

Chapter 10

Post-fake activism

How activism and art can break reflexivity

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Abstract

This text explores the historical evolution and intertwinement of propaganda, black-boxing, and attention control over the last century, and their combined roles in influencing the masses, more specifically through the spread of fake information in various media formats. In this scenario, activism (art + activism), in its many forms, hacks the black boxes and exposes their inner workings, algorithms, and strategies. Thus, the author highlights key aspects of propaganda, as posited during the Second World War, and their subsequent spread into advertising, becoming an intrinsic part of global politics and businesses. The concept of black-boxing, as introduced by Latour to designate an opaque process that takes input A and transforms it into output B, while hiding its inner workings or hidden purposes, is then extended and applied to all modern content and media production – including propaganda and advertising – that occludes its sources and information transformation from the public. The reflexive use of these extended back-boxes, together with technological determinism, is fostering what is presented as a widespread phenomenon, turning fake into real, largely supported by a culture rooted in propaganda, thriving in attention-capturing mechanisms and in the conscious use of logical fallacies to maximize public impact, epitomized by the phrase “if faking it gets the job done, who cares?” Form has become more important than function, in the pursuit of goals. The appeal to emotion – overriding reason and fact – is privileged in public communication. Recent advances in generative AI black-boxed systems have densified the scenario, making it nearly impossible to distinguish between highly polished, often hyper-realistic, machine-generated deep-fakes and actual, human-generated media. In a post-fake reality punctuated by a barrage of cognitively overlaid buzzwords – from the simpler like, friend, or tag to the more complex Internet of behaviors, artificial intelligence, extended reality, or enhanced connectivity – created and controlled by dominant cultures to inculcate habits and norms, and to consolidate power, the dismantlement of this unprecedented curtain of clichés becomes urgent, and post-fake activism (art+activism) may be a step in the right direction.

Keywords: activism, art, attention, blackboxing, media

Introduction

When discussing digital communication tools, images of computers and mobile devices, applications, text, and image editors are among the first to come to mind. Many of these tools behave like black boxes, about which we know nothing except their expected behavior. However, nowadays, most of these sophisticated tools are as complex from a technological point of view, as they are from social perspectives, and this complexity is proportional to the number of new connections and relations they are designed to hold, explore, and exploit. For Latour (1988), society and technics are two sides of the same Machiavellian ingenuity, and the black box is a machine that occupies a position, defined by trade-offs and negotiations – some of them rendered invisible or *implicit* by the black box's success. The contemporary plane of discourse within post-digital cultures may thus be characterized by the observation that singular media entities have dissolved into a techno-social ecosystem, inhabited by smart things that intend to engage and cooperate with human users. This socio-technological environment is translated into a hyper-nervous system of existences, which addresses, affects, and appropriates the human on a preconscious level (Hansen 2011). Most people with smartphone access have already become familiar with the idea of providing input A to black-boxed mobile applications, knowing that they will obtain output B in return. But they know very little – close to nothing – about the algorithms and inner workings of the black box, what data is being retrieved, and for what purpose: “when given the option to sign their agreement without reading the policy, most participants skip the policy altogether” (Steinfeld 2016:992). For Latour spotlighting these inner workings and contractual small print is “not trying to innocent the Prince, but simply to give the analyst at least as much intelligence and deviousness as the Prince has” (1988:29). These tools are also fostering *cognitive overlaying*, which consists of the act of assigning new meanings to existing concepts, words, and expressions, imbuing them with biased perception. The process is straightforward: it starts with a generally positive or attractive concept, and then the original meaning is adapted to designate something substantially different but intended to be well (or badly) accepted, superimposing the new meaning over the former. Words like *cookie*, *friend*, *like*, and *tag*, among many others, had their original meaning superimposed, redefined for the digital world. A cookie, which is a small file that is created on the users' devices when navigating through webpages, could be deemed as intrusive, but calling it *cookie* makes it sound harmless, almost desirable. This phenomenon of cognitive overlaying has extensively been used, for example, in the American political oratory of former President Trump, where the expression of *the Chinese virus* was used to designate SARS-CoV-2 (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman 2020), aiming to attribute by proximity (or overlay) a negative connotation of threat to other subsequent uses of the term *Chinese*. The previous examples appear to be linear in construction and meaning, but what happens when the redefinition takes place over two concepts that had previously been mutually exclusive, such as *real* and *fake*? The exhibition “Fake,” held at the Science Gallery in Dublin, explored the concept of authenticity, questioning its value through a variety of points of view:

From fake meat to fake emotions, if faking it gets the job done, who cares? From biomimicry to forged documents, from scandals to substitutes — when is authenticity essential, when is copying cool, and what is the boundary between a fakery faux-pas and a really fantastic FAKE? We have long been obsessed with authenticity, the genuine article, the real deal. But, in both

the natural world and human society, faking, mimicking, and copying can be highly reliable strategies for success. When appearance is everything — could a fake be just as valuable as the real thing? (Catts et al. 2018)

The purpose of the next sections is to cover the historical evolution and intertwinement of propaganda, advertising, black-boxing, and attention control over the last century, and their combined roles in influencing the masses, more specifically through the spread of *fake* information in various media formats. In this scenario, activism (art + activism), ranging from performative satire to technological hijinks, hacks the established black boxes and exposes their algorithms, thus promoting a better understanding of their societal influences and fostering critical thinking.

From Propaganda to Black Boxes

Propaganda

Second World War propaganda and rhetoric can be placed at the root of most modern-day phenomena of mass-media-based information and counter-information, used by governments, advertising agencies, activists, and artists alike, to influence the general public. The Second World War undoubtedly marked the assumed use of mass media by the involved countries, as a tool for shaping public perception and opinion. Joseph Goebbels (1934), the main enforcer responsible for the rhetoric and propaganda of the Nazi regime, presented the foundations of propaganda, a term previously instituted by the Catholic Church (Huskinson 1982), to designate the dissemination of the faith among non-Christians, in other words, to spread a message and pass it as true among an unreceptive, possibly hostile audience. Some of these principles include the statement that political propaganda is aimed at the broad masses, therefore it should speak the language of the people. Propaganda is also defined as a means to an end, being neither good nor evil, its moral value determined only by the goals it seeks. Propaganda's task is a creative high-art, which transforms complicated events and facts – just like a black box – through creativity and “productive fantasy” (sic) into simpler messages. In the same text, Goebbels clearly states that “since it is almost invisible, it is effective and powerful,” thus reinforcing the black-boxed nature of propaganda, whose ultimate goal is *influence*: “The effective propagandist must be a master of the art of speech, of writing, of journalism, of the poster, and of the leaflet. He must have the gift to use the major methods of influencing public opinion such as the press, film, and radio to serve his ideas and goals” (Goebbels 1934). And then he proceeds to tackle the concept of *truth*: “Good propaganda (...) has no reason to fear the truth” however, “a good cause will lose to a bad one if it depends only on its rightness, while the other side uses the methods of influencing the masses” (Goebbels 1934). German propaganda was considered by the Allies to be a danger to public opinion, which is why Goebbels was presented as a master of lies and deceit. But at the level of political and military summits, German reports of the battlefield were considered to be synthetic and accurate (NSA 1950). An example of Western media being used as a black box, blurring the distinction between true and false, was

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the Katyn massacre¹, in which Soviet secret services decimated the elite of the Polish officers, burying the corpses in a mass grave near the town of Katyn. The Germans discovered this grave and publicized their finding in order to instill a distrust of the Soviets among the Allies, whose representatives were invited to examine the mass grave. At a time when the Allies sought to join the Soviet Union to defeat Germany, Soviet responsibility was ultimately concealed from American public opinion by the Roosevelt administration. In Europe, the Allies decided to attribute the crime to the German Army. The American media echoed this point of view, and The New York Times, among others, blamed the Germans for the massacre (NYT 1945). It was not until 1990, with the opening of the archives of the Soviet secret police, that it was proven beyond any doubt that it was indeed an act of Soviet responsibility (NYT 1990). This was the dawn of the manipulation of public opinion through mass media, as *a service to a greater cause*, which was not necessarily the truth, but rather what propagandists deemed necessary.

Advertising

According to Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (1988), the 20th century is characterized by three developments of great political importance:

1. the growth of democracy,
2. the growth of corporate power and
3. the growth of corporate advertising as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.

This type of use of the media as propaganda (at the service of politics and power) paves the way for its use with any intent, be it consumerist, ideological, cultural, artistic, or activist. The fine line between (politics driven) propaganda and (consumerism driven) advertising gets blurred in the following years, as do the lines between power, politics, and business. More communication campaigns are created with a clear and firm goal: to influence the people, through any means and methods deemed necessary. Williamson's central premise is that "it is part of the deceptive mythology of advertising to believe that an advertisement is simply a transparent vehicle for a 'message' behind it" (Williamson 1978:17). But when the signifier has been conceptually overlaid, does the signified remain intact? As defined by Goebbels, propaganda is neither good nor bad: its value is determined by the objective it sets out to achieve. In other words, the end justifies the means. Or, in more modern terms, *real* and *fake* are beyond *good* or *bad*. Greenberg, who stressed the opposition between avant-garde and kitsch, personifying everything that was artificially produced through industrialization, noted this *artificialization* of reality in 1939. For him, the media are a direct product of capitalism. These industries are driven by profit alone, and the mechanical culture they spread is intended to look like more than it actually is (Greenberg 1939). During the 1930s and 1940s, the advertising industry adopted many of the visual references of surrealism, but that did not mean that the

¹ More information on the Katyn Massacre can be found, for example, at the Encyclopaedia Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Katyn-Massacre>

images used in advertising at that time were actually surreal, as they conveyed style without substance, nor were they objective, since they relied on surrealism to promote their very surreal products. On one extreme of the spectrum resides avant-garde creativity, on the opposing end lie market-driven trends, appropriating clichés through superficial stylistic innovation, and using them to claim privileged status for those innovative objects of desire when, in fact, they are merely products of the new consumer culture. This marks the rise of artistic movements, marked by the use of their works at the service of activist causes, such as Fluxus, *L'Internationale Situationniste*, and the French student movement of May'68, with its striking poster art. Artists began using or incorporating into their artworks the same media, tools, and principles, as propaganda and advertising, at the service of their causes, to influence the public.

The Media as Black Boxes

Most modern media inherited the strategy of operating behind curtains, to both ethically sound and questionable purposes, ranging from undisclosed sources of protection, to receiving inputs (facts) and producing biased outputs (news) without allowing for an external glimpse upon their internal mechanisms and algorithms, thus preventing an objective external observation of the transformation processes (of facts into the news). This also explains why unchecked claims can quickly enter global circulation as news (Stencel 2015), as the public deems certain outlets more reliable (even if they are not). Trust and distrust influence acceptance, and to establish trust, these operations are sophisticated, admitting logical fallacies², but seldom obvious falsehoods. The extent and variety of this kind of fallacy are used not only in populist oratory, as it is often present in multiple areas of society, from politics to advertising. The lack of transparency in these processes was coined by Latour as *black-boxing*, referring to the process of making scientific and technical work invisible through its own success. “Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the opaquer and obscure they become” (Latour 1999: 304). Even if Latour’s observations were made regarding science and technology, the present text posits their abstract amplification to a broader scope: in short, if one process achieves one known outcome, the act of black-boxing it is defined by keeping its internal mechanisms or algorithms hidden from the public, so that it cannot be disputed and questioned. If, on the one hand, it is easy, elegant, and attractive to use black boxes to hide complex functionalities, purposes, and limitations, on the other hand, they represent a type of *knowledge without knowing*, already

² The list of logical fallacies is extensive – Bennett (2017) proposes more than 300 – and includes dispersal fallacies (e.g.: false dilemmas, *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, multiple interlocking issues), appeal to motivation or emotion rather than reason (e.g.: *argumentum ad baculum*, *argumentum ad misericordiam*, *argumentum ad consequentiam*, *argumentum ad populum*), wrong target (e.g.: *argumentum ad hominem*, *argumentum ad verecundiam*, anonymous authority, style without substance, *petitio principii*, *ignoratio elenchi*), inductive fallacies (e.g.: hasty generalization, limited sample, false analogy, lazy induction, omission of data), causal fallacies (e.g.: *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, conjoint effect, genuine but insignificant cause, complex cause), fallacies of ambiguity (e.g.: misunderstanding, amphibology, emphasis), *non sequitur* (e.g.: assertion of consequent, denial of antecedent, inconsistency, explanation, irrefutable, *ad hoc*, superficiality), among others (Bennett 2017).

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widely dissected by Stiegler (2010). Pasquale also posits a definition of the *black box* in his seminal work *The Black Box Society*:

The term “black box” is a useful metaphor for doing so, given its own dual meaning. It can refer to a recording device, like the data-monitoring systems in planes, trains, and cars. Or it can mean a system whose workings are mysterious; we can observe its inputs and outputs, but we cannot tell how one becomes the other. We face these two meanings daily: tracked ever more closely by firms and government, we have no clear idea of just how far much of this information can travel, how it is used, or its consequences. (Pasquale 2016:3)

The possibility of using a certain type of tool, knowing its input and output, but not knowing (and not questioning) its internal workings, is behind many of the data encoding processes taking place nowadays in mobile devices and applications, and going beyond data and information collection, generation, and dissemination. Black boxes allow individuals to grasp, consume, capture, generate, transmit, duplicate, reproduce, manipulate, store, and retrieve digitally encoded multi-sensory information. Under cover of technology's apparent neutrality and appeal, black boxes can introduce invisible biases in their operation, and if some of these biases may appear as favorable (such as the skin-softening and eye-highlighting filters included in most current digital cameras, which result in more polished and supposedly appealing, albeit less trustworthy, portraits), others may pose threats to security and privacy (Bergman, Frenkel, and Zhong 2020). A group of academics at the University of Harrisburg developed automated facial recognition software, allegedly capable of predicting the likelihood of someone committing a crime. It is not fiction, despite immediately triggering associations to the film *Minority Report*³. The announcement of its acceptance for publication was received with strong peer opposition, deserving an open letter of repudiation, signed by several scientists) – including the author of this text – under the name of Coalition for Critical Technology (CCT) and supported by the following arguments:

This upcoming publication warrants a collective response because it is emblematic of a larger body of computational research that claims to identify or predict “criminality” using biometric and/or criminal legal data. Such claims are based on unsound scientific premises, research, and methods, which numerous studies spanning our respective disciplines have debunked over the years. Nevertheless, these discredited claims continue to resurface, often under the veneer of new and purportedly neutral statistical methods such as machine learning, the primary method of the publication in question. [...] Part of the appeal of machine learning is that it is highly malleable — correlations useful for prediction or detection can be rationalized with any number of plausible causal mechanisms. Yet the way these studies are ultimately represented and interpreted is profoundly shaped by the political economy of data science and their contexts of use. Machine learning programs are not neutral; research agendas and the data sets they work with often inherit dominant cultural beliefs about the world. These research agendas reflect the incentives and perspectives of those in the privileged position of developing machine learning models, and the data on which they rely. The uncritical acceptance of default assumptions inevitably leads to discriminatory design in algorithmic systems, reproducing ideas

³ More information on the film can be found, for example, at the Internet Movie Database website: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0181689/>

which normalize social hierarchies and legitimize violence against marginalized groups. Such research does not require intentional malice or racial prejudice on the part of the researcher. Rather, it is the expected by-product of any field which evaluates the quality of their research almost exclusively on the basis of “predictive performance.” (CCT 2020)

The Power of Black Boxes

The global business system, including media and IT companies, is radical in that it does not respect traditions or habits if they interfere with profit (James 2009). But it is also politically conservative, since the media (and IT giants) are significant beneficiaries of the prevailing global social structure. Any change in social or property relations – especially if they interfere with the power of business – is not in their interest (McChesney 1999). One of the ways to alleviate interference with corporate power is to expand power itself, and this is achieved through concentration. In the 1980s, there were about fifty corporations that dominated the media in the United States (Gershon 1993). That number has since been steadily dropping through mergers and other financial concentration operations, and many of these new giants have, in the meantime, started operating on a global scale (Lutz 2012). But their initial dependency on third party generated content, that is, on the events they reported, meant that in practical terms, they did not have direct power over that same content – and this realization implied a turning point. A considerable part of what is seen, read, and heard today is generated by the media themselves, from the jet-set press to live entertainment and reality shows that fabricate social media stars, which then catapult their own events to the status of news: opening and closing episodes, red carpet parades, festivals, and awards for film, television, music or cooking, reality television, political, sporting, and cultural debates or opinion-making talk shows. Their employees – especially TV hosts and news anchors – are given the same star status, and all the feedback they generate, such as interviews (with the very same who used to be interviewers), book launches, and music recordings by media personalities, just to name a few, are given the same treatment. When IT corporations started attaining the same order of magnitude as media corporations, social media networks were regarded as serious competition by traditional media. Fostered by the democratization of access to digital communication black-boxed tools, a growing number of individuals, as well as formal and informal groups based on social networks, produce and share countless media pieces, eagerly seeking the viral effect that would catapult them onto the global stage. These individuals gather their own fanbase on social media networks and continue to exert their influence over a wide range of subjects, often unrelated to their area of expertise. As Allcott and Gentzkow posit, “An individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN, or the New York Times” (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017: 211). And this marked the point when media and technology started to merge, so that a more appropriate description today would be *media technologies corporations* (MTC). Big Data may also offer a complementary angle – from MTCs’ point of view – to the success of black boxes, as they significantly contribute to user data acquisition processes, both visible and invisible:

Big Data not only refers to very large data sets and the tools and procedures used to manipulate and analyze them, but also to a computational turn in thought and research. Just as Ford changed the way we made cars – and then transformed work itself – Big Data has emerged a system of knowledge that is already changing the objects of knowledge, while also having the

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power to inform how we understand human networks and community. 'Change the instruments, and you will change the entire social theory that goes with them,' Latour (2009:9) reminds us. (Boyd and Crawford 2012: 665)

The use of black boxes causes pronounced impacts on human self-conception, interactions between individuals, the metaphysical concept of reality, and how humans relate to and interact with it. Several studies point to the rise of individuality, conformity, and hedonism (Gallego et al. 2020; Uhls and Greenfield 2011). Young people today are even more obsessed with fame, and research suggests that narcissism is on the rise, with each successive generation surpassing the vanity levels of the previous one (Seigel 2013). The highlighted values in media content aimed at pre-teens in the twenty-first century make a greater appeal to individualism and sensationalism than in the 1990s, facilitating a narcissistic pre-teen culture (Rosen 2016). The claims and statements repeated in sales pitches, self-motivation manuals, and lectures on creativity also shape public opinion: the creative individual is idolized and advertised as hyper-empowered, directed towards fame, using black-boxed apps such as TikTok, Instagram, FaceApp, YouTube, or Snapchat, moving between the physical and virtual universes. If *truth* and *facts* do not ensure likes, comments, shares, and more followers, then they must be replaced by something else that does. Often presented as *technological determinism* or *corporate determinism*, this phenomenon assumes technology as the main driver of social change, replacing – or consolidating – the power of MTCs such as Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon (Natale, Bory, and Balbi 2019).

Gaps in knowledge, putative and real, have powerful implications, as do the uses that are made of them. Alan Greenspan, once the most powerful central banker in the world, claimed that today's markets are driven by an "unredeemably opaque" version of Adam Smith's "invisible hand", and that no one (including regulators) can ever get "more than a glimpse at the internal workings of the simplest of modern financial systems" (Pasquale 2016:2).

Let us define, then, the power of the black box as the result of the rearrangement of society's resources, in order to give the organizations behind them the power of independent negotiation over – and against – the other key sectors: countries, political, financial, and cultural elites, among others. This growing power over what is produced and communicated is what currently enables and consolidates the actual power of the black boxes being used MTCs, whose intricacies remain hidden from the public. But one could argue that the present text should be more concerned with the quality of information – its truth or lack of – than with the analysis of power. However, one does have close implications over the other: as MTCs contribute to the creation of vast amounts of data, are those data being used to produce and deliver reliable and sound information? Or is that also beyond *good* or *bad*, as with propaganda?

Too often, Big Data enables the practice of apophenia: seeing patterns where none actually exist, simply because enormous quantities of data can offer connections that radiate in all directions. In one notable example, Leinweber (2007) demonstrated that data mining techniques could show a strong but spurious correlation between the changes in the S&P 500 stock index and butter production in Bangladesh. Interpretation is at the center of data analysis. Regardless of the size of a data, it is subject to limitation and bias. Without those biases and limitations being understood and outlined, misinterpretation is the result. (Boyd and Crawford 2012: 668)

Attention: Here Comes Post-Fake Reality

The Control of Attention

Mobile devices are currently responsible for more than half of the Internet traffic (STATISTA 2021), which is generated through black-boxed applications, to the detriment of conventional browsers. Each of these black boxes brings its own arsenal of notifications and attention requests, transforming the average user experience into a constant switch from application to application, from black box to black box⁴. Concentration and distraction form opposite poles: the usual, the customary, and the familiar tend to be enjoyed uncritically, and only the other, the strange, the weird, and the misunderstood is isolated and pointed out, as noted by the Coalition for Critical Technology (CCT 2020). Embodying this *other* is a common exercise in the populist politics of our time, often transferring to this *stranger* the causes of society's ills (Dhawan 2016; Itagaki 2015; Kaya 2010). The way through which individual attention can be manipulated had already been mentioned by Münsterberg (1894), although in a broad context of psychological studies, and has since been analyzed by several other authors as well (e.g., Kahneman 1973; Wickens 1984; Tipper et al. 1989; Lang 1995; Pashler 2016), including Guattari (2000). For him, an individual's attention is captured by their environment, ideas, tastes, models, and ways of being. The images are constantly injected into them, even by the refrains that creep in and settle in their heads. Guattari exemplifies this division of attention:

When I watch television, I exist at the intersection: (1) of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen's luminous animation which borders on the hypnotic; (2) of a captive relation with the narrative content of the programme, associated with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the stove, a child's cry, the telephone...); (3) of a world of phantasms occupying my daydreams. My feeling of personal identity is thus pulled indifferent directions. How can I maintain a relative sense of unicity, despite the diversity of components of subjectification that pass through me? (Guattari 2000:8)

To remain efficient, propaganda had to learn and adapt, to capture the public's attention, or risk failing at its task of influencing the (distracted) masses. Boyd claims that the media is now shaped by these attention-grabbing mechanisms, while decentralized groups – including artists – take advantage of digital tools and networks to hack the *attention economy* (Boyd 2017). The ways of governing the capture of attention are linked to what Kelly (2008) designates as the generative characteristics, of intangible value, and generators of attention. These generative characteristics are qualities or attributes that must be cultivated, nurtured, and cannot be copied, cloned, falsified, replicated, or reproduced. They are uniquely generated, in a place and time. In the digital field, Kelly understands that generative qualities add value to things and experiences

⁴ In 2019, the app market witnessed a total of 204 billion apps app downloads. Normally, an average person has 40 apps installed on his phone. Out of that 40 apps, 89% of the time is split between 18 apps (SIMFORM 2021).

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that are often free, turning them into something that can be sold. For him, the generative values of attention are:

- Immediacy: here and now.
- Customization: personalization and exclusivity.
- Interpretation: translation and simplification.
- Authenticity: realism and uniqueness.
- Availability: permanent access.
- Appropriation: use for other contexts and remixing.
- Sponsorship: low value paid directly to the author/creator by means of direct links and individualized recognition.
- Discovery Potential: ease of being found.

According to Crawford (2014), if the term *economy* applies to what is scarce and therefore valuable, then the debate about an *information economy* should be replaced by a debate about an *attention economy*, based on the fact that our cognitive ability is a valuable but limited resource, and that decisions must be made about its use, with bad decisions resulting in losses. This economic phenomenon manifests itself as a crisis of self-ownership: the individuals' attention is not exclusively theirs, so that they can direct it wherever they desire. The changing technological environment creates an ever-increasing need for stimuli, and the content of stimuli becomes almost irrelevant. Propaganda is now delivered through notifications. If notifications do not arrive on our mobile devices, as expected, we feel anxiety over their absence. To better understand this phenomenon, let us consider that attention can be categorized – even if not exclusively – in its orientation by goals (executive attention), at the service of the individual's own will, or by stimuli (involuntary attention), regardless of the individual's own will (Crawford 2014). An artist who is focused on his work devotes his executive attention to it. He, therefore, channels his attention to a goal. In contrast, if there is a sudden loud sound outside, his attention is stimulated. He can go out to investigate what is happening, or not, but the claim for attention is involuntary and uncontrollable. The answer, however, requires a combined effort of executive attention if he is to resist external stimuli, and his capacity for such resistance is finite. But executive attention can be manipulated, creating dependence on certain stimuli, for example, those obtained through interactions on social networks. Even outdoors, the ability to appreciate nature is impacted by the mediation of smartphones, which encourage treating the experience as a sequence of actions: observation, engagement, image/video capture, publication/sharing and archival/dismissal. The notifications produced by black-boxed mobile apps range from inherently relevant and useful (incoming calls, messages, e-mails) to advertising/propaganda, whose purpose is often limited to keeping the users *engaged*, reaching for their phones, and opening the apps⁵. Some of these strategies may include calls to attention about features or updates in the app itself, very secondary – and often irrelevant – notifications about group activities (especially on Facebook), or even messages from *fake* accounts (bots or otherwise). But

⁵ On average, we check our phones every four minutes (Wheelwright 2022).

depending on the amount of privacy protection enabled on their smart devices, individuals' risk being constantly monitored and influenced: where to go, what to see, where to shop and eat. The ability to exert influence on such a constant basis, as well as a wealth of personal and geographic data, is, truly, a propagandist's dream. The distraction of individuals, or the inability to stay focused on a single intellectual activity (for example, admiring the landscape), seems to indicate that individuals are agnostic about the question of what deserves their attention, about what is, in fact, interesting. Systematic distraction, as a result of an overstimulation of attention, may be compared to the mental equivalent of physical addiction (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004). Thus, elements of distraction (or *notifications*) can hamper⁶ creative production by disrupting the ability to keep multiple representations in mind. Indeed, disconnecting distraction devices and immersing yourself in a controlled environment over a long period of time can increase the production of creative verbal associations by 50% (Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley 2012). Becoming aware of the mechanisms that are already used by third parties – mostly through black-boxed devices or apps – to manage and capture the attention of individuals is an important step towards understanding their purposes and effects and, at the same time, consciously choosing to either remain under their influence or not. Latour (1999:214) states that we already live and act as a collective and increasingly large number of humans, mixed with an increasingly large number of nonhumans, actively engaged in the making of aesthetics, politics, law, and morality, regardless of existing regulations. This may imply that black boxes are already an intrinsic part of this collective, as well as their attention-grabbing mechanisms. Our lives in the so-called *developed societies* imply the coexistence with nonhumans, and this extends beyond our conscious choices. Therefore, conscious and unconscious acts, voluntary and involuntary choices always intermingle, producing hybrid states in which actors are dispersed in an ever complexifying network. Some of today's information systems behave like attention control black boxes, appealing to the fluency of their users in certain basic concepts and typical vocabulary, providing assertive – or even dogmatic – mechanisms along with easy-to-accept information (regardless of its validity or truthfulness), through user profiling. Black-boxing and attention control can thus be understood as current propaganda mechanisms, widely used in the keeping the masses actively engaged in social media networks – while often disengaged from reality. And if the trick to maintaining this level of engagement is the widespread dissemination of (ethically, factually, or scientifically) questionable information, institutional and corporate priorities are clear: influence and profit above all else.

⁶ However, it is also suggested by other authors that distraction can improve disruptive creativity, making individuals more open to remote associations between concepts. In verbal creativity, not fixing the dominant meaning of a word allows subordinate meanings to remain active, which can promote atypical connections between concepts and therefore creative associations. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a distraction, preventing the individual from focusing on the most likely interpretation of a stimulus, thus creating unusual interpretations and connections. The discovery that the attention disorder or hyperactivity – which can be interpreted as a failure to control attention – may be linked to creativity, divergent thinking, the ability to focus too far, non-conformism, adventure, self-acceptance and sublimation is consistent with this view (White and Shah 2011; Sedgwick, Merwood and Asherson 2019).

Post-Fake Reality

Watching footage of actual death became commonplace through television coverage of bombings, shootings, war, or executions. Shocking and unusual footage is guaranteed to trigger virality more easily. To this effect, individuals mount cameras on cats and dogs seeking unique angles on their secret life, while training them to behave as desired in simulated situations in controlled environments; drones are used to film pornography, as if they were spontaneous flashes of reality: reality is being forged and shared as the genuine article. As early as 1922, in Robert J. Flaherty's documentary⁷ "Nanook of the North," an Inuk actor is led by the director to perform staged actions, such as hunting seals with harpoons (instead of guns, as was the custom at the time), or the exaggeratedly inappropriate use of a gramophone to fallaciously illustrate ethnographic concepts (Kara and Reestorff 2015). In May 2016, the suicide of young Océane (Williamson 2016), broadcast in real-time by herself through the Periscope social network to an audience of more than 1,000 users, launched the debate on the differentiation between fantasy and reality, when both are mediated by the same technology. Several people watching the live broadcast assumed it was a simulation, while others expected the worst, some fearing it and others urging its outcome. It was also at this time that the Blue Whale challenge (Adeane 2019), which supposedly started as a hoax, gained notoriety. Its universal projection and dissemination increased its impact among adolescents, through a complex phenomenon, imbued with imitation, tribalism, and acceptance rituals, as well as the appeal of risk and transgression, leading several social networks to change their search mechanisms to try to stop the situation (Hempel 2017). More recently, in 2020, the coronavirus challenge, which consisted of licking a toilet seat in a public space, was released on the TikTok network by a 21-year-old influencer. Ava Louise, whose accounts on social media networks have since been suspended, in addition to filming herself – allegedly in an airplane bathroom – also had the help of Larz, a friend who posed as an unknown follower, who was also filmed licking a toilet seat. Later, Larz claimed on social media that he had contracted the disease, and even showed images of his hospital stay. Except that the hospitalization had occurred before the toilet-seat-licking shoot and had no relationship with Covid-19. Ava Louise then dismantled the whole situation as fake, assuring that she only did it with the – achieved – purpose of gaining more notoriety. When faced with the multitude of negative reactions on various social networks (and many positive ones, too), she claimed to being happy with the outcome, which she reinforced in the Dr Phil TV show⁸. In the era of the *post* prefix (post-real, post-internet, post-modern), it is worth positing yet one more: *post-fake*. And a *post-fake* event may be defined as follows: the outcome of any false or fallacious creation that one wishes to posit and communicate as true, in order to cause (actual) impacts or changes in reality, can be designated as *post-fake*. Due to the wide dissemination that the term *fake* underwent, especially during the Trump administration, *fake* is thus used as the opposite of *real*,

⁷ By definition of The Oxford Dictionary: "Either television, film, video, or radio programme dealing with factual material rather than fictional material, usually with some defined goal to create new insight or exposure to facts." retrieved from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095724407>

⁸ An excerpt can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayuS5W45LIE>

since *fake*, in this context, stands for non-existence, therefore, non-reality. Fake (fictitious) situations in cinema, theatre or television have already led to (real) aggression to the actors involved in them, as people mistook the actors for the characters, hence resulting in a post-fake event, such as the attack on two cast members of an LGBT themed theatre play in Southampton, U.K. (Perraudin 2019). *Post-fake* is thus the outcome of *fake* affecting and changing the *real*. In the controversial electoral campaign in Brazil in 2018, which culminated in the election of President Jair Bolsonaro, social networks were flooded with heavily politicized memes, based on various fallacies, imbued with emotional appeal, ranging from the collage of the concept of modern Socialism to Nazi National Socialism, to the spreading of fake news about several candidates, including the elected President. WhatsApp was the most used network to this effect, as there is no centralized or public monitoring of what is being shared. All communications are encrypted, and therefore the type of scrutiny exercised on Twitter or Facebook cannot be applied, making it a perfect black box. In addition, groups are created in an organic and free way, in which anyone can add friends, professional colleagues, and family members, not needing their prior acceptance. The El País newspaper conducted an investigation (Gosálvez and del Ser 2018) into the topic and found that 66% of Brazilian voters shared political news using WhatsApp, and 90% of those users did so more than 30 times a day. To further understand this reality, a survey (IPSOS 2018) revealed that 62% of the Brazilian population admitted to having already believed in fake news. When asked for the main reason behind this, nearly half of the respondents blamed the politicians and the media, which – they felt – deliberately deceived the people. However, 37% assumed that this could be due to their biased view of society and the world, to generalizations from personal experiences, or to the influence of social networks. WhatsApp does work like a black box, obscuring the possibility of verifying the facts it relays, enabling the assembly of fallacies such as the "gay kit for six-year-old children" (GLOBO 2018a) attributed to candidate Haddad – a distortion of the initiative "School without Homophobia" – or, in the opposite direction, the rumors about Bolsonaro's terminal cancer (GLOBO 2018b), which would prevent him from finishing his term. It is also worth noting the fact that much of this information circulates in the form of a meme, some of which exhibit careful photographic editing and composition, context extraction, and adulteration – much like what happens in most modern advertisements. This phenomenon of communication through images, often complemented by the abundant use of emojis, further corroborates the emotional – rather than rational – nature of the message, which mere text cannot convey with comparable impact (Kaye, Malone, and Wall 2017). The output of this black box was voter influence, through a set of fake or fallacious stories about the various candidates, spread by their supporters with the intention of undermining the voting outcome of their opponents. The Brazilian presidential election could thus be deemed as *post-fake*. One final example of what could be considered⁹ as *post-fake authorship* of artistic work, is Jason Allen's AI-generated piece, "Théâtre D'opéra Spatial," whose notoriety stems from the fact

⁹ While the competitors claimed he didn't author the work, Jason Allen stated that it was submitted under the name "Jason M. Allen via Midjourney", and that he hadn't deceived anyone about its origins. (Roose 2022)

that it won a prize in 2022 at a fine-arts competition, where all other competing pieces were non-AI generated artworks, being the first known example of this type of situation.

Art, Attention, and Black Boxes

Too Much Art, Too Little Time

The process of cognitively superimposing virtuality and materiality – or the human, machine, and nature (Floridi 2015) – is similar, in operation, to the cognitive overlay of authenticity and falsehood, and can be assumed as a direct heir of Goebbels' propaganda: seeking acceptance without questioning, dismissing critical analysis, positioning itself as necessary, beyond good or bad. In the context of popular music, Gauvin (2017) stated that the attention economy has introduced significant changes in the processes of creation and construction of musical pieces, to deal with an online streaming market, characterized by a constantly growing offer that can easily become overwhelming. This implies that the possibility of quickly ignoring any content that does not capture one's attention or interest during the first few seconds of contact is on the rise. Capturing attention by providing information with a strong appeal to emotionality and subjectivity, while preventing its fixation, is a viable strategy. And those initial few seconds play a crucial role, since it is also the time when most users decide to share what they are experiencing, before exerting any critical thinking and analysis, mostly based on emotions and immediacy. Regarding how individuals exercise their choice to direct attention (toward art, music, news or information sources) Pomerantsev suggests that “one has to look beyond just news and politics to also consider poetry, schools, and the language of bureaucracy and leisure to understand the formation of attitude” (2019: xv). This intricate and interconnected mesh delivers a constant flow of attention-capturing stimuli, designed to guarantee the uncontested acceptance by the user: digital artworks become easily forgettable, as they are time-lined by the hundreds on Instagram and Facebook, or streamed on Spotify, Google Music, Netflix, or Apple TV. And users often rely on word-of-mouth to focus their attention on a particular song or series – much like they do with information and news, with uncontested and acritical acceptance. An observer whose attention is concentrated before an artwork is absorbed by it. By contrast, the distracted/abstracted masses absorb the work – often relegated to a secondary role, as *background noise* or *decoration*. For the public, the greater the decline in the social meaning of an artwork – even an art form – the greater is the gap between a critical attitude and distraction, and in this case, literally *everything* risks being reduced to mere amusement, playfulness, and entertainment. In the context of visual art (including digital art) several strategies have emerged to counter this phenomenon and provide the audience with more immediate meaningful connections: for example, a work of art with a title that relates to its content produces better responses (appreciation, subsequent interest, remembrance) than using unrelated titles, or the absence of a title (Belke et al. 2010). The semantic context improves the processing fluency and therefore it also improves the evaluation and the reaction. Aesthetic enhancement occurs as a function of the viewer's ability to mentally process the properties of the artefact in a significant way, with the viewer's attention being a critical part of the aesthetic experience. Seeing a work and saying it is interesting is a much more superficial aesthetic

experience than seeing the same work and noticing that it is interesting and that it has additional value because of its author's creative process, its original intent, its communication goal, its place in history and the influences, techniques and production processes used. Just as fluency for aesthetic experiences is enhanced by access to more information and deeper connections between one's experience and the audience's cognitive processes, so the ability to think creatively – creative literacy – is supported by access to a rich and broad knowledge network, which can also be interrupted by an attention deficit. Roger (1997) proposed the concept of *artialization*¹⁰ *in visu*, which designates the process of elevating the landscape to the status of a work of art, but the present author posits its generalization to all visual representations, culminating in what could be designated as the digital *artialization* of the mundane (Whitfield and Destefani 2011). The artist's conventional identity, as one who develops projects or works that are intended for a merely receptive (i.e., non-creative) audience is challenged by generations of individuals actively engaged in the use of black boxes, even before the dawn of modern generative AI systems, to produce their own *artialized* content for public viewing and sharing – including photographs of pets, food, personal styling, trendy locations, status granting objects, only to name a few. The power of the *like* on social media pressures them to become noticed, craving comments and reactions (Rosen 2012). Hundreds of millions of *artialized* multimedia content, either original, remixed or simply appropriated, can be found, for example, on YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, Flickr or SoundCloud social networks. But... is it art?

I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts were replaced by moving images. [...] And this song? Hear without listening. [...] It's fake music. Preserved music. It comes out of the music slaughterhouse like breakfast sausages out of the pig slaughterhouse. [...] It's music in cans. (Duhamel 1934: 24-52)

The belief that individual creativity and expression is unlimited, while at the same time it increasingly depends on the use of (limiting) black boxes, filled with machine learning and artificial intelligence, is widespread and encouraged. The field of digital art provides relevant examples of this dependence on black boxes, both in terms of creation as well as dissemination. Adobe Photoshop was the ultimate example of a creative black box, before the advent of generative AI systems. The term *photoshop* and its derivative verb and adjective have entered dictionaries, loosely used to designate an alteration to a photographic image, even though the low-level operations performed on the individual pixels remain a mystery for most of its regular users. But when it comes to disseminating or exhibiting the artworks on social media for a larger audience, the artists that are promoted are the same that the system commoditized, arbitrarily defining the value of their works according to their participation level in platform service subscriptions, paid advertisements, or digital marketing, among others, while ignoring everything else that is being created outside its sphere of influence. Even the Non-Fungible Tokens recent phenomenon happened through a similar type of manipulation, being heralded as a break from

¹⁰ *Artialisation*, in the original French.

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the art-market chains – while trying to deploy a new set of similar, black-boxed attention control mechanisms (Nadini et al. 2021).

Think Outside the (Black) Box

Artivism is a term used to reflect the use of art to the service of activism, using several forms, such as *subvertising*, *brandalism*, memes, *hijinks*, street performances, spoof-websites, and electronic disobedience events, among many others. To this effect, several art collectives have been using propaganda, advertising, attention-grabbing mechanisms, and post-fake reality to actually expose the black-boxed inner workings of events, organizations, corporations, and governments, forcing them into – mostly unwanted or unsought – action and accountability. The fact that they often resort to what is later perceived as camouflaged parody or satire, resulting in entertaining and humorous outcomes, is a merit, not a flaw. These collectives can thus be called *post-fake artists*.

REFF was born in Italy in 2008. Since then it continuously operated using *fake*, *remix*, *reinvention*, *recontextualization*, *plagiarism* and *reenactment* as tools for the systematic *reinvention of reality*. Defining what is real is an act of power. Being able to reinvent reality is an act of freedom. REFF promotes the dissemination and reappropriation of all technologies, theories and practices that can be used to freely and autonomously reinvent reality. To do this, REFF established an international competition on digital arts, a worldwide education program in which ubiquitous technologies are used to create additional layers of reality for critical practices and freedoms, a series of open source software platforms and an Augmented Reality Drug. (REFF 2011)

REFF is a paradigmatic example: an Italian fake cultural institution that has its origin in a protest of the organization of an art competition – RomaEuropa WebFactory – which strictly prohibited artistic remixes, *mashups*, and other artistic combinations, for fear of copyright-related problems. But that same organization reserved the right to be able to use and remix the submitted works for further exploration. Then came the idea of occupying the event by registering a similar name and web domain (RomaEuropa FakeFactory), and a parallel competition was launched, in which it was mandatory to use all kinds of remixes, highlighting the importance of the new open licensing models: commons, public domain, copyleft, among others. In short, the fake organization's competition not only outranked the original competition's success, as it also received official recognition around the world, being received by the Cultural Commission of the Italian Senate and considered an official initiative of the European Community's Year of Creativity in 2009, surpassing in media coverage the original event. When doing an online survey about the original competition, most of the organic results pointed, in fact, to the fake one, which may lead to the conclusion that *fake* surpassed and transformed *reality*, giving rise to a *post-fake* event and organization. Another relevant example is "The Yes Men," a culture jamming activist duo that deploys a satirical yet carefully crafted aesthetic approach, including communication materials and media, posing as powerful entities, and making shocking statements that caricature the ideological position of the actual entity, either a person or an institution. The Yes Men use spoofed – yet credible – websites and media outlets to disseminate their ideas, which have included the prospect of selling one's vote or a proposition

that the poor should consume recycled human waste. This has resulted in fake news reports, such as those covering the demise of the World Trade Organization, or Dow Chemical paying compensation to the victims of the Bhopal disaster – two of the many institutions that The Yes Men have posed for as spokespeople (TYM 2021). An early example of their satirical actions was the 2004 group called "Yes, Bush Can!" that went on tour, encouraging supporters to sign a *Patriot Pledge*, agreeing to keep nuclear waste in their back yards and send their children off to war (TYM 2004). The Yes Men are Jacques Servin, an author of experimental fiction, and Igor Vamos, an associate professor of media arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, New York. They encourage activist and student groups into unconventional – yet highly impactful – actions, such as crashing conferences, creating fake websites, and getting arrested. The post-fake outcome of their actions is the actual damage control the real entities impersonated by them then need to make, due to the raised public awareness of the issues they tackle, as such public shaming seeks to assert social demands through their social impact. One final example, among many other possibilities, is the 2016 action art *Bundeserpressungskonferenz*¹¹, which was held at Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre, launching the project "Flüchtlinge Fressen – Not und Spielen"¹² (Gorki 2016), by artists Phillip Ruch, Cesy Leonard, Stefan Pelzer, and André Leipold – under the moniker "Center for Political Beauty" (CPB 2020). Their claim was to feed volunteer refugees to tigers if their political demands were not met, and it relied on the shock value and word-of-mouth support to gain enough traction in order to force the authorities to control the public damage. All these projects have the *post-fake effect* in common, as they all rely on a spontaneous response of public disobedience or protest from their audiences, which is "the dream of every activist: a passing of the baton to civil society" (Banks 2016).

Conclusion

The interconnected networks of digital communication seem to lead to conformism and self-indulgence in real life, in contrast to online petitions, written confrontations in the comment sections, and memes. *Propaganda* set the rules over which *true* and *fake* could be "justifiably" combined to influence the masses, placing it at the root of *post-fake's* genealogy. The fragmentation of attention and a growing set of logical fallacies disseminated by black-boxed applications contribute to *form* becoming more important than *function*. There is little transformative and collaborative action, given that the appeal to emotion, overriding reason, is widely used by the media. We are witnessing the global aestheticization of all areas (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2014; Groys 2009), from the dishes served in gourmet restaurants to political events, from landscape interventions in the best cities to visit, to disposable and polluting packaging and COVID19 fashion facemasks.

¹¹ Federal blackmail press conference, a take on the German expression for federal press conference.

¹² Devour Refugees – Misery and Games.

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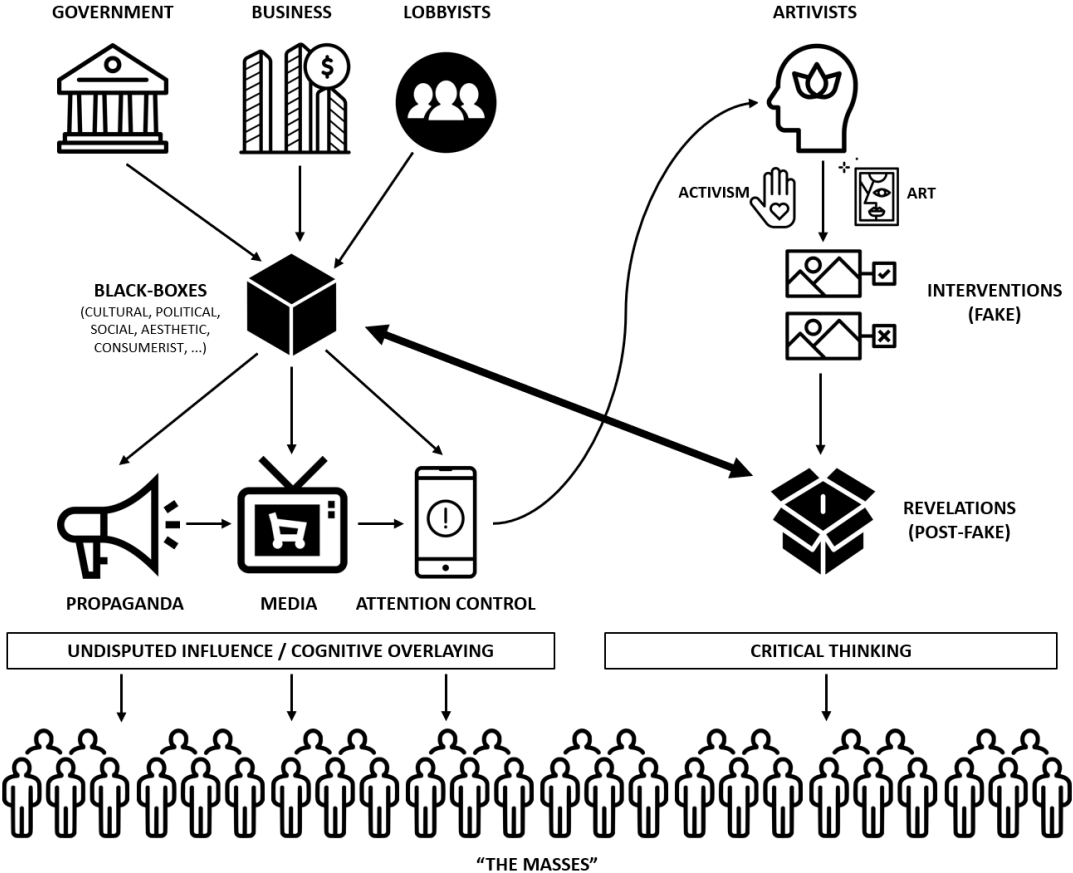


Figure 10.1 – A summarizing visual representation of the presented argument

Source: the author

But the study of fallacies also gives individuals the tools to explore the truth and expose the falsity of ideas and, as such, to participate in society and politics (Rosen 2006). More than just living uncritically with global aesthetics and contributing to the perpetuation of fallacies, post-fake activism can help bring the public closer to a critical, logical – and entertaining – spirit, sustained by philosophical debate. These areas of knowledge have somewhat been pushed to a secondary role by the dominant STEM and entrepreneurship culture, which – unlike them – seem not only to coexist rather well with the present reality, but also strongly contribute to maintaining it, as the novel success of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, DALL-E or MidJourney, attests. Despite the hype surrounding ChatGPT, and its ability to produce elaborate, human-like answers to user prompts, its FAQ section clearly states that “ChatGPT (...) can occasionally produce incorrect answers. It has limited knowledge of world and events after 2021 and may also occasionally produce harmful instructions or biased content” (ChatGPT n.d.). However, using an

artificially intelligent black box that may or may not deliver reliable, fact-based answers has in no way hampered its public success. In a *reality* guided by the cognitive overlaying of a barrier of buzzwords, produced and controlled by the dominant culture to inculcate habits and consolidate power, it is necessary to dismantle this "curtain of clichés, which has become trivial and selfish, in an unprecedented way" (Berger 1983: 279). Art and activism can help understand the structures that sustain modernity and colonialism by creatively exposing the underlying relationships and mechanisms that structure social fabric, the logical fallacies and assumptions that underpin the unquestioned acceptance of knowledge-without-knowing, the individually and collectively manifested *otherphobia*. Post-fake activism can contribute to a wider understanding of the complexity of influence and attention-grabbing mechanisms, through their exposure. By rendering less opaque the dispersed and unpredictable algorithms that lead to manipulation and bias in information and communication, post-fake activism can also foster critical thinking and analysis, as opposed to the undisputed acceptance of influence and cognitive overlaying.

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