppress the truth of profitable carbon-fueled climate catastrophe. Big deal if high schooler David Hogg becomes a “crisis actor” for 24 hours in one dark corner of the Internet, and Trump gets his rocks off in the wee hours of the morning retweeting warmed over *Fox News* bullshit and insulting his critics.

In the same news cycle as the fake news “crisis actor” Parkland high-school smear, came the story of the underpaid teachers of West Virginia, where collective bargaining is illegal, who were able to use a Facebook page to organize and win an eight-day, statewide strike. Through person to person and online communication, the teachers were able to win over the sympathy of the parents, unite with other school personnel (bus drivers and janitors), spread their movement to teachers in neighboring states and force the conservative State Legislature to grant a 5% raise to all state workers, not just teachers.

This remarkable page of U.S. labor history bodes well for the future. It also reminds us of the power of social media to overcome obstacles of geographical isolation, lack of information, bureaucratic foot-dragging and institutional obstacles. Thus, thanks to their Facebook page, teachers in 55 dispersed counties were able to unite, receive information about politicians’ lies from teachers in the State Capitol, reject the surrender agreement made in their name by their (suddenly recognized) unions, and address their just and popular cause directly to the legislators, whose positions were certain to be remembered the following November. Awesome!

[1] Personal disclosure: “Izzy” was my boyhood hero, role model as a writer and mentor as a young man. A star reporter for the then-liberal *New York Post* and *The Nation*, Stone was blacklisted in the 1950s and barred from press conferences. With the help of his wife Esther he began to produce a newsletter in their garage , *I.F. Stone’s Weekly*, for about 5,000 loyal subscribers (including my parents) who paid \$5 a year for eight pages a week of top notch investigative journalism which was later recognized by multiple awards. We got a bargain and the Stone family lived moderately well throughout the McCarthy period.

[2]http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176396/best_of_tomdispatch%3A_noam_chomsky%2C_why_national_security_has_nothing_to_do_with_security/

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html?rref=collection%2Fissuecollection%2Ftoday's-new-york-times&action=click&contentCollection=todayspaper®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection>

[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/opinion/exxons-climate-concealment.html>

[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/climate/pruitt-red-team-climate-debate-kelly.html?rref=collection%2Fissuecollection%2Ftoday's-new-york-times&action=click&contentCollection=todayspaper®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection>

[6] The same is true for the power of oil dictatorships like Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Putin’s Russia, even Venezuela, not to mention the imperialist powers like the U.S., France and Britain who still dominate their former colonial possessions. Apparently the carbon-based sectors of the capitalist economy have taken control of the world economy and the world state system, which is becoming more and more militarized and repressive as the ecological, financial and political crisis deepens.