



Alt-News and Post-Truths in the "Fake News" Era

Hal Berghel, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Fact checking must be done as a public good, but it's pointless to direct the results at those who can't change their mind and won't change the subject. Our focus should be on developing a set of online tools to facilitate the fact-checking process and make it easily accessible to those who wish their truth straight up.

Seventeen years into the new century, the United States is besieged from all sides. Conspirators, political dissidents, terrorists, and illegal immigrants all provide a clear and present danger to the nation. The world is at war with itself, and that war is spilling over into the US. The threats to our national security posed by an enemy within has never loomed larger—at least not since the Civil War. A senator from North Carolina warns that 100,000 enemy aliens stalk the land. Sometimes that number rises to 200,000. On some days he claims it to be 400,000, or perhaps a million or more. The administration has prepared a blacklist for use by the Department of Justice to expel enemy aliens and accused

recent presidential candidates of treason. It has also contrived terrorist plots. Dossiers leaked to the press purport to show that Russia is behind some of the subversion efforts—the dossiers are fake but have changed the political conversation in America anyway. Other leakers are prosecuted under the Espionage Act for disloyalty, and several are incarcerated. Company executives across the country finance ultraprotectionist organizations to augment law enforcement efforts to defend government and business

from the dissidents, terrorists, and immigrants. The president and attorney general whip the public into a frenzy in support of exclusion legislation aimed at deporting foreign undesirables once and for all. These are tense times.

Sound familiar? The paragraph above described the United States in 1917, as recounted in Tim Weiner's recent best seller.¹ The president was Woodrow Wilson. The attorney general was Thomas Gregory. The North Carolina senator was Lee Overman. The offending immigrants were Germans, Italians, and Russians. There were sundry acts of terrorism and crime to be sure, but the government dragnet targeted nationalities and unions, not just individual terrorists and criminals.



The names and dates have changed, but the themes—xenophobia, aversion to multiculturalism, censorship, fear mongering, and witch hunts—are recurrent ones in the American drama that tend to reinforce our national bipolarity. Driving all of this is fake news. In this column we investigate the “info-wars” behind the fake news.

ALT-FACTS AND POST-TRUTHS AS SPEECH ACTS

Fake news has been so overused as a political weapon that it has become a cliché. We all agree that some news is fake, but beyond that admission its meaning depends upon your point of view. The phrase does have a well-defined meaning to scholars and journalists—that which can't be corroborated with facts—but tribalists and ideologues refuse to accept this definition. For them, fake news is that which differs from sanctioned orthodoxy. We need a way of discussing our info-wars that is less banal and goes beyond labels. I offer a modest proposal here.

Alt-facts and post-truths are in a slightly different category than fake news since they haven't yet been weaponized. They still play a primarily defensive role in political discourse. If an ideologue offers an account of the facts that have no basis in reality, they're not false statements but rather alternative facts. If a description of events plays footloose with the truth, the description is “beyond” truth (that is, truth is irrelevant). These two terms are worthy of analysis for it will help us draw out the subtleties of our current linguistic predicament. I propose that the appropriate analytical tool is speech act theory. But first, we begin with a linguistic blueprint provided by Princeton philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt that bears directly on the topic.²

Frankfurt suggests that to understand what's going on, we first must

distinguish between lies and BS (not the university degree). One distinction is that their speakers differ in terms of the respect and concern they hold for the truth. A liar knows the truth, but “deliberately promulgates a falsehood.” BS, on the other hand, is produced without any concern for the truth. BS is simply made up, phony, and bogus. For this reason, BS is far more insidious for it wanders so far afield of reality that it circumvents all but the most rigorous fact checking. I'll return to this topic below.

Failure to understand this subtle distinction is currently causing great consternation among the current crop of ill-prepared journalists and citizens

(and a few White House staffers, apparently). I shall endeavor, with the help of professor Frankfurt, to show the proverbial fly the way out of the fly bottle with a few postulates.

POSTULATE 1

First, all alt-facts and post-truth claims (for brevity, alt-post) are manifest in both lies and BS. However, it's critical to be able to distinguish between them to determine how to react. In the case of the lie, fact checking is relevant and purposeful and the result should be shared and documented. However, in the case of BS, fact checking is irrelevant and pointless. It's like trying to fact check “Odysseus died in Flanders in 1934.” BS isn't intended as a departure from truth but a substitute for it: it lacks the requisite semantic anchors to make it evaluable. Lies, on the other hand have meaning—but they're false.

We make this distinction more tangible by taking a few liberties with the work of philosophers John Austin³ and John Searle.⁴ Austin introduced the concept of non-truth-evaluable performative utterances that do something. Searle later provided exemplars of performatives: assertions, directives, declarations, and so on. We bend Austin/Searle slightly by adding a new performative: a political or ideological proclamation, which is a statement that must be evaluated not by truth value but rather by felicity conditions stripped of sincerity on the speaker's part. That is, we evaluate the proclamations on the basis of goodness-of-fit with the ideology and

not the facts, and also how well they serve the interests of the tribalists to whom they're addressed. In this way, the performative “Mexico will pay for the border wall” should be thought of as a tribalist proclamation that appeals to xenophobiacs. Similarly, utterances like

- › “Ted Cruz was an anchor baby,”
- › “Barack Obama wasn't born in the US,”
- › “The 2017 inaugural crowd was the largest in history,”
- › “We need guns in schools to prevent grizzly attacks,”
- › “Two Iraqis were the masterminds behind the Bowling Green massacre,” and for that matter
- › “There's no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,”

Alt-facts and post-truth proclamations are essential components of the pervasive politics of intolerant decree.

are much easier to comprehend when recognized as ideological performatives that fire up a base. What drives journalists and scholars off the rails is their attempt to reconcile this nonsense with reality. Such was the source of Alice's confusion in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* when she tried to fact check Humpty Dumpty. One just doesn't do that—it stresses the brain unnecessarily. For ideologues, the meanings of words are their effects on the base.

Alt-post statements are necessarily fungible. What we know for sure is that they represent a state of affairs that exists or fails to exist at some perhaps imaginary point in time by person or persons either real or imag-

any cognitive dissonance that might result from facing facts. In a sense, alt-post performatives are like novels, plays, poetry, and songs: when alt-posters speak, they don't think that what they're doing is any more deceptive than any other performer. Lawrence Olivier speaks Shakespeare's sentences in *King Lear*, he doesn't parse and fact check them. The overarching aim in literature and the arts, as well as in alt-posting, is to get the audience to willingly suspend disbelief long enough to get a meme going. The same holds true for fish stories. When Uncle Wilbur tells you that he couldn't land his last one because it was too big for the boat, you don't ask for photographic evidence or witness

is substantially woven from the yarn of BS, there are threads of both truth and lies included in the blend to provide semantic elasticity. Truth, lies, and BS all contribute differently to the fabric. The BS makes the fabric appealing to the tribe. Lies provide needed reinforcement when the fabric is stretched so thin that it's in danger of tearing. Truth in measured amounts provides sufficient grip to allow the tribe something to hold on to during political storms. All three must be present for alt-post proclamations to achieve the desired effect.

To understand how the threads interweave, consider the recent debate over the "death tax." The debate was framed by calling the estate tax a death tax, thereby building the argument on the negative emotions surrounding the association of "death" with "tax." This is a simple example of the definist fallacy, which in this case was used to trigger emotions of working people to oppose a tax that actually helps rather than hurts them. While immediately spotted as BS by those with even a modicum of understanding of tax policy, it was very effective with the uninformed public. Tied to the mantra that estate taxes destroy family farms (nearly all family farms are exempted, by the way), the fallacious argument became an effective political tool to change policy in favor of the privileged elite. This is all partisan political theater to distract public attention from a tax break for the rich. The only part of the debate that has traction concerns the lie about whether it affects family farms. Occasionally peppering the performance with truths like "No one wants to see family farms disappear" gives the performance some visceral grip.

Frankfurt explains that the focus of BS is "panoramic rather than particular." Such is the case with alt-facts and post-truths. Should either actually embrace a truth, it's coincidental because it's irrelevant to the panorama—the proclamation performance. A landscape artist might

The overarching aim in alt-posting is to get the audience to willingly suspend disbelief long enough to get a meme going.

inary. Nothing more can be said. Though easily detected as nonsense by scholars and journalists, they take on a life of their own with tribalists. Alt-facts and post-truth proclamations are essential components of the pervasive politics of intolerant decree. The media, academia, and the enlightened public are well served to recognize the nonsensicality of this alt-postum, but they must understand that there's absolutely no reason to discuss this with the tribe. It's a waste of breath. Humpty Dumpty isn't going to change his opinion, Alice.

POSTULATE 2

Our second postulate is that alt-post performatives are extra-logical: they exist beyond the realm of logic in a fantasy world known only to the speaker and his or her tribe. They're not the product of reason but flights of fancy: they depict a possible world that would be convenient for the speaker (if it existed) because it would suppress

testimonies. In this case, Uncle Wilbur is an alt-poster. He's presenting his base (*viz*, you) with alternative facts—perhaps with some additional self-aggrandizement thrown in for effect. Truth is relegated to the back seat in fish stories, alt-postum, and, lately, White House press briefings.

The fruits of the alt-poster's tongue aren't designed to stand up to close scrutiny—they're offered for effect. White House staffers and journalists who decide to participate in these performances must come to understand that they're part of the theater troupe and their function is to give the star some characters to play off in each scene. Far too often lately, the staffers have stepped on the star's lines. They need to take a lesson from Humpty Dumpty, the two Tweedles, and the Mad Hatter, and just go with the flow.

POSTULATE 3

The third postulate of the alt-post world is that although the narrative

capture the exact number of leaves on a tree or birds on a power line. But that's usually accidental. The painting isn't about the details of leaves and birds; it's about presenting a possible state of affairs that approximates the painter's vision of reality.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan is credited with the quote "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts" (www.goodreads.com/quotes/1745-everyone-is-entitled-to-his-own-opinion-but-not-to). Alt-posters take the opposite view: everyone is entitled to their own facts so long as they concord with the official position. We all must understand that the current crop of alt-post birthers are following a different playbook. The target audience's minds are made up; they're only looking for reinforcement to offset any cognitive dissonance they might experience from occasional brushes with reality. Fact checking their performance is akin to shoveling smoke.

LEAVING THE FLY BOTTLE

Fact checking is an important activity for truth-seekers but not tribalists. Once we understand that principle, we can see the latter will react to fact checking as a kind of rhetorical tear gas—something painful and to be avoided at all cost. Legitimate fact-check websites like FactCheck.org, the PolitiFact Truth-o-Meter (www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements), and *The Washington Post* Fact Checker (www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker) are the equivalent of online pepper spray to tribalists. These fact-checking sites are stuck with the old linguistic model built upon meaningful, declarative sentences of discernable truth values. That is so Tarski-Church.

Fact checking now, just as in 1917, serves a specialized audience—one not in synch with the xenophobia, aversion to multiculturalism, censorship, fear mongering, and witch hunts mentioned earlier. Fact checking must be done as a public good, but it's pointless

<ALT>-FAQs

One recent story of note was the rapid rise and fall of Michael Flynn as national security advisor to President Donald Trump. This story fulfills one of my earlier prophesies that the NSA's bulk digital surveillance program would eventually come back to bite the government. Such was Flynn's undoing.

Flynn admitted that he gave incomplete or incorrect information to senior members of the Trump administration concerning his discussions about US sanctions with the Russian ambassador before he held an official position within the Trump administration—a violation of the Logan Act that prohibits unauthorized citizens from negotiating with foreign governments. What Flynn did, incidentally, was similar to what George Logan did in 1798 that prompted the law associated with his name to be passed in the first place.

However, the real story isn't what Flynn did, or that he lied to his future bosses, but rather how Flynn's meeting with the Russian ambassador came to light in the first place. In a letter to the editor responding to my column on the PRISM leaks ("Through the PRISM Darkly," *Computer*, vol. 46, no. 7, 2013, pp. 86–90), a reader wrote that "None of [the NSA's intelligence data on US citizens] has ever been used for anything except to protect US citizens from attacks on the US" ("Letters," *Computer*, vol. 46, no. 9, 2013, pp. 10–12). I gave counterexamples to that claim at the time. But the Flynn case provides an even better example than the ones I gave then. Flynn's phone calls were intercepted and leaked by officials in the very government he was attempting to join. It wasn't the police or the telecoms that revealed his phone conversation, it was our Deep State. As I pointed out in my response to the letter's author, "This NSA surveillance program is fraught with legal and ethical problems—most especially that it creates an ideal environment for abuses—especially blackmail and extortion. And that may be its eventual undoing." Once again, this is use of the very eavesdropping information that the author assured us would never be used for anything except to protect us from attack. So far as I can determine, no attack was imminent from Flynn.

Here's another prediction as President Trump wages war with the Deep State over the Flynn leak. Look for hints of selective file scrubbing of NSA servers in the near future. The White House has learned an important lesson in the Flynn case: the NSA digital surveillance programs also store embarrassing and prosecutable evidence of wrongdoing of politicians, business leaders, and the military—information that can be used against them in court. The power elite will soon come to a single mind on this issue: this shall not stand. The NSA's massive digital data surveillance has proven itself to be a double-edged sword. Their choice is either to corrupt the programs by sanitizing the data so that they don't themselves get caught in the web (as with the Nixon tapes) or to revert back to programs with constitutional safeguards like ThinThread. However, for the data already captured and stored, file scrubbing is the only effective cover-up tactic.

to direct the results at an alt-poster who can't change his mind and won't change the subject. Our focus should be on developing a set of online tools to facilitate the fact-checking process and make it easily accessible to those

who wish their truth straight up.⁵ The available evidence seems to indicate that the most effective counter to alt-posters is satire and ridicule. Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and *Saturday Night Live* are having far more success

against the alt-posters than *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Former Congressman and CIA Director Porter Goss once advised new CIA recruits to “admit nothing, deny everything, and make counteraccusations.”⁶ That’s the best prescription for alt-post strategies I’ve seen so far. Fake news is founded upon this recommendation.

To deal with the barrage of misinformation that comes our way these days, we must get more creative with information technology and online delivery systems. Mass media isn’t working well because, with very few exceptions, it’s controlled by those who seek to either appeal to or profit from the tribalists and it’s built on a push-feed metaphor. Pushing facts at tribalists just isn’t effective (think pepper spray analogy). Rather, our focus should be on integrating

available fact-checking resources for those who are interested. Unfortunately, much of broadcasting—talk radio, agenda-driven media, partisan blogs—targets those who aren’t. Our challenge is to find online resources that can fill the gap. What’s most needed is a fact-based management system for the Internet that overcomes ideological impedance mismatch. **□**

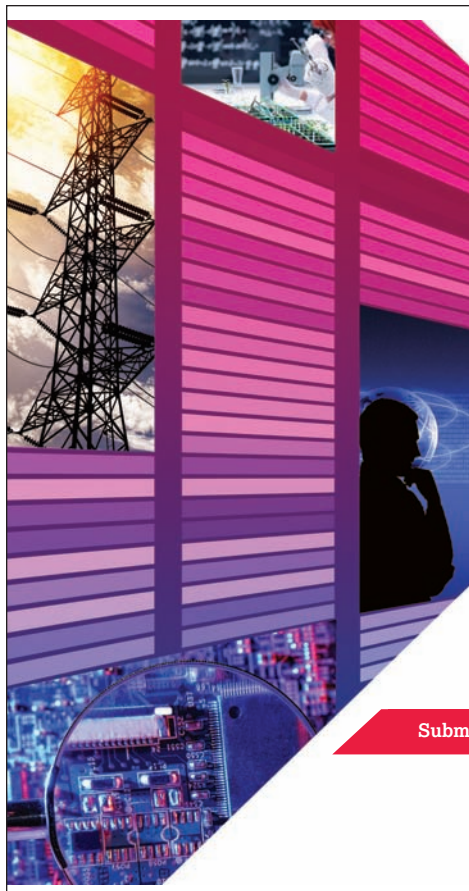
6. T. Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*, Anchor Books, 2008.

HAL BERGHEL is an IEEE and ACM Fellow and a professor of computer science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Contact him at hlb@computer.org.

REFERENCES

1. T. Weiner, *Enemies: A History of the FBI*, Random House, 2012.
2. H.G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2005.
3. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Clarendon Press, 1962.
4. J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, reprint ed., Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970.
5. H. Berghel, “Lies, Damn Lies, and Fake News,” *Computer*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2017, pp. 80–87.

Read your subscriptions through the myCS publications portal at <http://mycs.computer.org>



CALL FOR STANDARDS AWARD NOMINATIONS

IEEE COMPUTER SOCIETY HANS KARLSSON STANDARDS AWARD



A **plaque** and **\$2,000 honorarium** is presented in recognition of **outstanding skills and dedication to diplomacy, team facilitation, and joint achievement in the development or promotion of standards** in the computer industry where individual aspirations, corporate competition, and organizational rivalry could otherwise be counter to the benefit of society.

NOMINATE A COLLEAGUE FOR THIS AWARD!

DUE: 15 OCTOBER 2017

- Requires 3 endorsements.
- Self-nominations are not accepted.
- Do not need IEEE or IEEE Computer Society membership to apply.

Submit your nomination electronically: awards.computer.org | Questions: awards@computer.org



IEEE  computer society