

Q & A on Fake News and The Yes Men Legacy

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Interview with Geert Lovink by Hadas Emma Kedar, including a guest appearance by Jacques Servin (The Yes Men).

Hadas Emma Kedar is masters student of Media Arts Cultures in Krems/Austria, working with Ana Peraica on her thesis on the legacy of The Yes Men in relation to today's activist media arts.

Hadas Emma Kedar: Why has fake news been such an issue over the past two years? And how has its production and dissemination become so easy, in terms of internet technologies?

Geert Lovink: This topic is not global in nature and emerged in specific countries where the social media uptake has been intense yet the overall skepticism towards official news channels and authorities was already articulated. Everywhere data manipulation and media censorship are on the rise. In part, this is because of the democratization of digital tools and the distribution of news outside of easy-to-control channels such as radio, TV and the printed press. Everyone with a phone can create fake news, and even more people can 'share' it.

Having said that, this is a deeply boring era, characterized by anxiety, backlash, conformity and withdraw. The support in society for control has never been bigger. This explains why fake news, in most cases, is regressive, not revolutionary, subversive or artistic. If only it was funny.

From an activist-artistic perspective there is no reason to exclude fake news from our arsenal of tactical means at our disposal. Many utilize virtual realities in order to tell stories about the state of affairs. I never advocated the One Truth. It's our task to advocate multi-perspective ways to describe reality. This doesn't mean that I advocate the willing manipulation in order to achieve your goal.

There are propaganda wars going on. For instance, I follow the Stop Fake twitter account of a Ukrainian organization in Kyiv that reports about Russian info war against their country (<https://www.stopfake.org/en/news/>). They present clear cases of made-up stories, which are often hilarious, comparable to the level of the British and German boulevard press. The over-the-top

compact stories, almost on the level of memes are often hilarious. It's clickbait, which doesn't necessarily mean that people believe it. Regard it as ideological entertainment. These info bits are easy to forward and are designed to be liked and shared within seconds. It is subliminal information. The propaganda layer is easily to identify if care to actually read it and is not even suitable for a proper deconstruction. Much like a joke we can take it apart with psycho-analytic tools. However, 'fake news' is not really something for Slavoj Žižek. He would immediately shift the topic and start to talk about something else. That's the problem of fake news: it grabs our attention and blurs the issues and can be effective within split seconds. The ideological construct is in place. prejudice confirmed. That will do.

HEK: Who is responsible for the dissemination of fake news? The producers, individual users/readers, corporations/social networks (Google, Twitter, Facebook), mainstream media, politicians, all of them or none of the above?

GL: That's an interesting TV quiz question. Only one is the right answer, I presume? The way your question is framed assumes that we agree what fake news is. What I find interesting is growth of social media marketing firms, the professionalization of the so-called 'influencers', the huge size of the public relations and advertisement sectors that are now active and design 'campaigns' for clients. They are missing on your list. Please have a look at this classic of the Share Foundation working out of Novi Sad: The Human Fabric of Facebook Pyramid (<https://labs.rs/en/the-human-fabric-of-the-facebook-pyramid/>). If you dive into 'fake news' and narrow down, you find an odd mixture of DIY of amateur political players and professionally produced material. However, this is not the case if you take the marketing angle. There we see an exponential growth of apps and platforms (the 'martech space'), related to the hyper growth of ad budgets in this field (<https://martechtoday.com/infographic-marketing-technology-landscape-113956>). This question is thus how these two 'spheres' relate.

HEK: Can we analyse Donald Trump's constant tactic of publicly discrediting mainstream media while supporting social media—e.g. the intense use of Twitter as his main communication tool—as socially and technologically

progressive? Is this a matter of “old” vs. “new” media, or is it merely the current form of American propaganda?

GL: Remember the campaign in January 2017 to put pressure on Twitter/Jack Dorsey (@jack) to close all Trump’s Twitter accounts, including @realDonaldTrump and @POTUS, the one that former President Obama used? This was going nowhere, as the company was probably afraid of legal actions, an ‘anti-American’ image and censorship accusations. As we all know, Twitter closed off accounts all the time, from unknown characters to big shots, so the proposal was all that unusual. Many inside the Republican Party would have loved to see this happen, as would the Clinton/Obama liberals that have traditional ideas of the American president as a formal position. Neither the Trump family nor his staff have been able to confiscate his smart phone and/or password. Read this, a January 2018 version of the same question if Jack Dorsey is complicit:

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/is-jack-complicit/article22369206.ece>
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Former Kremlin watcher Tom Nichols once asked in a tweet if anyone is considering the fact that this is basically a raw feed of POTUS thoughts to foreign analysts. This is how the world reads the Trump tweets. I fear it is less focused on global level and more much immediate, introvert and banal. Trump is a media player himself and loves the fact that this channel cannot be taken away from him, in particular not by his staff. What’s surprising is the fact that there is no visible difference between candidate and President Trump. Nichols: “It shows how the President reacts under stress. It’s something you never want the enemy to know. And yet it’s all out there, every day.” “President Trump understands Twitter is a way to connect,” the Spectator writes. “This is something that even some long-time users of Twitter don’t grasp: the medium is meant for connection.”

HEK: What is the difference between the “fake news” radio broadcast *War of the Worlds* by Orson Welles (1938), and seventy years later, the fake newspaper *New York Times* “special edition” by The Yes Men (2008)—from a social and technological point of view?

GL: *War of the Worlds* is part of the Western canon, and the NYT edition of the Yes Men is not. Welles produced his radio play inside official institutions, while the Yes Men acted outside. But from a technological point of view there is almost no difference: both are artists utilizing the media at their disposal. Let's confuse the timeline in this case. What if Claire Bishop's critique of engaged political art (*Artificial Hells* from 2012) was written in the late 1930s? Can we de-historicize art works and criticize them now for their lack of impact, totalitarian aesthetics and their incorrect political framework, for instance, the explicit affiliation with Stalinist Communist parties at the time? Should we praise or criticize 'tactical media'? Are artists and activists today failing to understand the present rise of authoritarian national-liberalism?

HEK: Let's compare the NewsTweek project of Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev (2011) with the news website CBS News (www.cbsnews.com). What's the difference between the use of technology to create and disseminate fake news by mainstream web users and faking news as a tactical media artistic practice?

GL: There is no fundamental difference. I do not make a distinction between good and bad intentions. This is purely subjective. Often artistic 'fake news' is something in-between, it doesn't look like real news nor like fake. It often lacks the evil dirtiness and offers an odd mix of clean aesthetics with amateur performances. Lately there is progress. With Marc Tuters I am plotting on the question if the Left can meme and how our meme theory looks like (<https://non.copyriot.com/author/geert-lovink-marc-tuters/>). If the populist right, anarcho-capitalists and ethno-nationalists all can meme, why can't we strike back at that strategic sub-conscious level of image-text? We should just find out where to hit them hard. What upsets them? What makes us laugh when the current status-quo is attacked? Let me give two examples that I love: all crypto fun such as *Keep Calm and Hodl* mugs from <https://twitter.com/cryptofun1> and CyberWanderlust (<https://twitter.com/CyberWanderlust>).

HEK: Social media are cheap tools for producing tactical media interventions. What ever happened to tactical media? Why haven't we seen more "Yes Men" tactics over the past decade?

GL: Producing fake news is only one of the many activist tactics we have at our disposal. Maybe this is not the right era to do *Spassguerilla*. The ‘social engineering’ hackers techniques still works. Non-violent hacking (think of Anonymous in 2012-13) provides us with valuable material that geek/art collectives and investigative journalists no longer can process because of the sheer quantity. This is an aspect of whistleblowing we have not yet discussed. How do you respond to the information overload? We can resolve this by using purpose-built search engines, data visualizations and the distribution of the material worldwide through networks of experts. Why we haven’t seen more Yes Men tactics lately? For that I invited Jacques Servin of The Yes Men to answer that question himself.

Jacques Servin: The short answer is, we haven’t seen them because actually, while social media may be cheap tools for producing whatever, the tools evolve, or their environment does, or whatever, and while we’ve evolved with them at times, at a certain point we also just have other things to do than keep up with the latest technology. The Yes Men started in a technological experiment, I guess, or in an attempt to use the suddenly existing (or apparent to us) technology for good ends. It was never intentional that way, more just playful and almost always accidental. Fake emails! Fake press releases! Fake websites! Whee! They were never really fake, not for long—the whole point was to reveal them and arouse laughs and insight. But we did depend on fakery for a moment, like a clown act does, not so that people believe it, but so that the act of mockery itself can then happen.

When commercially-oriented fakery deluged the internet—and that was already a number of years ago—and then extra-legal fakery, all kinds of algorithms arose to suss out fake things. And that made it harder for our truth-telling by email as well, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. <http://theyesmen.org/project/ge-returns-billions>). Social media was another avenue, and we tried some of that, and had some popular successes there too (<http://theyesmen.org/shellfail>, <http://theyesmen.org/project/coal-cares>). But since then, commerce-driven bots and so on have made that trickier too. And again, whether or not we’re right, we’ve decided we have better things to do than keep up with the latest technology. And if you check

out <http://theyesmen.org/projects> you'll see we've been keeping busy, just not so much with social media.

HEK: How will our information society look like in 20 years? Will categories such as true and false be constantly exchanged, and children grow up to believing everything they are told? Or will they not believe anything? Might nations intervene with legislation and censorship in response to the dissemination of fake news? And which of these scenarios is most dangerous?

GL: There's the quote of William Gibson: "The future has arrived—it's just not evenly distributed yet." We can't distinguish anymore between information warfare and cyberwarfare. The arsenal of available info weapons is impressive and are already employed on a large scale, from (anti-)drones to laser weapons to air-gap hacks of personal devices, ransomware, hacking electricity grids, hospitals, pacemakers, crypto-currency miners, transferring hundreds of millions of dollars. Micro-targeting elections through social media is part of this. So-called fake news production is beyond the well-meant categories of the *Gutmenschen* and their liberal ideas of truth and *Bildung*. Take the naïve worldview of Marc Zuckerberg: "We've been focused on making the world more open and connected and I always thought that that would be enough to solve a lot of problems by itself." He admitted Stephen Dubner that "the world is today more divided than I would have expected for the level of openness and connection that we have today. It is somehow incredible that he openly admits this. But this statement certainly is part of a PR game. Zuckerberg's close ties to the NSA and the CIA are well documented. His young 'liberal' face is one for public consumption.

Let's forget the difference between fake and real. Everything is simulated, hyper real, and has been for decades. Respect to Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio. Virtual warfare goes together with a ruthless real-world destruction at the level of local conflicts in which entire cities and regions are destroyed by 'civil war' partners that operate as proxies for the Great Powers that provide them with money, weapons and other resources. When the 'global' economy is in an up-cycle this is all containable and can be seen as a 'war theater' that does not really affect the large majority of the world population. This can flip or implode, at some point, when economic interests of the big players really

clash and conflict becomes inevitable. This is also the moment when the 'surplus population' can be mobilized, and ultimately sacrificed in brutal extermination wars. Information warfare is an important element in this. Propaganda these days works best if people cannot identify it as such and it positioned deep inside our networks, next to the baby pictures, as a techno-default, inserted into the lifestyle.

Nihilist insights come after the Event and present themselves as cynical wisdom. There are no nihilist wars (for sure they must in science fiction). People sacrifice themselves in wars do this in the name of God, the Party & the Nation and are required to believe in something. Kids that don't bother these days because they are bored by whatever leader will not show up when they forced to participate into an armed conflict. Their ability to see through this or that ideological agenda is key. The biggest danger for us does not come from agit-prop and fake news but from the current belief in identities. Identity politics is a dangerous tool that is in sync with social media, music choices and tribal dynamics. Many good people believe in identity of some sort. If we want to undermine future wars, we have to start with the deconstruction of identity-as-such.

