

The Imagination of the Christian College in the Age of Fake News

João M. Monteiro, Eastern University

Abstract

One of the markers of the present era is the emergence of the notion of “fake news” and all that it begets: aggressive disputes over what is real and true, a polarization and hardening of preferred viewpoints, and ultimately a corrosion of public trust. While the phenomenon of disinformation or misinformation is hardly new, it presents itself in this current moment with unprecedented vigor fueled by our advanced information and communication technologies, especially social media. This climate of rapid change and uncertainty poses a significant challenge for the academy and especially the Christian university, whose work and purpose are intrinsically tied to values such as objectivity, facts, and evidence, all of which appear to be under siege at the moment. This paper reflects on this challenge, and suggests that imagination aligned with a continued commitment to objectivity may offer the most viable and promising way forward.

Key Words: fake news, objectivity, imagination, Christian college

“American history,” writes Brooke Gladstone in her provocative little book *The Trouble with Reality: A Ruminant on Moral Panic in Our Time*, “is pocked with ferment, battles, and brawls over what is true. But at this moment, the nation seems to be waging civil war over reality itself.” At issue is not simply the escalation of an old problem, but how to cope with a different kind of struggle, one of high stakes and unknown consequence. It may be a thrill to watch, “but how will it end?” (Gladstone 2017:60).

Gladstone’s observation is instructive, for in some ways it captures the essence of what could be regarded as a time like no other: what one might call the “age of the hoax” or the “age of fake news.” Named “Word of the Year” for 2016 by Australia’s Macquarie Dictionary (2016), “fake news” was selected because, as the editors point out, it denoted an “evolution in the creation of deceptive content” to the point where people “believe what they want to believe,

whether or not the news story is actually true.” Remarkably, the Oxford Dictionaries’ choice for 2016 International Word of the Year was “post-truth,” a term sometimes used interchangeably with “fake news.” And for 2017, both Britain’s Collins Dictionary and the American Dialect Society chose “fake news” as their Word of the Year. While Collins (2017), which defines fake news as “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting,” noted a 365 percent increase in usage since 2016, the American Dialect Society (2018) selected “fake news” as “best representing the public discourse and preoccupations of the past year.” The advent of this circumstance where public opinion is seemingly shaped less by objective facts than by personal preferences or emotional dispositions has prompted “fake news” and related terms such as “post-fact,” “hoax,” and “alternative fact” to be regarded as defining traits of our time (Corner 2017).

Indeed, it seems fake news is the inescapable *mot du jour*, present everywhere: in news stories, social media posts, late-night comedy shows, books, and scholarly pieces (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017). According to a recent Pew (2016) survey, two out of three Americans believe that fake news spreads confusion about current issues. And when one college in North Carolina offered an online course entitled “The Story of Fake News,” more than 2,300 people enrolled (Tate 2017)! Whether in the form of completely bogus stories or otherwise questioned or questionable narratives, the notion of fake news has entered our national conversation with such vigor that not a day goes by when we do not encounter it in some fashion.

As a concept, fake news is not new, if by it we mean misinformation, propaganda, falsehood, and other forms of fabrication, distortion, or manipulation of information with the intent to deceive. Examples abound, from the classic Cold War-era disinformation volleys traded between the United States and the Soviet Union, to the head-spinning “scoops” that can rock or sink political campaigns, to the juicy comedic bites we associate with the pages of *The Onion* and Saturday Night Live’s *Weekend Update* (Carson 2017).

One thing that is new about today’s fake news—both the “news” itself and the *idea* of fake news—is how swiftly and widely it spreads across the socio-political landscape, driven by the wonders of 24-hour cable, online news sites, and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Of the various types of fake news that may confront the public at any given time, two are particularly salient. One is the type of story that is unfounded, fabricated, and completely false, yet is put forth as if factually true. It is an established fact within the intelligence community that Russian hackers and other operatives concocted all manner of political tales that they planted deep into the most recent U.S. national election process, and traded in falsehoods as if they were real facts. Another, perhaps more worrisome kind of fake news is where realities or accounts that are verifiably true and appropriately documented are nonetheless dismissed and discarded as fake simply because they prove unpalatable or inconvenient on some level. Such is the case of those who deny the reality of climate change or

question the plausibility of evolution despite the scientific evidence that is available in each instance (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017).

Whichever the case, the advent and proliferation of fake news can be unsettling and highly consequential on many fronts. On the geopolitical level, democratic and open societies are particularly vulnerable to the corrosive effects of misinformation and disinformation. Stories that are completely false, or even “misleading or biased tidbits of real reporting” that are repackaged and strategically deployed for nefarious purposes, are in effect weaponized and can very well cause democracies to “crumble . . . from the inside out” (Mihailidis and Viotty 2017). Although the U.S. political system did not crumble under the weight of the latest attack, the disruptive aftershocks of the last national election continue to reverberate, attesting to the significant power of fake news.

In the realm of social relations, fake news can be similarly dangerous and damaging. For if fake news turns out to be not just a label or passing fad, but rather a manifestation of a broadening societal proclivity toward distrust and denial of facts, truth, and reality, it signals a fraying of the social fabric and an erosion of our ability to live together (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Lelkes 2016). According to Gallup (June 2017), only 27 percent of Americans trust newspapers a “great deal” or “quite a lot,” and a significant majority of Americans believe that major news outlets *produce* false information on a routine basis (August 2017). We know that normal social intercourse hinges on basic shared notions of trust, civility, duty, and reciprocity. These are essential ingredients of what Durkheim conceptualized as the *collective conscience*, which binds society’s members together around a shared sense of belonging and saves them from their wildest egoistic impulses, the unrestrained pursuit of which inevitably ends in chaos and self-destruction. If, on the other hand, doubt, distrust, and suspicion become the norm and lubricant of social relations, where do we turn for legitimacy and authority? How do we bind ourselves to one another? On what basis do we cultivate social virtues such as loyalty and civic responsibility? How do we trust each other and seek the common good? These are important questions to ask of human communities, whether locally or globally. They are particularly pressing questions for academic communities.

The academy is hardly immune to the specter of fake. As is well-known, there is a long tradition of suspicion, anti-intellectualism, and contrived tolerance associated with academia in the minds of many (Gatehouse 2014; Hofstadter 1964; Jacoby 2008). Clichés abound. Scholars cocoon in academic ivory-towers, out of touch with the real world. Professors don’t have real jobs. Colleges and universities are of questionable value at best, considering that Mark Zuckerberg, Oprah, and Bill Gates all dropped out, yet made it big. Indeed, one in three Americans believes that colleges and universities have a *negative* effect on the country, with an astonishing 58 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents saying so (Pew 2017). In a recent address to an audience of students, the U.S. Secretary of Education echoed this sentiment. “The faculty,” she asserted, “from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to

do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think” (Jaschik 2017). While this statement is entirely misguided, it is nevertheless a reminder of how closely the fake news syndrome strikes at the university. As John Duffy (2017) writes in *Inside Higher Ed*, the emergence of a culture of fake news where “claims are detached from evidence and words do not necessarily bear any relation to reality” is surely one of the greatest challenges the university faces. Indeed, in an age where information cascades through our digital devices with dizzying speed and overwhelming intensity, a recent study by Stanford researchers found an alarming inability among students to assess the credibility of stories and news, and to discern legitimate information from fake (Wineberg, McGrew, Breakstone, and Ortega 2016). This blurring of the line between reliable information on the one hand and distortion or misinformation on the other wholly undermines the empirical foundations of the academic enterprise and its quest for truth. Immediacy of access along with ease of consumption and cut-and-paste portability emerge as privileged determinants of information use among a generation of digital natives, for many of whom conducting research is not uncommonly equated with googling.

Like the students in their courses and departments, professors and academics themselves are not wholly exempt from similar contingencies, as evidenced by the perhaps still limited but nevertheless disturbingly steady proliferation of fakeness in the academic milieu – from fake journals to fake diplomas to fake universities and other degree-granting institutions (Leetaru 2016). Alas, the temptation against which Max Weber (1926) warned long ago remains ever-present among academics, particularly in the context of highly polarized and partisan times: the temptation to be selective and preferential and perhaps even doctrinaire in the presentation of facts and evidence that align with one’s vantage point and outlook on the world, however well-intentioned that might be.

Beyond the gates of academia, a related concern is that this cumulative informalization or “casualness” about information and facts among the general public (Corner 2017:1101) likely encourages a certain disregard and dismissiveness not only of empirical evidence as such (particularly if it clashes with personal assumptions and preferences), but, equally importantly, also of expert knowledge and scientific authority. Why, it might be asked, should the professional opinion of scientists, even on matters on which they are the experts, carry greater weight or enjoy higher credibility than anyone else’s (Heitger and Milner 2017; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman 2011)? In this ecology of fakeness, it turns out that not only scientific expertise or consensus fails to resonate among members of the public, but the scientific and academic community as a whole is increasingly “regarded with skepticism, if not hostility, and [its] adherence to fact-based argument dismissed as elitism” (Duffy 2017).

Yet it remains an axiom of the university that inquisitiveness, dialogue, and argument are the cardinal values that define and orient all that we do. To varying degrees of success in our classes, labs, and scholarly papers, we purport to promote and nurture critical thinking, invite diverse and opposing viewpoints, and encourage testing and re-testing of hypotheses.

We explore novel ideas and pursue hidden angles, because we believe, with Peter Berger, that “things are not what they seem” (1963:23), and that in seeking to discover what they really are we find wisdom and virtue. Berger also reminds us that the reality we inhabit is not just an external entity conferring structure and order onto our daily existence, but also an entity of our own making that we ourselves create in the course of continued engagement with one another. To grasp reality as a social construction is to grapple with the possibility that it can be manipulated for worse, *but also* the prospect that it can be changed, that social problems can be alleviated, and that people’s lives can be made better.

Both classic academic skepticism and provocative notions like the social construction of reality are hallmarks of the university—and anything but fake. The gender pay gap, the “savage inequalities” in education (Kozol 2012), the structure and operations of health care systems or immigration regimes, and the warming of the planet are all aspects of reality whose examination we undertake with the requisite intellectual skepticism guided by not only facts, but evidence—empirical, reliable evidence—in the quest to understand what is really going on. Therein lies our best response to the threat of fakeness: to redouble our commitment to reason and rigor, to sharpen our methods and tools of inquiry, to evaluate carefully our sources, to scrutinize the data, to heed logic, and to prize theory. *And*, never relent in the quest to let the research proceed objectively and logically to its conclusion, irrespective of whether the conclusion aligns with the personal inclination or preference of the researcher, as Weber (1946) pointedly remarked in an essay written a hundred years ago.

Objectivity—scientific inquiry—then, is the academy’s necessary antidote to fake news. But it is not a sufficient one. For even as it repudiates fakeness and asserts empirical truth, science also exposes its own limits by leaving out the most vital question of all: meaning. Science, as Tolstoi famously put it, “is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live’” (Weber 1946:143). Science imparts us with privileged and sophisticated knowledge of the workings of the world, both the natural world and the social. But it does not *prove* to us that the world it reveals is worthwhile, meaningful, and has ultimate purpose (Weber 1946).

Half a century after Weber, C. Wright Mills (1959) also contended with the limits of science. Troubled by what he saw as a tendency among young researchers to engage in an “abstracted empiricism” where technical expertise is confused with understanding, he proposed the novel idea of the *sociological imagination*—a quality of mind that seeks to understand human reality by placing it at the intersection of individual biography, social structure, and history. Understanding, in other words, is more than simply accounting for facts and individual experiences in isolation and on the surface level, as is often our tendency to do (Calhoun 2002). Indeed, the multiple layers of meaning of human events and the structures of the empirical world often lie hidden from ordinary everyday consciousness, and to access and understand them we must discern the broader social issues and the larger historical context

that give meaning to the individual lives of people in their particular circumstances (Mills 1959). The sociological imagination, then, directs us to look beyond the immediate, visible, and commonly accepted dimensions of reality to capture a larger framework of coherence and meaning (Berger 1963; Burdziej 2014). Sociologists, Jeffrey Alexander argues, “do not (only?) enlighten modern men and women by discovering objective facts about their world, *but by offering people new theories*. . . . They sketch out a new arc of history so we can re-imagine the world and act in more energizing ways” (2011:88). In other words, the sociological imagination enables its possessor to move beyond the mere observation or acknowledgment of facts, experiences, and reality; it allows him or her to cast and engage them within a larger framework of meaning that lies beyond the bounds of scientific objectivity. It also turns out, when it comes to the virus of fake news, that the sociological imagination adds a vital dimension of meaning to the objective quest for an antidote.

The question of how to resist and effectively counter the damaging effects of fake news is a critical one that scholars and students of the matter inevitably face. Recommendations include improving media literacy in schools and colleges, elevating public diligence and levels of scrutiny, enhancing trustworthy and legitimate sources of information, promoting legitimate counter-narratives of fact and evidence, and strengthening critical thinking and objective analysis (Corner 2017; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017; Lazer et al. 2018). While these directives are undoubtedly worthwhile, on closer inspection they seem to be of limited countervailing value. In one way or another, all of these approaches share a common imperative that falsehoods and factual distortions be countered with objectively sound information, sources, and methods. Yet, the scale and magnitude of the problem suggests that the expected benefit of such approaches would be modest at best. What is more, raising awareness and offering factual correctives likely turn out to be necessary but not sufficient response strategies. At issue is not so much a dispute over competing factual claims and their objective discovery. What is at issue, rather, is whether the facts and claims in question are engaged, substantiated, and understood within a larger framework of meaning, purpose, and the common good. While discovering factual reality is an essential initial step, what is ultimately needed is (a sociological) imagination: “new theories,” and a “new arc of history” to inform, frame, and direct our engagement with our world (Alexander 2011:88). In their examination of media literacy, Mihailidis and Viotty underscore this point when they suggest that what will make a difference in the final analysis is not just a heightening or enhancement of media literacy, but “reimagining” it and focusing it on “civic impact,” leveraging it so as to effectively shape the “political, social, and cultural issues that define our democracy” (2017:451). In other words, the real value of media literacy as a way to counter fake news rests not so much on its factual, objective corrective to false claims, but rather on its contribution to a shared framework of understanding and meaning, as well as the significance of virtues such as authenticity, legitimacy, and accountability in the broad space of civic and community experience.

Not surprisingly, this crucial role of (the sociological) imagination in an age of fake news can hardly be overstated in the world of academia. To the extent that the university sees itself threatened by the culture of fake news, it finds in (the sociological) imagination an indispensable and powerful ally that at once complements, expands, and enhances the university's effort to resist and fight back through heightened re-deployment of reason, scientific objectivity, and academic integrity. And while this applies to academia broadly defined, it arguably finds particular resonance within the Christian university, which along with its academic identity claims as its ethos and *raison d'être* Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. Indeed, the imaginative and meaning-making framing of the world that Mills prescribes not only uncovers previously hidden underpinnings of social reality, but also foresees new possibilities of engagement and significance, including envisioned realms of "relationships that are egalitarian, moral, and reciprocal," and marked by bonds of solidarity, not domination (Alexander 2011:90). Alexander calls this imagined world of justice and neighborliness "the civil sphere," while Martin Luther King speaks of it as the Beloved Community, the imagination of which rallied his faculties and drove his commitment to bring it to pass even if it cost him his life. And, while Mills would likely wince at this application of his concept, Jesus, of course, talked about this imagined realm of solidarity and justice as the kingdom of God, and urged his followers to actively strive for its realization among them—on earth as in heaven.

In our advanced scientific age, reason is essential, and objective truth and facts matter, the claims of "hoax" and "alternative facts" and "fake news" notwithstanding. Yet, as Alexander, Mills, and Weber each point out, objectivity is not all. Indeed, it is quite possible, as Wright (2011) cautions, that in pursuing objectivity we may end up "missing the point and losing the plot" altogether. While reason and objectivity tell us how the world really is, they do *not* in themselves settle the question of how it can, or *ought* to be, nor tell us "what we shall do and how we shall live." For that, we need imagination. Not imagination in the way we ordinarily think of it, not a sort of undisciplined castle-in-the-clouds fantasizing or, as Brooks (2002) puts it, "some airy-fairy quality that artists use to paint pictures." Rather, it is imagination as a dynamic and purposeful faculty that can shape and chart our lived experiences by opening before us novel landscapes of meaning and possibility, and thereby frame the way we think, act, and live together. Consumer behavior, Brooks observes, is a case in point. People tend to buy things "that set off light shows in their imaginations . . . [that] fire their visions . . . [and seem] to provide a pathway to some idyllic future." Yet imagination is consequential beyond utilitarian or transactional functionality. It also enables us to embrace meaningful causes, spiritual quests, and realms of possibility yet to unfold, as Alexander (2011) suggests. It is an orientation and commitment of the spirit to look beyond the empirical realm in order to capture the unfolding of God's work of redemption through Jesus' death and resurrection, and to operationalize it in our daily lives through acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). This, Wright (2011) maintains, is the good news of the gospels, that they

“go on telling the story of how God became king, and demanding that serious readers learn to imagine a world in which that might be the case.”

This too is the charge of the Christian university today. At a time of heightened discord and intense apprehension over what is and is not real and trustworthy, the specter of fake news hovers over the academic community like a dark cloud threatening to hide the sun: science cannot be trusted, professors are ideologues, college is a hoax. In the face of such a cynical cloud, the university must not only recommit itself to letting reason, science, and objectivity illuminate the realization of true knowledge, but it must also find in the kind of imaginative engagement with reality that Mills recommends a vital and defining source of meaning and purpose in what it does. Even more so, the Christian university, with its distinct bearing and ethos, is especially called to the imagination not of fantasizing or daydreaming, but the moral imagination that compels it as a community to seek justice, truth, and peace—to bid God’s kingdom come.

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Direct correspondence to Dr. Joao Monteiro at jmonteir@eastern.edu.

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