

GLOBAL



Fake news about the past is a crime against history

[Antoon De Baets](#) 04 May 2019

Historians observing the current debate on fake news are tempted to make comments from a long-term perspective. First, fake news, as a type of lie that constitutes disinformation, has an [ancient pedigree](#).

Indeed, among the plethora of primary sources used by historians to study the past, some are forged, many distorted and all are biased. To filter truth from such sources, historians have developed a severe method of source criticism over the ages, first in East Asia and Europe.

Although an old phenomenon, fake news in its recent guises also has some strikingly new features because it spreads on the internet [nowadays](#), mainly via social media platforms.

These new features are: everyone can publish and disseminate content; this can be done with evidence that is easy to [distort](#), on an unprecedented scale and at unprecedented speed; and people have the capacity to micro-target audiences.

Although many observers are impressed by the efficiency of online fake news, opinions remain divided about its real impact.

Second, in order to counter fake news, the mainstream media has rediscovered one solid tool from the bag of source criticism: fact-checking. This tool is almost as old as science, but only recently did it become clear that one of its well-known psychological effects may have been underestimated for centuries: its risk of backfiring.

It seems that many people become more, not less, [entrenched](#) in their beliefs when these are [challenged](#) by solid evidence, a phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance.

In addition, in dismantling fake news items, fact-checking services are condemned to repeat the main claims of these items, thus running the risk of fuelling their circulation.

Third, there is a remarkable continuity among the major distributors of fake news: these have been and still are states.

Government propaganda

Many governments use disinformation and propaganda to further their policy goals at home and abroad. The leading [Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and 'Fake News,' Disinformation and Propaganda](#), which offers an international human rights perspective on fake news, stipulates that “state actors should not make, sponsor, encourage or further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda)”.

In 2017 [Freedom House](#) reported that the governments of 30 countries deployed some form of manipulation to distort online information (up from 23 in 2016). Some of this state propaganda is historical propaganda, the systematic manipulation of historical facts or opinions by, or with the connivance of, the government or other powers. Historian [Frederic Paxson](#) called this “historical engineering”.

Alongside states, private parties are increasingly important as providers of fake news on social media platforms. It is no exaggeration to say that the cumulative effects of fake news – especially if it takes the form of defamation, privacy invasion, war propaganda and hate speech – can seriously [undermine democratic societies](#). As such, it is a real danger.

Fake news from or directed at historians

When we talk about fake news and history, we should clearly distinguish two almost contradictory types: fake news emanating from historians and fake news directed at historians.

The first type is particularly pernicious but the product of a fringe, but growing, minority: I mean the denial of genocide and related atrocity crimes when the facts of the events underlying these crimes have been amply corroborated.

Being fake news, genocide denial is the complete antithesis of science: it is a form of pseudoscience and an intellectual and scientific fraud. Those defending genocide denial should not be called historians; their views are not historical opinions.

The second, completely different, type is the false accusation against *bona fide* historians and others writing and speaking about the past. Typically, the work of historians living in dictatorships has routinely been dismissed as “[fake history](#)”.

Usually accompanying state propaganda and state censorship, if not a part of them, such spurious accusations aim at silencing historians. In the USSR, for example, Stalin falsely denounced AG Slutsky in the 1930s as a “falsifier of the history of our Party”.

One step further is the false self-accusation. Forced confessions during which historians had to falsely incriminate themselves of existent or non-existent crimes were the rule during the Great Terror in the USSR and elsewhere.

Sometimes the false accusation consisted of the allegation that the accused historian produced fake news. In Czechoslovakia, the *Black Book* that historians compiled to document the Warsaw

Pact invasion in 1968 was condemned by the Soviet authorities as a “gross falsification of the facts, having nothing in common with historical scholarship”.

Namibian President Sam Nujoma warned the nation of Siegfried Groth’s “false history” in 1996 after the latter had denounced SWAPO’s crimes during the liberation struggle in his book.

In [cases such as these](#), the equation between critical history and fake news was used to stifle dissent. The critical history was not false, but the accusation that it was false was false.

We see a dangerous paradox at work here: a false charge of fake news is fake news itself. It is falsely doubting the honesty of others in order to harm them. Disinformation, including fake news, is indeed an extreme threat.

In my book [Crimes against History](#), I have argued that past-related fake news is nothing less than a crime against history. As insidious as censorship, it is its double.

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