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Fake News: It's Ideology, Stupid

David I. Backer | Society & Culture | Commentary | February 2nd, 2017

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Glenn Greenwald recently [skewered Ben Jacobs](#) at The Guardian for "summarizing" an interview Stefania Maurizzi did with Julian Assange. The essay shows how Jacobs cherry-picked ideas from the interview to portray Assange as being pro-Russia and pro-Trump, but goes on to a more general meditation on the phenomenon of "fake news":

If one really wants to battle Fake News and deceitful journalism that misleads others, one cannot selectively denounce some Fake News accounts while cheering and spreading those that promote one's own political agenda or smear those (such as Assange) whom one most hates.

While Greenwald is absolutely correct, there is a much easier way to say this, one that's largely absent in the debate on fake news.

Simply put, this "fake news" thing is just ideology. Plain and simple. And the sooner we integrate this concept into our toolbox for interpreting media, the better.

The philosopher Louis Althusser revolutionized how we think about ideology in the 1970s. His definition is the most helpful one in this case. He defines ideology as "imagined relations to real conditions of existence."

There's a difference between real conditions and someone or some group's imagined relation to those conditions. Generally speaking, real conditions are extremely complex, while people's imagined

relations to that complexity are simplified versions that vindicate their agendas.

As Greenwald points out, it's in Jacobs' interest to portray Assange the way he portrayed him. Jacobs was a Clinton insider, and the Clinton faction's position on the 2016 election places inordinate blame on outside forces like WikiLeaks, Russia, and hackers.

The real conditions of Clinton's loss are complex, and obviously include the leaking of DNC emails, which we know came through WikiLeaks. But the Clinton campaign also failed in various ways that had nothing to do with leaking or Russia.

The Clintonite ideology is an imagined relation to real conditions which attempts to vindicate Clinton's position by casting WikiLeaks and Assange in a certain way. Ben Jacobs' "summary" is a paradigm case of this particular ideology, which is the ideology of the centrist faction of the Democratic Party and some moderate Republicans.

The beauty of Althusser's definition of ideology is that no one is exempt from ideological speech. Everyone must imagine their own relation to real conditions.

And it's not a matter of truth and falsity. Each speech act, to some degree, is limited by the speaker's imagination. The real conditions are always more complex.

This is why Althusser wrote that ideology is allusion, not illusion. Everyone, particularly in the public sphere, is always alluding to this or that part of complex social conditions. Why? To push their agenda.

In this sense, all news is "fake" news. People speak in the public sphere in order to vindicate their positions as much as (and sometimes more than) representing real conditions' complexity.

When they do this, they cherry pick aspects of real conditions accordingly, speaking from their imagined relation to it via their agenda. Sometimes this is intentional and flagrant (like the Pizzagate fiasco), but most times it is unconscious and subtle (like most "objective" reporting).

The term "fake news" itself is a masterpiece of ideological speech. Calling reports "fake news" is a desperate attempt to communicate that one's own report is "real news." But making this claim is clearly a power play just as much as it is an attempt to refer to something in the world.

If Democrats call Republican reports "fake news" then it benefits Democrats because it makes it look like Republicans are trying to pull the wool over society's eyes. Republicans do it to Democrats too and get the same benefit.

But the thing is: every report comes from a perspective. Even "objective" ones.

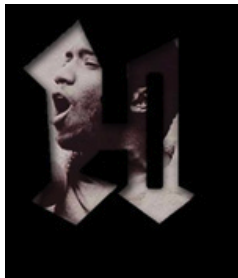
So rather than making it seem like there's some hidden force out there pulling the wool over society's eyes, what people need to realize is that political speech is always trying to win for a particular side. When people speak, whether they mean to or not, they are promoting an agenda. Period.

All political speech is subject to imagined relations to real social conditions, since speakers have positions and have to imagine what their relationship with social conditions are when speaking. This doesn't mean there isn't truth and every state is merely a Machiavellian power play.

But when it comes to speaking and writing in the public sphere, we have to consider peoples' imagined relations to society *just as much as* we consider the extent to which their statements refer to something like the real social world.

In other words, ideology is everywhere in political speaking, writing, and conversing. The sooner everyone in the debate about fake news gets comfortable with this basic concept, the better.

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