

Facts, Fantasies, and New Online Sociopolitical Interpassivity

Nathan Greenslit

In the U.S. media we often see left-wing frustration with how facts often fail to trump right-wing punditry. This is notably parodied on *The Daily Show*, whose correspondents might stare dumbfoundedly wide-eyed at their (often politically conservative) interviewees who flatly deny statistics or other quantitative data that contradict their worldview. *The Daily Show* uses such segments to cathartically sublimate political disagreement into laughable disbelief at an opponent's intellectual obstinance. The humor depends on the conceit of a world divided into unambiguous facts and "rationality" on the one side and manipulative delusions and "irrationality" on the other. This bifurcation goes beyond fodder for comedy. There is now a many-decades-long history of psychological and neuroscientific investigations of how individuals of different political leanings perceive the world along the putative rational / irrational dividing line, from the McCarthy-era notion of the "totalitarian personality" to the more contemporary notion of the "right-wing brain." That such research itself seems to be born of political agendas has not gone unnoticed, as not-too-subtly indicated by the subtitle of a 2008 *Slate* article: "Why Is Every Neuropundit Such a Raging Liberal?"

Similarly, it is not hard to find websites devoted to displaying how "idiots" have mistaken parody for real-world news. One site reproduced the following exchange that took place on Facebook: "Instagram now belongs to Facebook that belongs to the CIA. Every photo you take on Instagram from now on belongs to the CIA and can be used for whatever they seek fit." The post included a video segment from *theonion.com* to back up the claim. One response snarked, "dude thats from the onion you retard ... its a comedy website," following up with links to Wikipedia's entry on *The Onion*. The author of the original post interrogated back: "What makes it fake? Their stories aren't on the mainstream? Cause its on the internet? Mainstream media will never cover stories like that. There [are] soooo many stories that the mainstream doesn't and won't ever cover." The increasingly exasperated interlocutor responded: "IT'S A FUCKING COMEDY WEBSITE. it's fake because those are actors they make up all the stories. Read the Wikipedia page I sent you." The original poster concluded, "I've always learned not to trust wiki for credible info lol."

This exchange is nearly structured like a Marx Brothers joke, with vaudevillian timing in which apparent stupidity that takes the form of a literal misinterpretation ends up turning the tables on a supposedly more rational grip on reality; its clever triumph exposes the core circuit of meaning in a social interaction—in this case, agreement that the Internet should not be trusted as a source of authority about the Internet. On the one hand, *The Onion's* news segment, while fake, does not stray from the reality that social network sites like Facebook do in fact gather a plethora of data concerning online behaviors (so-called "Big Data") which could make the government's job of surveilling us that much easier. (As the adage goes, just because you are paranoid doesn't mean that you are wrong.) On the other hand, *The Onion's* fakeness in this case became a pretense to deride and dismiss somebody who worried what its news segment might have revealed about the real world.

Reaction to *The Onion* story was not a straightforward case of gullible people buying into obvious falsehoods, so much as people identifying real-world justification for their own beliefs and fears; the story was credible because it was validating. Reaction to *The Onion* piece also shows how effective parody cuts both ways, that is, as funny to those in on the joke, but for whom the humor is possible only insofar as they've identified some core truth to it ("I

can totally imagine the CIA checking our Instagram photos!”), and as truthful to those who already believe in its premise, but who are thus unlikely to find it humorous (“I knew the CIA was checking our Instagram photos!”). For both the believer and nonbeliever, the parody reaffirms the truth of their convictions.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued that this is precisely how ideology functions. Ideology is different from “false consciousness” in the strict Marxian sense of an underclass systematically duped into accepting as natural its disadvantaged social position. Rather, ideology is how we convince ourselves about reality. As Žižek puts it, ideology “... is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself.” (1989:33) In this framework, how we affirm our beliefs does not so much blind us from reality or allow us an escape from it, so much as articulate what we already feel to be true of the world. Throughout his literary career Mark Twain seemed to have found himself up against that very tension, as he had to quit more than one newspaper position because his satire was repeatedly taken as actual news. As he diagnosed the situation, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”

But what makes the lie in this sense so sticky? The circulation of parodic news stories as authentic is not new, and its history certainly predates the Internet as part of the social work of folklore (especially the transmission of mythologies concerning a social group’s origins), including urban legend (apocryphal stories that are often retold as having ‘actually’ happened to oneself or one’s acquaintances). Interrogating the ‘realness’ of such stories has since been taken up by the modern-day entertainment industry, with TV shows like *MythBusters* and its recent predecessors like *Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction* and *Mostly True Stories: Urban Legends Revealed*, all of which attempt to debunk urban legends through reenactments or scientific experiments. Culturally there is voyeuristic pleasure of watching investigators adjudicate “fact” from “fiction,” which exists alongside of certain claims about the world that may seem patently dubious, but which persist nonetheless. This suggests that cultural history of parodic news intersects with the psychology of ideology, insofar as there is an important social function of punting one’s views to an outside, putatively authoritative or objective source.

Fantasy Meets Cyber-tribalism

Our psychology is not independent of our social influences, and our ideologies are buttressed by the people we choose to surround ourselves with. We are not alone in our bubbles. A 2012 study from Pew Internet found that nearly 20% of social network site users had blocked, unfriended, or ‘hid’ someone as a result of political disagreement. The consequence, the study argued, is that social network users craft their friends like an “echo chamber” – reinforcing relationships with people who share their beliefs and shunning those who don’t.

Insofar as their propagation of news (real or fake) can generate a personalized world of facts (or factoids), social networks offer us an important case study of the sociology of ideology. Indeed, the online echo chamber phenomenon evokes the “psychological group” that Freud described in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), which he claimed was characterized by “mental homogeneity” given the reciprocal influence that its members exert on each other, and the emotional charge that intensifies through mutual interaction, including increased disciplining of dissent. In a virtual environment where social networks are constantly pruned to reflect shared ideology, it is unsurprising to see such reciprocal influence.

Freud’s essay draws from the observations of French sociologist Gustave Le Bon, who posited “the psychological group” as an entity that transmuted individuals into a collective mind that basically turns each into a different person than were he or she alone. Le Bon uses language like “contagion” and “suggestibility” and “hypnotized” to characterize how ideas and affects spread among the group, to emphasize what little cognitive resistance is offered up by the individuals who comprise it.

Freud interprets the infectious group mindset as opportunism for the individual’s unconscious desires. The group generates conditions in which the taboo or aggressive desires of an individual can be more freely expressed -- that is to say, less repressed. An important consequence of the untethered fantasy life enabled by group psychology is decreased capacity for putatively rational thought:

[G]roups have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them. They constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real; they are almost as strongly influenced by what is untrue as by what is true. They have an evident tendency not to distinguish between the two.

For Freud, groups are therefore quintessentially psychoneurotic insofar as they substitute fantasies for realities.

It could be argued that online groups are all the more so psychoneurotic, as they not only suffer these general characteristics of group psychology, but because they are comprised of individuals whose participation in the group is based on the computer interface — a fantastical screen to begin with. Online presentation of self involves social role playing that goes beyond our in-person, putative “real life” presentation of self. We enact fantasies online, whether this means adopting a new persona or avatar, or hurling inflammatory comments under the shield of anonymity, or even ‘merely’ being voyeurs into the lives of others. In all cases, we get to act on / act out fantasy. In a psychoanalytic framework, it would seem that our unconscious urges are all the more so given expression online than in person, since the social strictures of the virtual world offer us a less intimidating reality principle to negotiate. It is easier to insult somebody online than to their flesh-and-blood face. It is this new fantastical psychological group that must be contested with in terms of how facts are generated and circulated and sustained.

Here’s one example: On September 24, 2013, the website for Popular Science announced that it would no longer allow readers to post comments to their articles. They cited “recent research” that hyperbolic comments can bias how a reader interprets the ‘facts’ of a story, and argued their rationale in terms of its “logical end,” namely that “... commenters shape public opinion; public opinion shapes public policy; public policy shapes how and whether and what research gets funded—you start to see why we feel compelled to hit the ‘off’ switch.” Popular Science’s decision to remove their comments section is part of a long history concerning the social construction of scientific knowledge, especially the sociopolitically-charged tensions between expertise and democracy. The magazine’s decision betrays its own ideology about the science and civic participation, namely that there are cold, hard facts about the world (in this case, scientific) that must be curated by an expert class (who is presumably less susceptible to the false consciousness of an intellectual underclass). Unlike the fake Onion story that some readers took seriously, this is an example of a real science news story that some readers refused to take seriously. But in both cases we see an important perversion of the tantalizing quip that “everybody is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts.” Ironically, the dupes of the fake Onion story may be better attuned to the reality of government surveillance that the story was joking about. And the Popular Science editors justify their decision to eliminate comments by arguing that, even if it happens circuitously through public policy and political agendas, opinion can indeed ultimately shape how fact is generated. So, they conclude, to protect fact, you may just have to suppress public opinion about it.

There is yet a third case, whose consequences are not any less unsettling for the hope of a democratic social construction of fact. In early November 2013, mainstream media and online social networks alike were trending coverage of a scary and infuriating crime called “the knockout game,” in which youths in urban settings randomly assault unsuspecting individuals, supposedly with the goal of rendering them unconscious with a single sucker-punch. My own Facebook feed was peppered with morally outraged and vengeful comments about this behavior. On the one hand these assaults are real, opprobrious crimes. On the other hand it is not clear that they are part of any sort of newly depraved trend. Crime statistics would suggest both that this particular form of assault is not new, is quite rare compared to other violent crimes, and that it is not becoming more frequent. But the story has spread online with an indignant furor that does not jive with these facts. But as we’ve seen, this is ideology in the flesh, insofar as a number of people have already fantasized-interpreted the knockout attacks as unambiguous evidence of a “spreading” crime wave of blacks against whites. The dangers here are of course sociopolitical as much as psychological; the racial overtones of online reaction to “knockout game” are part of a long history in the U.S. of moral panic around urban black youths.

Cyber-tribalism Meets Interpassivity

More insidiously, once online we may very well be subjected to algorithms that idiosyncratically shape what we see online based on our prior searching, linking, and ‘liking’ behaviors. As Eli Pariser, former director of MoveOn has described it, these algorithms are based on what we want to know, not necessarily what we need to know. He recalls an experiment between two friends who did separate Google searches for “Egypt” on their respective computers. One got a front page of links to news stories about the protests there, while the other got a bunch of travel links and pictures of pyramids. Pariser preempted the knee-jerk defense of the corporate advertiser—“We are just giving people what they want”—by asking, “Well, what do you mean by ‘what we want?’” He noted that we are all subject to multiple and often conflicting ‘wants,’ questioning the wisdom of algorithms that may very well

reinforce transient or superficial desires at the expense of providing content that is critical to informed democratic participation. Pariser worries that, rather than there being a more democratic collectivization of information (in which searches are perhaps ranked by the overall popularity of websites), there is increased fragmentation in how we view the world via the Internet. Our democratic ties to each other are arguably weakened, in part because our perception of the world gets automatically skewed towards our own individualized fantasies.

It is useful to think of social networks and search engines as desiring machines, insofar as they are externalizations of our fantasies perhaps in the manner that Žižek (1994) describes the “interpassive” externalization of belief (hired funeral weepers, prayer wheels, canned laugh tracks). However, letting a sitcom’s laugh track do the psychological work of enjoyment for us is different than the personal ‘likeability’ of information deciding on your behalf the future information you will encounter. Online personalization thus turns out to a more insidious form of interpassivity, especially as it happens under the noses of those of us under the ideological conceit of social media as the great grassroots populist opposition to centralized forms of governance. Online algorithms surreptitiously help construct our social echo chambers as they reinforce our personal fantasies about the world. This is a socialized form of ideology perhaps already articulated by the playfully cynical 17th-century writer François La Rochefoucauld: “We should not be upset that others hide the truth from us, when we hide it so often from ourselves.”

Chomsky or Žižek?

Fact versus fantasy; truth versus propaganda; rationality versus emotions—these are some of the bifurcations we indulge when we fight with each other. We don’t want to be stuck between the Popular Science model (no dialogue, arguably undemocratic) and the desiring-machine model (echo chambers and the winnowing of civically critical information). But we seem to find ourselves somewhere between the critiques of Noam Chomsky, who tirelessly articulates how mainstream media—even if while on paper is operating “objectively”—systematically neglects to provide citizenry with facts pertaining to the illegal and egregious activities of its government; and the critiques of Žižek, who argues that the psychological life of ideology works precisely to thwart, ignore, twist, or otherwise obfuscate what is presented as supposedly objective about the world. It is in this sense that psychoanalytic philosophy offers a more sobering pronouncement of life online: It is hard to trump our deep convictions about the world; the inner life of desire and fantasy is often more resilient than external ‘facts.’

The resilience of conviction resonates with historian of science Thomas Kuhn’s 1960 seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which explored how the progress of scientific knowledge is not some idyllic, enlightened accumulation of facts that speak for themselves. Rather, changes in scientific paradigms (e.g. buying into the idea that the earth travels around the sun and not the other way around) are characterized by infighting and stubborn clinginess to older theories—even in the face of ‘the facts.’ Sometimes it is simply a matter of the old guard literally dying off for new ideas to take hold. Similarly, today, if achieving political accord were a simple matter of “showing the truth,” then presumably it would be effortless to have widespread consensus without resorting to philosopher kings. But clearly that’s not the case. Moreover, the ‘truth’ of the core facts that we carry around with us as indisputable (like that the earth travels around the sun and not the other way around) is more derived from group consensus than from individual scientific deduction. How many of us—off the top of our heads—could actually prove that the earth travels around the sun? Not many. It would seem that, despite ourselves, we are all inhabited by what *The Daily Show* alum Stephen Colbert coined “truthiness”—not infallible proof that something is correct, but rather the (socially-given) conviction that something is correct.

This is not to say that we should snub the basic premise of Chomsky’s propaganda model, namely that if only people would see the facts, then we would have a saner society. After all, consider the now infamous 1969 internal tobacco industry memo regarding the link between smoking and lung cancer: “Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.” This is more than simply lying about a product. It is about generating the very process of doubting. Such duplicitous strategies to reengineer facts as factious should be exposed by our best investigative journalism and be widely disseminated without algorithmic filtering online—even if at the same time we heed a psychoanalytically-informed ideology model, because apparently seeing the facts is not enough. So we need to challenge the political economy of mainstream media à la Chomsky but we cannot be so naive as to think that facts will save us from ideology. In the meantime, we must come to terms with how ideology gets debunked in public

venues like *The Daily Show*, whose tactics against stubborn convictions would seem to follow Groucho Marx's insult: "He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot."

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