

Fake News, Media and Reality¹

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0. Abstract

This article deals with the construction of reality by the media, how news broadcasting is filtered by various internal mechanisms in order to purify it. With being the fourth power in a democracy, the media has a lot of influence on public opinion and therefore has the power to influence the outcome and result of elections and other democratic processes directly or indirectly, depending on the political view and agenda the media owners have – or not. Additionally the problem of fake news and media (il)literacy are discussed as well.

1. Reality, Truth and the Construction of them

The perception of the world is always defined by the individual's own experiences and recognition. "That all our recognition would start with experience, there is no doubt about that [...] Although all our recognition starts with experience, not all of it does originate from experience" (Kant, KrV, B1, 1974) is something that Immanuel Kant stated in his "Critique of Pure Reason" concerning the process of recognition of the world. He means that even though we have to combine our experiences, may they be haptic, social, experimental etc. in order to perceive an image of the world and be able to develop an impression of the world of our own. The individual and subjective character of how the human being sees the world is a very important factor of how the world is also interpreted. Space, time, natural laws, imaginations of causality, education, socialisation and so on, they all draw an image and perception of the world of the individual. It can be seen like a puzzle, where bits and pieces are assembled to a perception as a whole. The media, and the mass media in particular, contribute a huge part to this perception in today's society.

First of all it has to be taken into consideration what all of this has got to do with the construction of reality and truth. Technically speaking, perception is a cognitive reaction of what is going on around the individual. It is considered a "physiological, neurological, neuro-anatomic, physiognomic etc. problem, but it is the results of exactly those sciences, which demonstrate that perception is a logical-philosophical, social-cultural and sometimes even political problem" (von Foerster in *Ars Electronica*, 1989, p. 27). So the perception of ongoing processes around the individual depends on several factors. In

¹ Where the original source was not in English, the translation has been made by the author.

principle it is a differentiation between decidable and undecidable questions. Von Foerster postulates a theorem where he states that “only undecidable questions can be decided by us” (von Foerster *ibid.*, 1989, p. 30). There he states that decidable questions would follow a certain pattern and therefore they would be decided already before the decider perceives at all that he or she would have followed this certain, very often not obvious discernible, pattern, while undecidable questions would confront a problem that a determined path for finding a solution is left blank and the decider has to develop a pattern of their own in order to reach a solution or come to a decision concerning the problem’s approach.

Without trying to go too deep into the matter of perception, it should be mentioned that the perception process needs to have a depiction and a reference setting. Depiction is an optical term, where two sub terms exist: the object space and prospect space. Each dot of the object space has an attributed counterpart in the prospect space and vice versa. That way an image can be recognized by the human. The reference setting on the other hand is a biological sciences recognition, which states that the human can only recognize with its senses the intensity of a stimulus, but not the “what” of the stimulus (cf. von Foerster in *Ars Electronica*, 1989). But with the combination of depiction and reference setting it is possible for the human to perceive something and furthermore decide what has been perceived.

If the humans can only recognise what they have formed by their actions, then they are not the explorers of their world, then they are the inventors of it. In other words, they construct a world of their own, a perception of their own within the above mentioned frames and limitations of depiction and reference settings. Each recognition and knowledge is based on the expectancy of a previous invention and that way the perception of a (subjective) reality is more a kind of fiction than it is the result of an objective exploration. This Radical Constructivism deals with “the order and organisation of judgements in the world of our experience” (von Glasersfeld in Watzlawick, 2006, p. 23) and it also states that the problem of occidental epistemology would be “to try to recognize what lies beyond the world of experience” (von Glasersfeld, *ibid.*). Already Immanuel Kant stated that the thing in itself would be a unit of experience (Kant, *KrV*, 1974, A 108), a transcendental object, which would be impossible to be recognized, as it would also be a pure object of thought (Kant, *KrV*, 1974, B 306) and an unknown object behind the phenomena (Kant, *KrV*, 1974, B 236). So this means that it is impossible for the human to look behind these phenomena and the essence and quiddity of the objects could not be recognized at all. The human would have to build a construct of ideas in order to try to have a glimpse of what is behind these phenomena. So constructivism and its application centres itself around the epistemological questions of “how” and not the metaphysical, ontological “what” matters. But, the construction of reality should not be believed as arbitrarily subjective. It only states that every truth depends on its observer. For objects to have a meaning, it is necessary to have knowledge about them before. This includes symbolic worlds as well, which are obtained by cultural and lingual apprehension and organised by communication (cf. Hartmann, 2008).

So when to take a closer look at the mass media in order to transport information, the question about the construction of reality by them is inevitable. Niklas Luhmann states that the media does not necessarily portray reality how it is, but it constructs a reality adequate to the media organisation that goes conform through a process of preselection before it is aired. "The reality of the mass media is a reality of a second category observation" (Luhmann, 2004, p. 153) is probably a very famous sentence by Luhmann. It explains very well what he wants to say about the construction of reality in the media, as it first observes what is going on, then selects what could be broadcasted through various, internally predefined criteria in stages and only then publishes it. So that way it is that "what we know about society, even the world we live in, we know through the mass media" (Luhmann, 2004, p. 9), leaving the non-broadcast events aside and therefore hidden from the public eye. What is not shown or broadcast does not exist, at least in the mass media. This is a media idiosyncratic process, because the alternative media is behaving the same way when it comes to distribute their truth and reality. They might not have such a wide range as the mass media, but with the construction of reality and its own truth, they follow the same selective processes and mechanism as the mass media does.

2. Democracy

Democracy is the power of the people, in most countries the ruling class of a country are not the (former) aristocrats anymore, neither a meritocracy, it is the people (population with the particular citizenship, defined by the country's administration) with the principle of one person, one vote (when this person has fulfilled several predefined criteria such as age, citizenship, legal maturity etc.). A democratic country is living from the division of the powers, legislative, judicative and executive, which are supposed to control each other in order to uphold the countervailing of the powers. The equilibrium of the powers is essential for a functioning state and the control of each other should prevent the concentration of power in just one hand, so that it cannot be abused so easy as it could in a state where there all the power is concentrated in the hand of an absolute lordship. In this triangle the media intruded as the invisible fourth estate of the state, but it developed this potency already before the form of democracy as we know it today was introduced.

Usually the media is seen as the voice of the population, but because it is placed at the interface between ruling and ruled classes, it is not really uncommon that the persons in power use the media to try, or even openly manipulate it in order to influence public opinion in their favour. It is not uncommon either that the media companies start to develop a life of their own and become a ruling class either, especially in societies where the state controlled media is weak and neoliberal tendencies have done everything possible to give power to the owners of companies – and media companies are companies like any other. They just have more publicity than others and with publicity they have more power. The democratic idea of one person – one vote turns into a farce then, when the mass media start to select the news and messages they broadcast according to their owners' will and political conviction. That way the media influences and manipulates the

original will of the voters according to their own ideas and of course in favour of their particular goals.

This phenomenon is referred to as “media democracy”. As a basic fundament of a real democracy, the freedom of the press is guaranteed by the constitution. That means that the press, radio, television and also web sites can broadcast freely without any external or political influence. A democratic society should not differentiate between media and non-media compatible politicians, but through the influence of the media this has changed meanwhile. Photogenic, eloquent and populist politicians take over the highest positions of the state, elements of entertainment infiltrate political messages, important debates move from parliament to TV talk shows on a Sunday evening (cf. Postman, 2006, cf. Kleinsteuber, 2008). The element of the cultural industry has moved in with the democratic element as well (cf. Adorno, 2003). That way the media influences directly the day to day politics by its coverage and in the long run it supports or destroys political careers, it places its own interest in the public eye or stimulates public debates and discussions (eventually in its own interest).

Recently the term of “internet democracy” has popped up and with the growing importance of this type of media, the concept of “media democracy” has to be thought over. As the internet allows every user to be a sender and a receiver of media messages, new publics (and markets) can be made accessible. While the traditional media is fairly well organized and targets big markets, the internet offers a low threshold access and with the introduction of social media such as Facebook or Twitter, it has produced also isolated bubbles of different perceptions of reality of its users, where citizens organise themselves and stew in their own grease together with others who are of the same opinion. Still, the internet has made it possible for its users to emancipate themselves from the influence of the mass media and its dominance (cf. Kleinsteuber, 2008). If an internet democracy is better than a media democracy that is to be decided by everyone on their own. The answer is to be given at the ballot box at the end of every legislature period – and in the end, this is what democracy is about.

3. News, more news, fake news and information warfare

Journalists are on a battlefield every day, the journalistic field (cf. Bourdieu II, 2004). The hunt for news, for something that could make it to the front page headline puts them under a lot of stress and as the non-public owned media has to live from something, they are also under a lot of economic pressure. The journalists have to survive in a war of information, the infowar.

This war is not lead with conventional weapons, which could kill a person from a long or close distance. This war is lead with typewriters, computers, photos, moving images, with everything that could transport a message. When Marshall McLuhan talks about war and peace in the global village, he also talks about how war had revolutionised the communication systems (cf. McLuhan, 2002). Was it in the First World War that the train

was considered to be a transporter of news (and the media is nothing but an intermediary and transporter of news, therefore a train can also be considered as media according to McLuhan), so it was the radio in the Second World War, which transported the news from one place to the other (cf. McLuhan, 2002). It has also to be mentioned that during the Second World War the weekly news summary in the cinemas contributed its share to the news distribution and then later on television did the same for the Vietnam War. Nowadays with the introduction of the internet and its various possibilities of broadcasting, conventional wars can be followed in real time action, but the real war within the journalistic field is not the reporting from various battlefields around the globe. The real war is the hunt for the headline – and the internet is a perfect battlefield for that.

When Vilem Flusser developed his idea of the telematic society (cf. Flusser, 2000), he definitely did not think of the possibility that the free access to information, which characterizes this type of society, could also lead to information warfare. Only the one, who is able to come up with great and breaking news, would be able to win the battle. Information warfare can be described as following: it is a conflict in which both sides battle for acquisition, control and application of information and in which the primary tools are information activities and technologies. It is an amorphous, unbloody war, fought in invisible space.

So coming to think of that, why would someone walk into battle with invented news, when they could be detected easily and brought to daylight as a lie? The secret of this strategy again lies in the aspects of information warfare. As it was seen previously, the media construct reality according to their own selective process before they go public with it. Now taking the scenario of information warfare into consideration, this process of reality construction has also undergo the aspects of exactly this information warfare. The aspects are as following:

- A) It is a war, which is lead in the information sphere
- B) The goal is to dominate the news/information segment of society
- C) Another goal of information warfare is to obstruct, weaken, sabotage or destroy the opponent's CI4 system (command, control, communication, computer intelligence)
- D) Informational weapons and information systems are the most important tools of warfare
- E) Information war is a type of war, which comes very close to real time war; as it uses information systems, the battle field is expanded, while the density of the military forces can be reduced and the period of the war can be minimized
- F) The main tool of information warfare is the corruption of information. The domination of the informational area is a decisive factor, which can decide about victory or defeat. Dominance means that it is possible to use information in time, fully and precisely. The functions of the opponent's political and economic system should be destroyed or at least suspended (cf. Shen, 1998)

So when presidential candidate Donald Trump started his crusade against the traditional media, calling their reports fake news at every possibility (because he did not like what they were reporting about him), he did exactly that of what is falling under those six points of information warfare. He tried to undermine the credibility of the traditional media, but used it at every opportunity when he could be on television in order to spread his message. And as he was a presidential candidate, there were a lot of such opportunities. His populist agenda by discrediting the other candidate, Hillary Clinton, paid dividends in the end and he was elected president. But his crusade did not stop there, he continued with his accusations, trying to weaken the media at every other opportunity. Very often he was proven wrong, still it did not stop him from going rampage.

And that is a big problem. The invention of news or information is going unpunished in most cases and even when being proven wrong, the addressed public has some remaining people who do not believe the whistleblowers and remain true to the invented originals. The social media like Facebook have contributed a huge part to that, as they have invented an algorithm which identifies the interests and believes of their users, feeds them with the news that they want to hear and creates an information bubble around these people giving them the idea that everybody else agrees with their views on the world. Through the option to share content with others a snowball effect sets in and the imaginary fake world becomes reality for its inhabitants, who try to spread their believes beyond this world's borders then. In the year 2018, a MIT study found out that via the social network Twitter lies spread much faster than the truth (cf. Vosoughi, Roy, Aral, 2018, and the mentioned literature there) and the study's authors assume that the recipient's emotional reactions and status in the moment these news are received have got something to do with it. False news would spread fear and disgust, while true stories would inspire sadness, joy, trust and other emotional reactions (Vosoughi Roy Aral, *ibid.*). As the human being prefers to hear about bad stories in order to satisfy its own desire of knowing that there are people out there who are doing worse than oneself, hence the journalistic guideline "bad news are good news", the result of this study is not really surprising. The creation of a particular reality by the media definitely has got to do with this situation.

4. A silver lining on the horizon?

In the middle of the raging information war and the spread of true and false news, someone might become desperate as it is most difficult to differentiate of who and which news outlet to trust and who and which one is not trustworthy. Especially with the mass media being the fourth power in a democratic country, the responsibility of serious and truth-bound journalism is quite high. But even the serious media has a credibility problem, especially when it becomes too powerful and influential and is considered as a shadow government. They probably do not invent the stories, unlike others, but it makes a big difference in how the news are reported about. Pierre Bourdieu calls this as "hiding by showing" (cf. Bourdieu I, 1998), where he states that the news industry demands the dramatization of the everyday event. The media would have to turn the common into

something most uncommon in order to acquire readers, viewers, followers, users etc., capitalist market mechanisms function in that field as well as in any other field of society. What is demanded exists and what is not demanded can exist, but it is hushed up and in the long run ends up deteriorated and isolated, with no interest from any side. If that hushed up topic gets drawn and hidden among a set of banalities, the reception of it is as strong as if it would be shown within a context which would suit its content and message. Still, the media publishers and editors can claim that they would have reported about it – that is how “hiding by showing” functions.

When a media conglomerate decides to report about something they like, they usually use a lot of push words in order to boost that topic and eventually hide their own interests. When it comes to the reporting about the same topic, but the initiative they have to report about is not among their personal favorites (as it might have a different political agenda, for example), the used words could range from commonplace bathos to a simple format of a very short message. Newspapers all around the world, especially in neoliberal countries, are full of such examples.

So the question if there is a silver lining on the horizon, which could bring some kind of rescue from this dilemma, is a very difficult to answer. First the government would need to have interest to shed light into that darkness of newsconstruction by implementing some media literacy classes or content in school curricula. The problem with that is that an uneducated society is easier to manipulate and guide than a society, which has cultivated the technique of critical thinking. Then the concentration of media power in one hand ought to be disapproved by the law, meaning that here also the government has to intervene. On the other side, as mentioned above, the government depends a lot on positive publicity by the mass media and it is extremely difficult to govern against the ruling media conglomerates of a country. Argentina’s president Cristina Kirchner has tried to do so against the El Clarin group, the leading media house of the country (cf. Repoll, 2010). The aftermath of it is still a raging battle between the post-Kirchner governments, the El Clarin group and the high courts of justice of Argentina.

Alternative media might be seen as a silver lining, but they are also ideologically influenced and quite often they are the ones, which spread the many times quoted fake news. Independent sites like Breitbart News or Hot Global News are just two examples for them, whereas Breitbart News follows a far right wing ideological political agenda, while Hot Global News invents stories just for the fun of it and to make money with them (cf. Gardt, 2016).

As society is changing from a knowledge society to an information and telematic society, it is most important to find out and know about the mechanisms of the media, especially the social media, which are one of the main information sources of news and fake news today.

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