



# The Genesis of Postmodern Disinformatics

Hal Berghel, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

*While misinformation has always been a political tactic, in the last half-century it has been weaponized.*

**M**uch has been said of the practice of disinformation, especially as it relates to modern politics.<sup>1</sup> Disinformation is manifest in several activities including online trolling, the production of fake news (in the journalism rather than partisan sense), hit-and-run posting, sh\*t posting, meat puppeting, Twitter litter, and sundry other forms of fact fabrication.<sup>2,3</sup> These topics have been well covered by myself and others and continue to be topical and newsworthy for people who prefer to take their truth plain and uncorrupted. One issue that has not been adequately discussed is how we got to the point where the practice of disinformation became widespread and accepted in some partisan circles. I think that I may have an answer.

Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MC.2018.2876183  
Date of publication: 15 January 2019

## ADVERSARIAL JOURNALISM

Lying has always been a tactic in politics (along with many other forms of organized social interaction). Pseudo news, faux news, lies, prevarications, and the like have been a constant companion to politics as long as there have been people who reported news. Misinformation is a critical part of

the world's political tradition. As iconic journalist George Seldes put it, "From the first day to the last [in reporting news] there was censorship, there was suppression of news, there was distortion and coloring of the news. There was always an attempt by someone to mislead the public. There are powerful forces that don't want the facts....presented truthfully."<sup>4</sup>

Although Seldes wrote this in 1935, the situation remains as he presented it, only some of the names have changed. And through it all, there have been courageous journalistic voices who spoke truth to power, beginning with Thomas Payne before the Revolutionary War, Ambrose Bierce after the Civil War, and continuing through the muckrakers of the late 19th century like Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair, and Will Irwin, to name but a few. I emphasize that the original meaning of "muckraking" was laudatory rather than derogatory and to be contrasted, and not synonymous, with yellow journalism.



This fact seems to be lost on recent generations of students.

Today, we generally subsume the muckraking, truth-to-power brand of journalism under the banner of adversarial journalism. Adversarial journalism is usually found online, as typified by [theintercept.org](http://theintercept.org), [consortiumnews.com](http://consortiumnews.com), [foreignpolicy.com](http://foreignpolicy.com), [politico.com](http://politico.com), and so on, although some commercial print news sources like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* still maintain an adversarial presence. But, by and large, muckraking and adversarial journalism have always been, and will always be, media outliers because they irritate the power elite. Unfortunately, they have historically been the only consistently reliable sources of news of enduring importance.

Why is this? The answer is exactly what Seldes said. Media businesses are, first and foremost, businesses. That they may be purveyors of news is of secondary consideration. Any public responsibilities that they might recognize are subservient to corporate interests. Recently, there has been extensive comment on the catch-and-kill stories that the *National Enquirer* has accumulated on Donald Trump. Catch-and-kill is simply one form of news suppression that is used to serve a variety of parochial, and not public, interests. Trump's concern is that the killed reporting may not stay dead for long—that's why he wanted to buy it all from the *Enquirer*.<sup>5</sup> This makes Special Counsel Robert Mueller's offer of immunity to the *National Enquirer's* parent company, American Media, all the more alarming to Trump.<sup>6</sup>

But, in addition to suppressing news of interest to the public, corporate media also manufacture non-newsworthy content for the same reasons. Newspapers routinely print "business office musts" to secure good relations with other corporate interests. Virtually every paper prints notices on business

promotions, new store openings, corporate expansions, new product introductions, and so forth that are of little (if any) public interest but of some public relations benefit to businesses. These notices fall under the category of free publicity and are used to leverage paid advertising and build goodwill. Thus, suppressing news of genuine public interest, sanitizing news stories, creating new story lines to distract the public in service to special interests, generating "alternative facts," manufacturing content-free notices of little public interest, and so on are all essential features of commercial media.

I offer this by way of background to my central point that not everything presented by news media is newsworthy. With few exceptions, they're interested in making a profit, and the profit motive usually dictates what is presented. That said, I don't mean to paint all news media with the same brush. Some are more reliable at presenting news than others. But any outlet that relies on advertising or is beholden to corporate interests is going to be heavily influenced by the money factor. And this is not to mention the so-called tabloids and their fake-news descendants that have never been very closely aligned with the facts.

So far as I know, the only way that investigative journalists have found to avoid the pressures imposed by special interests is to self-publish and avoid advertising. And two luminaries in this endeavor stand out: George Seldes and I.F. Stone. Fortunately for us all, both have written extensively of their experiences,<sup>4,7</sup> and both are the subject of many biographies and two fascinating documentaries.<sup>8,9</sup> Both self-published nonadvertising-based newsletters. Seldes' contribution was *In Fact: An Antidote for Falsehood in the Daily Press*, which was published from 1940 to 1950. Stone published *I.F. Stone's Weekly* from 1953 to 1971. Both weeklies were highly

regarded by journalists, very influential with nonpartisan interests, and represented the only sustained adversarial journalism of the 20th century. As mentioned previously, most muckraking and adversarial journalism was published in magazines.

### ALL GOVERNMENTS LIE— NOTHING POSTMODERN ABOUT THAT

In exposing government lies and the wealth of misinformation that was being disseminated, Seldes and Stone performed in bravura fashion. As noted previously, lying has always been a political tactic, and pseudo news and its variants are an integral part of the world's political tradition.

If that's the case, what is different now? There are several things worthy of note. First, while misinformation has always been a political tactic, deployed whenever the truth proved inconvenient to the political aspirant, office holder, or corporate interest, in the last half-century it has been elevated to a *political strategy*. It is now woven into the fabric of the political narrative so tightly, in fact, that it is nearly impossible for the typical citizen consumer to distinguish fact from fancy. Recent examples abound: misinformation propagated about the Iran-Contra affair, Iraq's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction that claimed to justify an invasion, the My Lai massacre, Watergate, not to mention a dizzying stream emanating from the current administration.

The second difference is the presence of digital information technology (the Internet and telecommunications systems) that provides friction-free distribution/access through email, web services, social media outlets, and so forth. It is this second difference that made it possible to elevate misinformation from tactic to strategy: every political partisan is a potential outlet for

bogus information. Among tribalists, misinformation is self-reinforcing and auto-replicating, and the problem is exacerbated by a public and media unprepared to deal with the phenomena. Combined with the ability to microtarget clusters of swing voters on hot-button issues, misinformation provides a perverse incentive for manipulating elections and insulating politicians from the public will. The outcomes of US national elections these days are as likely to be determined by the Supreme Court and the Electoral College as by popular vote, neither of which is directly responsible to the electorate.

So when did the shift from tactic to strategy begin? As near as I can tell, it began in the 1980s, with a shift in political mores occurring contemporaneously with the commercialization of the Internet and the explosive growth of the web. This second phenomenon deserves clarification because it wasn't the explosive growth of Internet-enabled information sources alone that contributed to the problem. There were two derivative effects that also played into the mix.

First, Internetworked information sources contributed to the diminished profitability of traditional subscription-based news media. Concomitant with this diminished profitability came diminished investigative reporting, which in turn reduced the relevance of commercial media to daily lives. More and more pages/minutes were devoted to non-newsworthy but sensationalistic items. During the past 50 years, the mantra "if it bleeds, it leads" became omnipresent. From the perspective of genuine news of enduring value, commercial media have become relatively content free. This became a vicious spiral as the dumbed-down media discouraged subscriptions that necessitated cutbacks in the newsrooms, which produced more lightweight content, and so forth.

In addition, the Internet made it possible for people to create their own filter bubbles to simultaneously reinforce their personal biases and shelter

themselves from opposing ideas.<sup>12</sup> These filter bubbles are enhanced by online services that operate under the rubric of personalization. However, this personalization comes at the expense of moderating influences that might mitigate unhealthy biases.

The conventional media (both print and electronic), at least before cable TV, were pretty much one size fits all, which drove the content providers to the ideological center. The past 50 years have witnessed content narrow-banding that is inherently polarizing as it targets ever-smaller tribes. The Internet pushed content narrow-banding to the extreme: content can be microtargeted to as few as one individual. At this point, for those who prefer their biases maximally reinforced, there is no reason to ever hear a breath of dissent. Under the banner of convenient, pull-phase access to digital information, microtargeted thought bubbles can be created that provide self-reinforcing insulation from all alternative points of view. Bothersome realities are ancient history for today's tribalists.

If there were to be a pivotal moment that ushered in the era of fake news, it may have been the Reagan administration's wholesale adoption of perception management, euphemistically called "Project Truth."<sup>13</sup> Although the concepts were straight out of Edward Bernays' philosophy of propaganda,<sup>14</sup> Hitler-era Germany made the term so toxic as to render it unacceptable for modern eyes. However, casual inspection will reveal that the only part of the title "Project Truth" that was veridical was that it was a project.

The goal of Project Truth is spelled out in the introduction. The White House was to create a "committee on information policy coordination to arm the United States for effective battle in the war for man's minds *to which the administration is committed*" (emphasis added). This project was to create an image of US policy that advanced the policies of the Reagan administration. What was needed was a formal

mechanism to generate useful facts that served the administration's interests and countered the observed facts that cluttered citizen's thoughts. This was a new spin on psy-ops, but this time the target population was domestic.

In addition to Bernays, the Reagan administration was heavily influenced by the 1975 report of the Trilateral Commission.<sup>15</sup> Both maintained an anti-intellectualist position and claimed that a well-enlightened populace leads to a general lack of confidence in the integrity of government. The claim is that a "...weakening of the coherence, purpose, and self-confidence of political leadership..." results from the public's suspicion of governmental authority. "People no longer felt the same compulsion to obey those whom they had previously considered superior to themselves in age, rank, status, expertise, character, or talents.... Each group claimed its right to participate equally...in the decisions which affected itself.... Authority based on hierarchy, expertise and wealth...came under heavy attack."

According to the Trilateral Commission, the problem with democracy is that it's too democratic and the public asks too many questions. One cannot have "democracy" in any meaningful sense so long as citizens challenge prevailing authority. Political administrations must be free to define their own reality and truth—it's the natural order of things. Project Truth set out to define a US propaganda strategy for the American public that would be beyond repudiation (or at least protected by plausible deniability). All of this propaganda was to be advertised as "public diplomacy"<sup>17</sup> and administered by government agencies bearing that name. The overarching idea was that the public's conception of the truth needed to be shaped by the political realities of the Reagan administration.

While Project Truth took flight domestically, the Reagan administration launched a broader effort called "Project Democracy" that was to use the same

propaganda tools internationally.<sup>16</sup> These and related projects were all integrated under NSDD-77 to shape public and world opinion in service to the administration's policies. The activities of government groups and agencies such as the Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean (with which Oliver North was associated) would, along with soft-power non-profits like the National Endowment for Democracy and Freedom, be coordinated by the United States Information Agency and, indirectly, through the Central Intelligence Agency.

In the words of Robert Parry, perhaps the leading journalist covering these activities, NSDD-77 provided a mechanism that "allowed ostensibly independent groups to advocate administrative policies without the public realizing that the group's funding had been arranged by the White House. The group's pronouncements, therefore, were viewed as more objective than those coming from the government."<sup>16</sup> An important collateral benefit was that the indirect approach would avoid congressional oversight, although not as effectively as had been planned, as the Iran-Contra scandal would later confirm.<sup>18</sup>

In light of the observations of Seldes and Stone, Project Truth, NSDD-77, and sundry-related misinformation campaigns should not be surprising. However, as near as I can determine, they were the first time that such campaigns were made official government policy and the responsibility of specific government agencies and departments. This was new and the reason I claim that it seems to have ushered in the era of fake news and alternative facts. As a matter of fact, the 2016 *Oxford English Dictionary* word of the year, "posttruth," was historically attached to the Reagan-era Iran-Contra scandal by Steve Tesich in *The Nation* magazine in a 1992 essay.<sup>19</sup> This is an official recognition of the fact that

declassified records reveal "official deception in the name of protecting a presidency." While all governments have lied to the public, the Reagan administration can be said to be the first posttruth presidency. I predict that the Trump era will ultimately be credited as the first to see posttruth politics digitally weaponized. **■**

## REFERENCES

1. H. Berghel, "Disinformatics: The discipline behind grand deceptions," *IEEE Computer*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 89–93, Jan. 2018.
2. H. Berghel, "Trolling pathologies," *IEEE Computer*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 66–69, Mar. 2018.
3. H. Berghel, "Weaponizing Twitter litter: Abuse-forming networks and social media," *IEEE Computer*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 70–73, Apr. 2018.
4. G. Seldes, *Freedom of the Press*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935.
5. J. Rutenberg and M. Haberman. (2018, Aug. 30). National Enquirer had decades of Trump dirt. He wanted to buy it all. *NY Times*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/30/nyregion/trump-cohen-national-enquirer-american-media-recording.html>
6. G. Sherman, Gabriel. (2018, Aug. 23). "Holy shit, I thought Pecker would be the last one to turn": Trump's National Enquirer allies are the latest to defect. *Vanity Fair Hive*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/08/donald-trump-national-enquirer-allies-defect-david-pecker-michael-cohen>
7. I. F. Stone, *Best of I.F. Stone*, 1st ed. New York: PublicAffairs, 2006.
8. G. Seldes. (1996). Tell the truth and run: George Seldes and the American press. *YouTube*. [Online]. Available: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9qZ5JE\\_yMw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9qZ5JE_yMw)
9. P. Fred. (2017). All governments lie. First Run Features. [Online]. Available: <https://allgovernmentslie.com/film>
10. I. F. Stone, *In a Time of Torment: 1961–1967 (Nonconformist History of Our Times)*. Boston: Little Brown, 1989.
11. G. Seldes. (1940–1950). In fact: An antidote for falsehood in the daily press, *In Fact Newsletter*. [Online]. Available: [https://archive.org/details/infactnewsletter](https://archive.org/details/infactnewsletter/details/infactnewsletter)
12. E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 2011.
13. USICA. (1982, Jul. 20). Report on Project Truth, Central Intelligence Agency (sanitized copy for release 2011/12/29). *Internet Archive*. [Online]. Available: <http://archive.org/details/ProjectTRUTH>
14. E. Bernays, *Propaganda*. New York: Ig Publishing, 2004.
15. M. Corzier, S. Huntington, and J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 1975. Available: [http://www.trilateral.org/download/doc/crisis\\_of\\_democracy.pdf](http://www.trilateral.org/download/doc/crisis_of_democracy.pdf)
16. R. Parry. (1999). *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, The Press & Project Truth*, The Media Consortium. [Online]. Available: [www.themediaconsortium.org](http://www.themediaconsortium.org)
17. R. Reagan. (1983, Jan. 14). Management of public diplomacy relative to national security, NSC-NSDD-77. *Federation of American Scientists*. [Online]. Available: <http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-077.htm>
18. B. Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981–1987*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
19. M. Byrne. (2016, Nov. 25). The Iran-Contra Affair 30 years later: A milestone in post-truth politics. *National Security Archive*. [Online]. Available: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/iran/2016-11-25/iran-contra-affair-30-years-later-milestone-post-truth-politics>