

Thumbnail Image:



Mar 16, 2018 by [Jan Melissen](#)

Part I: Fake News, And What (Not) To Do About It ^[1]

Fake news comes thick and fast, on national issues and in international politics. The public reaction to it varies from great concern and offense to a sense of entertainment.

One of the main problems with fake news is that fabricated stories look real—that is their key distinguishing feature. They are believed, shared and circulated by people, thus making fake news what it is: “legit” for consumers-cum-multipliers of news.

The role of technology in our societies has changed the nature, scale, speed and direction of disinformation. Digital technologies have turned fake news into a new form of 21st century propaganda. Apart from the challenge of making sense of what fake news is, one can observe a worrying tendency to counter it before understanding it.

Some people involved in fake news are rather cynically motivated by economic self-interest to generate anything-goes stories in disputes fought out on the internet, or to mobilize like-minded “netizens” helping their cause. Fake news means different things to different people. It can have a destabilizing effect on societies that are being undermined from within, and with the mind-blowing

velocity and intensity of news circulation. Most challenging, fake news has the potential to pose a threat to international stability.

Disinformation and Dialogues of Disrespect

Fake news reverberates above all within so-called “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles”, in which algorithms tailor information to unwitting news consumers. Such algorithms constitute the back-end politics of fake news. Echo chambers come in many shapes and sizes. Both online and offline, the Western world arguably functions more or less like a filter bubble. Another sizable echo chamber, the global community of Catholics, was taken by surprise during the 2016 U.S. election campaign: “Pope Francis Shakes World: Endorses Donald Trump”, which generated 96,000 engagements on Facebook. Fake news has the capacity to *confuse* campaign-style national political debates.

In international politics, fake news can cause interference in a poisonous mix with calculated insults by leaders that impact public opinion and the ongoing conversation between states. Here are two of many examples: “Hillary Clinton Sold Weapons to ISIS” was, of course, a fake Facebook post. Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė has never been a KGB agent, and incest is not a norm in modern Europe, both suggested by fake news originating in Russia.

The creation of the internet was underpinned by trust, but millennials do not necessarily see things that way anymore, let alone their digitally native younger siblings.

And as to insults: it hardly greased the wheels of U.S.-Philippines relations when President Rodrigo Duterte referred to the U.S. Ambassador in Manila as a “gay son of a whore”. And it did not inject trust in Mexican-U.S. relations when U.S. President Trump, speaking alongside his counterpart Enrique Peña Nieto, confirmed to reporters that Mexico was going to “pay for the Wall.” Nor did it help the U.S. relationship with Australia when Trump hung up on Malcolm Turnbull during his first conversation with the prime minister of a country that has fought side by side with the U.S. in every armed conflict since World War I.

Fake news is the bedfellow of what could be called the dialogue of disrespect, and this combination constitutes a fertile breeding ground for political myths. The “post-knowledge society”, in which expertise is under fire, has not come like a bolt from the blue. In 1958, Cold War hysteria led to the widespread belief that the Soviet Union was technologically superior to the West, and—fast-forward more than half a century—in 2018, climate change is rhetorically equated to weather or winter.

Social Confusion

The World Economic Forum (WEF) warned as early as 2013, in the eighth edition of its *Global Risks* report, that “digital wildfires can wreak havoc in the real world.” Technological developments are blending with geopolitical risk, and systematic disinformation potentially undermines global governance and the legitimacy of international institutions. In the time-span of less than five years, we can see how perceptions of digital media are in flux. In the wake of the so-called “Arab Spring”, they were said to empower people and harbor the promise of social mobilization and political transformation.

Today, with some 15 percent of tweets generated by bots, people on the internet feel increasingly

unsure as to whether they are actually talking to a human. The creation of the internet was underpinned by trust, but millennials do not necessarily see things that way anymore, let alone their digitally native younger siblings.

Fake news plausibly demonstrates “a breakdown of social morality and a confusion in the value system.” These are fitting words from novelist Yu Hua in his book *China in Ten Words*, reflecting on the rapid rise in popularity of the words “copycat” and “bamboozle” in China. They might equally apply to the proliferation of fake news in the West.

The difference between false news and fake news lies in its stylization. Printed fake news looks real, and new technologies make it much harder to determine that pictures have been purposely doctored to mislead audiences for political purposes. “Weaponized” communication is affecting governmental public diplomacy. After the initial euphoria about social media empowering “the people”, it was only a matter of time before the power of algorithms drew the attention of a growing number of governments.

At the second International Conference on Digital Diplomacy hosted by the Israeli Ministry of Affairs in Jerusalem (#DDConf2017) in December last year, questions about diplomatic communication powered by algorithms took center stage. The same was the case at The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp (#DiploCamp) at the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, February 1-2, 2018, which coincided with the publication of this Clingendael Alert.

In international relationships, algorithms give governments the tools to penetrate digital people-to-people networks in both friendly and hostile foreign environments. It is hardly surprising that astute governments perceiving the digital sphere as an arena in which geopolitical rivalries are played out were among the first to embrace the use of algorithms in diplomacy. Outside the West, this includes usual suspect authoritarians like Russia, but also Iran and Sudan.

In China, which aims to become the world’s artificial intelligence superpower, junior diplomats have data science on their training curriculum. On the edge of Europe, Turkey is unfolding as a self-confident powerhouse using digital tools and fake news to both mobilize its diaspora and persecute political opponents in Europe and North America.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This article is Part I of a two-part series on combating fake news. Read [Part II](#). This piece originally appeared in [Clingendael Magazine](#).*
