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Fake Barns, Fake News

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The Twitter feed of Donald Trump regularly employs the hashtag #FakeNews, and refers to mainstream news outlets — *The New York Times*, CNN etc. — as #FakeNews media. Here is an example from May 28, 2017.

Whenever you see the words ‘sources say’ in the fake news media, and they don’t mention names ...
... it is very possible that those sources don’t exist but are made up by the fake news writers. #FakeNews is the enemy!
It is my opinion that many of the leaks coming out of the White House are fabricated lies made up by the #FakeNews media.¹

Lies and Falsehoods

Now it is undoubted that both fake news items and fake news media exist. A famous example of the former is the BBC Panorama broadcast about spaghetti growers on April Fool’s Day, 1957.² A more recent, and notorious example of the latter is the website *ChristianTimesNewspaper.com* set up by Cameron Harris to capitalise on Donald Trump’s support during the election campaign (See Shane 2017).

This website published exclusively fake news items; items such as “Hillary Clinton Blames Racism for Cincinnati Gorilla’s Death”, “NYPD Looking to Press Charges Against Bill Clinton for Underage Sex Ring”, and “Protestors Beat Homeless Veteran to Death in Philadelphia”. And it found commercial success with the headline: “BREAKING: ‘Tens of thousands’ of fraudulent Clinton votes found in Ohio warehouse”. This story was eventually shared with six million people and gained widespread traction, which persisted even after it was shown to be fake.

Fake news items and fake news media exist. However, this paper is not interested in this fact so much as the fact that President Trumps regularly calls real news items fake, and calls the established news media the fake news media. These aspersions are intended to discredit news items and media. And they have had some remarkable success in doing so: Trump's support has shown a good resistance to the negative press Trump has received in the mainstream media (Johson 2017).

Moreover, there is some epistemological logic to this: these aspersions insinuate a sceptical argument, and, irrespective of its philosophical merits, this skeptical argument is easy to latch onto and hard to dispel. An unexpected consequence of agreeing with Trump's aspersions is that these aspersions can themselves be epistemologically rationalized. This paper seeks to develop these claims.

¹ See <<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>>.

² See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/1/newsid_2819000/2819261.stm>.

An Illustration from the Heartlands

To start, consider what is required for knowledge. While there is substantial disagreement about the nature of knowledge — finding sufficient conditions is difficult — there is substantial agreement on what is required for knowledge. In order to know: (1) you have to have got it right; (2) it cannot be that you are likely to have got it wrong; and (3) you cannot think that you are likely to have got it wrong. Consider these three necessary conditions on knowledge.

You have to have got it right. This is the most straightforward requirement: knowledge is factive; ‘S knows that p’ entails ‘p’. You cannot know falsehoods, only mistakenly think that you know them. So if you see what looks to you to be a barn on the hill and believe that there is a barn on the hill, you fail to know that there is a barn on the hill if what you are looking at is in fact a barn façade — a fake barn.

It cannot be that you are likely to have got it wrong. This idea is variously expressed in the claims that there is a reliability (Goldman 1979), sensitivity (Nozick 1981), safety (Sosa 2007), or anti-luck (Zagzebski 1994) condition on knowing. That there is such a condition has been acknowledged by epistemologists of an internalist persuasion, (Alston 1985, Peacocke 1986). And it is illustrated by the subject’s failure to know in the *fake barn case* (Goldman 1976). This case runs as follows.

Henry is driving through the countryside, sees a barn on the hill, and forms the belief that there is a barn on the hill. Ordinarily, seeing that there is a barn on the hill would enable Henry to know that there is a barn on the hill. But the countryside Henry is driving through is peculiar in that there is a proliferation of barn façades — fake barns — and Henry, from the perspective of the highway, cannot tell a genuine barn from a fake barn.

It follows that he would equally form the belief that there is a barn on the hill if he were looking at a fake barn. So his belief that there is a barn on the hill is as likely to be wrong as right. And since it is likely that he has got it wrong, he doesn’t know that there is a barn on the hill. (And he doesn’t know this even though he is looking at a barn on the hill!)

You cannot think that you are likely to have got it wrong. This condition can equally be illustrated by the fake barns case. Suppose Henry learns, say from a guidebook to this part of the countryside, that fake barns are common in this area. In this case, he would no longer believe, on seeing a barn on the hill, that there was a barn on the hill. Rather, he would retreat to the more cautious belief that there was something that looked like a barn on the hill, which might be a barn or might be a barn façade. Or at least this is the epistemically correct response to this revelation.

And were Henry to persist in his belief that there is a barn on the hill, there would be something epistemically wrong with this belief; it would be unreasonable, or unjustified. Such a belief, it is then commonly held, could not amount to knowledge, (Sosa 2007). Notice: the truth of Henry’s worry about the existence of fake barns doesn’t matter here. Even if the guidebook is a tissue of falsehoods and there are no fake barns, once Henry

believes that fake barns abound, it ceases to be reasonable to believe that a seen barn on the hill is in fact a barn on the hill.

Truth's Resilience: A Mansion on a Hill

The *fake barns case* centres on a case of acquiring knowledge by perception: getting to know that there is a barn on the hill by seeing that there is a barn on the hill. Or, more generally: getting to know that *p* by seeing that *p*. The issue of fake news centres on our capacity to acquire knowledge from testimony: getting to know that *p* by being told that *p*. Ordinarily, testimony, like perception, is a way of acquiring knowledge about the world: just as seeing that *p* is ordinarily a way of knowing that *p*, so too is being told that *p*. And like perception, this capacity for acquiring knowledge can be disrupted by fakery.

This is because the requirements on knowledge stated above are general requirements — they are not specific to the perceptual case. Applying these requirements to the issue of fake news then reveals the following.

You have to have got it right. From this it follows that there is no knowledge to be got from the fake news item. One cannot get to know that the Swiss spaghetti harvesters had a poor year in 1957, or that Randall Prince stumbled across the ballot boxes. If it is fake news that *p*, one cannot get to know that *p*, any more than one can get to know that there is a barn on a hill when the only thing on the hill is a fake. One can get to know other things: that Panorama said that such and such; or that the Christian Times Newspaper said that such and such. But one cannot get to know the content said.

It cannot be that you are likely to have got it wrong. To see what follows from this, suppose that President Trump is correct and the mainstream news media is really the fake news media. On this supposition, most of the news items published by this news media are fake news items. The epistemic position of a consumer of news media is then parallel to Henry's epistemic position in driving through fake barn country. Even if Henry is looking at a (genuine) barn on the hill, he is not in a position to know that there is a barn on the hill given that he is in fake barn country and, as such, is as likely wrong as right with respect to his belief that there is a barn on the hill.

Similarly, even if the news item that *p* is genuine and not fake, a news consumer is not in a position to get to know that *p* insofar as fakes abound and their belief that *p* is equally likely to be wrong as right. This parallel assumes that the epistemic subject cannot tell real from fake. This supposition is built into the fake barn case: from the road Henry cannot discriminate real from fake barns. And it follows in the fake news case from supposition that President Trump is correct in his aspersions.

That is, if it is really true that *The New York Times* and CNN are fake news media, as supposed, then this shows the ordinary news consumer is wrong to discriminate between these news media and Christian Newspaper Times, say. And it thereby shows that the ordinary news consumer possesses the same insensitivity to fake news items that Henry

possesses to fake barns. So if President Trump is correct, there is no knowledge to be had from the mainstream news media. Of course, he is not correct: these are aspersions not statements of fact. However, even aspersions can be epistemically undermining as can be seen next.

You cannot think that you are likely to have got it wrong. Thus, in the fake barns case, if Henry *believes* that fake barns proliferate, he cannot know there is a barn on the hill on the basis of seeing one. The truth of Henry's belief is immaterial to this conclusion. Now let 'Trump's supporters' refer to those who accept Trump's aspersions of the mainstream news media. Trump's supporters thereby believe that mainstream news items concerning Trump are fake news items, and believe more generally that these news media are fake news media (at least when it comes to Trump-related news items).

It follows that a Trump supporter cannot acquire knowledge from the mainstream news media when the news is about Trump. And it also follows that Trump supporters are being quite epistemically reasonable in their rejection of mainstream news stories about Trump. (One might counter, 'at least insofar as their starting point is epistemically reasonable'; but it will turn out below that an epistemological rationalization can be given of this starting point.)

Always Already Inescapably Trapped

Moreover, arguably it is not just the reasonableness of accepting mainstream news stories about Trump that is undermined because Trump's aspersions insinuate the following skeptical argument. Suppose again that Trump's aspersions of the mainstream news media are correct, and call this the *fake news hypothesis*. Given the fake news hypothesis it follows that we lack the capacity to discriminate fake news items from real news items. Given the fake news hypothesis combined with this discriminative incapacity, the mainstream news media is not a source of knowledge about Trump; that is, it is not a source of knowledge about Trump *even if* its news items are known and presented as such.

At this point, skeptical logic kicks in. To illustrate this, consider the skeptical hypothesis that one is a brain-in-a-vat. Were one a brain-in-a-vat, perception would not be a source of knowledge. So insofar as one thinks that perception is a source of knowledge, one needs a reason to reject the skeptical hypothesis. But any reason one ordinarily has, one lacks under the supposition that the skeptical hypothesis is true. Thus, merely entertaining the skeptical hypothesis as true threatens to dislodge one's claim to perceptual knowledge.

Similarly, the fake news hypothesis entails that the mainstream news media is not a source of knowledge about Trump. Since this conclusion is epistemically unpalatable, one needs a reason to reject the fake news hypothesis. Specifically, one needs a reason for thinking that one can discriminate real Trump-related news items from fake ones. But the reasons one ordinarily has for this judgement are undermined by the supposition that the fake news hypothesis is true.

Thus, merely entertaining this hypothesis as true threatens to dislodge one's claim to mainstream news-based knowledge about Trump. Three things follow. First, Trump

supporters' endorsement of the fake news hypothesis does not merely make it reasonable to reject mainstream media claims about Trump—by the fake barns logic—this endorsement further supports a quite general epistemic distrust on the mainstream news media—by this skeptical reasoning. (It is not just that the mainstream news media conveys #FakeNews, it is the #FakeNews Media.)

Second, through presenting the fake news hypothesis, Trump's aspersions of mainstream media encourage us to entertain a hypothesis that insinuates a skeptical argument with this radical conclusion. And if any conclusion can be drawn from philosophical debate on skepticism, it is that it is hard to refute skeptical reasoning once one is in the grip of it. Third, what is thereby threatened is both our capacity to acquire Trump-related knowledge that would ground political criticism, and our epistemic reliance on the institution that provides a platform for political criticism. Given these epistemic rewards, Trump's aspersions of the mainstream news media have a clear political motivation.

Aspersions on the Knowledge of the People

However, I'd like to end by considering their epistemic motivation. Aren't groundless accusations of fakery straightforwardly epistemically unreasonable? Doesn't the fake news hypothesis have as much to recommend it as the skeptical hypothesis that one is a brain-in-a-vat? That is, to say doesn't it have very little to recommend it? Putting aside defences of the epistemic rationality of skepticism, the answer is still equivocal. From one perspective: yes, these declarations of fakery have little epistemic support.

This is the perspective of the enquirer. Supposing a given news item addresses the question of whether p , then where the news item declares p , Trump declares not- p . The epistemic credentials of these declarations then come down to which tracks matters of evidence etc., and while each case would need to be considered individually, it would be reasonable to speculate that the canons of mainstream journalism are the epistemically superior.

However, from another perspective: no, these declarations of fakery are epistemically motivated. This is the perspective of the believer. For suppose that one is a Trump supporter, as Trump clearly is, and so believes the fake news hypothesis. Given this hypothesis, the truth of a mainstream news item about Trump is immaterial to the epistemic standing of a news consumer. Even if the news item is true, the news consumer can no more learn from it than Henry can get to know that there is a barn on the hill by looking at one.

But if the truth of a Trump-related news item is immaterial to the epistemic standing of a news consumer, then it seems that epistemically, when it comes to Trump-related news, the truth simply *doesn't matter*. But to the extent that the truth doesn't matter, there really is no distinction to be drawn between the mainstream media and the fake news media when it comes to Trump-related news items. Thus, there is a sense in which the fake news hypothesis is epistemically self-supporting.

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