

Whose truth is it anyway?

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A fascinating aspect of Western political discourse in recent months has been the contortions and mental gymnastics performed by our governments to explain why the public keep voting for the wrong people. Americans voted for Trump and Brits voted for Brexit? What on earth is wrong with them?

This week we've been treated to a full spread by The Guardian detailing how big data analytics were used to brainwash the masses. This though is a conceit. There is no genuine attempt to establish whether such techniques actually work, rather it is a concerted effort by corporate media to question the legitimacy of democratic outcomes – and overturn them if they can get away with it.

If it isn't "sophisticated targeting techniques" then it's Twitter bots financed by the Russian mob. The various theories now flowing from the legacy media now look as absurd as any conspiracy theory once found written in block capitals and green text in the early days of internet.

The one truly unapproachable concept for our ruling class is that they might not be the virtuous people they imagine themselves to be and that the public rejection of them is a consequences of their failures over decades. They see themselves as entitled to power and believe it is for the greater good if the choices of the public are moderated by their betters.

We are routinely told that the public did not understand what they were voting for, that they were brainwashed by computer algorithms and that somehow we are too deficient intellectually to be able to choose our own destiny. The

rejection of a supreme government for Europe is supposedly more to do with ignorant and racist northerners and their dislike of foreigners than the fact that the EU is a remote technocratic bureaucracy that doesn't respond to democratic inputs.

For those who lost the vote, this narrative is powerful. It's useful for three reasons. Firstly it absolves them of any obligation to examine their own failings and secondly it allows them to believe that they are the victims despite them being the incumbent establishment with a near total control over the institutions.

The third reason is the most useful of all. All over the world the legacy media and governments alike are finding they are losing their monopoly over political discourse. They are used to controlling the flow of information and being able to transmit their own narratives without any serious challenge.

The internet, however has upset the balance whereby people can organise, communicate and disseminate alternative ideas – ideas which have toppled the Western post-war political order. It is, consequently, an existential threat to them, thus they need a pretext to regulate and censor it. What you and I would call “free speech” they call “fake news”. Fake news is just a euphemism for messages they do not control.

This is not to say that there are not malevolent forces out there producing fraudulent content and disinformation and it is worth the intellectual inquiry just to understand the nature of it, but when it comes to “fake news” the leading manufacturers of it are the legacy corporate media themselves. They are in the business of manufacturing controversy and have long dropped any pretence of impartiality.

What makes that a bigger threat to democracy is one element. Prestige. Our traditional media is comprised of trusted brands, some of which have existed for more than a hundred years. The

BBC also enjoys the authority and gravitas of being an arm of the British state. Though its reputation is tarnished on the domestic front it still carries a great deal of inherited prestige abroad.

In the age of internet, reaching a mass audience is far easier than ever it was if you can afford it. But that does not necessarily mean your message will be believed. This is why I am not especially worried about big data analytics being used as the basis of targeted campaigning. There is scant proof that it works. What worried me is the traditional means of propaganda; the art of repeating and reinforcing that which your audience wants to hear under the banner of a trusted media brand.

This is especially prevalent in the UK where we have maybe half a dozen editors giving houseroom to a handful of select political wonks, MPs, and authorised opinion gatekeepers to push a number of bogus concepts into the debate where their institutional prestige gives them credibility they would otherwise not have. They engineer particular talking points laden with plausible sounding jargon and consequently their notions spread through Twitter like a mutating virus.

The scary part about it is that it does not actually require a mass audience. It need only infect the Westminster groupthink and the consumers of its output. Since the Westminster bubble is its own sealed off ecosystem and its denizens selected because of their conformity, misapprehensions and lies take on a life of their own, accumulating their own power – and the more it is repeated the more prestige it acquires. That is a magnitude more powerful than any article of what is called “fake news” promoted through social media platforms to a mass audience.

In this the media has weaponised suspicion of big data campaigning and the internet, to promote the idea that the legacy media is more worthy of trust. Being that few understand how it works and who is behind it is easy to plant the idea that its intent is malevolent. What should concern us

more is how corporate interests are effortlessly able to buy their way into traditional media and control the narrative in the halls of power.

What we see before us is a battle for hearts and minds in which the establishment is seeking to fend off the disruptive influence of free speech and the free flow of ideas which challenge their monopoly. They're afraid. If ideas can flow freely then there is a danger that they will keep voting for the wrong people. The success of their efforts hinge on convincing voters that votes the establishment disapproves of fall short of being legitimate.

In the end Donald Trump did not win the presidency because of Twitter bots or targeted advertising. He actually lost the popular vote and if the US presidential elections worked on the same lines as referendums then he would have lost. Trump is ultimately the inevitable consequence of a remote self-interested Washington establishment locked into its own consensus where elections don't seem to change anything.

Brexit is exactly the same. We have seen prime ministers come and go but with policies locked in by EU directives there is no chance of meaningful reform or radicalism in government. The entire framework of European and global rules is designed to restrain democracy, to preserve a particular order – none of which is accountable to the people. We see politicians signing trade deals in the greater good with zero regard for the collateral damage. Jobs wiped out at the stroke of a pen in the name of "free trade".

This is the dilemma of globalisation. All the studies show that free and fair trade increases overall wealth but at the same time increases inequality. It's always the bottom two deciles who experience the pain – be they miners, steel workers or shipbuilders. The working classes always pay the price of economic revolutions. Now they are asserting themselves and the establishment is not at all happy about that.

This is what now bitterly divides the West. Our expert class tell us that their way is best because their spreadsheets say so. The public look around them at the street level and how atomised we have become, lacking any sense of control and increasingly discouraged from democratic participation.

Borders become fluid, communities diluted and cohesion evaporates. The West has never been more culturally fragmented.

As to who is right, nobody can say for sure. In any political dilemma there are always winners and losers. It's just that the losers from this iteration of history are nearly always the same. Since the economists have a habit of getting things badly wrong and failing to predict the fallout of their decisions, the expert class has no god given right to be taken seriously. There is really only one way to settle it. Democracy. This time around, those who are used to winning find themselves on the losing side – and they will use every dirty trick in the book to ensure it never happens again.