Volume 23 Issue 59
Originally issued as C7



Global Journal of human-social science: C
Sociology & Culture
Volume 23 Issue 7 Version 1.0 Year 2023
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Informulacra and Information: Fake News, Truth Substitution, and other Sovereign Acts

By Jack David Eller

Abstract- Justified criticism of fake news, as practice and as accusation, is premised on a pair of assumptions—that there is such a thing as "true news" or truth more generally and that truth is the business of news and of governments. Both of these assumptions are dubious. This essay, following the lead of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, considers fake news and other forms of disinformation and non-knowledge not as simulations or distortions of information but as substitutes for information, that is, as *informulacra*. Examining some of the principal purveyors of fake news and the accusers of mainstream media as traffickers in fake news, such as Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump as well as corporations, the essay explores how fake news, lies, disinformation, and propaganda are tools of political power and acts of sovereignty, literally deployed to replace information with informulacra and to impose the speaker's will on society and reality.

Keywords: *agnomancy, baudrillard, fake news, informulacra, post-truth, simulacra.*

GJHSS-C Classification: *LCC Code: P96.F25*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2023. Jack David Eller. This research/review article is distributed under the terms of the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). You must give appropriate credit to authors and reference this article if parts of the article are reproduced in any manner. Applicable licensing terms are at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

Informulacra and Information: Fake News, Truth Substitution, and other Sovereign Acts

Jack David Eller

Abstract- Justified criticism of fake news, as practice and as accusation, is premised on a pair of assumptions—that there is such a thing as "true news" or truth more generally and that truth is the business of news and of governments. Both of these assumptions are dubious. This essay, following the lead of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, considers fake news and other forms of disinformation and non-knowledge not as simulations or distortions of information but as substitutes for information, that is, as *informulacra*. Examining some of the principal purveyors of fake news and the accusers of mainstream media as traffickers in fake news, such as Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump as well as corporations, the essay explores how fake news, lies, disinformation, and propaganda are tools of political power and acts of sovereignty, literally deployed to replace information with informulacra and to impose the speaker's will on society and reality.

Keywords: agnomancy, baudrillard, fake news, informulacra, post-truth, simulacra.

I. Introduction

The rightful alarm at and condemnation of the pestilence of fake news typically stand on two assumptions—first, that fake news can be contrasted simply and meaningfully with legitimate, honest, or true news (and with truth as such) and second, that truth is the natural and legitimate business of news purveyors. Both of these assumptions are questionable: as the eminent political scientist Hannah Arendt (1967) expressed nearly sixty years ago, "truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truth among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade." Over two millennia earlier, Plato reserved for state authorities the freedom to lie (to both enemies and citizens), and Machiavelli later counseled the prince to veil facts with deceits and to be ready with excuses if caught in a deception. Surely political history corroborates that truth is hardly the first principle of power.

We might expect better from our news outlets than from our political leaders. Surely, we complain, journalists, the press, and subsequently radio, television, and online news are professional truth-tellers, whose job is to accurately inform the populace. History is full of examples otherwise, and in fact no one much expected unbiased objective reporting until fairly recently. But if we ask what information is for—that is, if we take seriously the etymology of "information" as *in/en + formare*, to put form/shape in—then we appreciate that there is much more to information that conveying facts. Indeed, if we peer deeper into the essence of "fact," we learn that it does not refer to that which is true but to that which is made or done (from *facere*, "to make/do," as in "manufacture"). Now we see that facts and information are made, not found, and that they have specific political and social origins and purposes—to shape or to give form to individuals, groups, and nations. We hope, certainly, that true facts and information are put to benign purposes, but this need not be, and often is not, the case.

Inspired by Baudrillard's analysis of simulation and simulacra, this essay suggests an approach to fake news as not so much information that misrepresents reality but as *informulacrum* that constructs reality. From this perspective we are compelled to ask who deploys fake news, to what end they deploy it, and with what effect they unleash it on society. What we will find is that fake news, whether it is reporting on a (genuine or artificial) crisis or generating a crisis of its own, is an act not of truth but of power, of *unrealpolitik* (not the opposite of *realpolitik* but a demented twist of it), and of sovereignty over a population and that population's sense of reality.

II. Baudrillard's Simulacra: Signs without Reality (But Not without Power)

The advent of "virtual reality" implies that humans previously solely "real reality." However, we understand that humans, due to their imaginative and symboling faculties (anthropologist Leslie White placed symboling or the capacity to bestow "meaning upon a thing or an act, or grasping and appreciating meanings thus bestowed" [1959: 231] at the heart of culture), have always dwelt in a virtual world partly of their own device. Many aspects of symbolic and cultural life are at least rooted in if not determined by reality. Hunter-gatherers track animals and integrate animal images in their art and rituals; they may, for instance, imitate or simulate animal (or plant) species in dance. Other aspects of life, though, are more independent of reality, purer acts of imagination and symboling, such as magic and myth.

Author: Global Center for Religious Research, Denver, Colorado, USA. e-mail: david.eller.anthropology@gmail.com

© 2023 Global Journals

These cultural phenomena cannot be said to represent or correspond to reality, although they perhaps still "refer" to it.

Human power to simulate (that is, to create something similar to) nature or humanity itself has grown exponentially over time, from dancing and painting to building robots and androids. But something different emerged by the late twentieth century: according to Baudrillard, we crossed the threshold from simulations to simulacra or "models of a real without origin or reality" or what he regarded as "hyperreal." No longer modeled on or coming after reality, simulacra *precede* and potentially if not actually displace reality. Without a precedent (both logically and chronologically) in reality, a simulacrum refers to nothing other than itself and hence achieves "a liquidation of all referentials"; in the world of simulacra, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (1994: 2).

The leap from simulation to simulacrum was not sudden. Baudrillard traced this history from simple reflections or copies of reality, to masks of reality, to masks of an absent reality, to images and signs with "no relation to any reality whatsoever," to the final stage of "its own pure simulacrum." For an illustration, we might consider an airplane, a real if human-made object (human-made and real are not mutually exclusive). At the first level of abstraction or alienation from the real is the replica or copy, for instance a toy airplane, a painting, drawing, or photograph of an airplane, or a reconstruction of a vintage airplane (e.g. a World War II bomber). The second level of abstraction is pretending or mimesis; this includes a children's game of pretending to be on an airplane or to be an airplane, as well as imitating an airplane in a ritual dance, as the Australian Aboriginal Yanyuwa people did in their post-WWII "Aeroplane Dance" complete with headdresses fashioned as bi-wings. The third level is the simulation, like a flight simulator in which a pilot has the experience of flying an airplane without leaving the ground. We have entered the world of simulacra when the pilot, crew, or passenger substitutes the simulator (or the toy, painting, game, or dance) for a real flight, when a person "flies" to somewhere they cannot actually travel (such as the past, another planet, or a fictional realm like Narnia or Middle Earth), or when she cannot tell the difference between a real flight and an imaginary one.

At that point, as Baudrillard emphasized, talk of "true" or "false" simulacra makes no sense. The practice of copying, imitation, or mimesis (each a simulation) "leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear; it is simply masked"; the pilot-in-training understands that he is not really flying an airplane, although the experience may be (and hopefully is) nearly indistinguishable. For that very reason simulation already "threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary.'" The simulacrum completes this break from truth and reality. A simulacrum does not replicate reality but replaces reality and is often if not ordinarily (mis)taken for real. A "false simulacrum" is hence not just an oxymoron but a nonsense term, since true and false do not apply. There is nothing to compare it to. All that we can cling to in a liquid modernity dissolved into simulacra is "nostalgia" with—and this is crucially important for our analysis here—its "a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality—a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity" (Baudrillard 1994: 6).

III. Fake News, Post-Truth, and Informulacra

I am not the first to notice the affinity between Baudrillard's vision and the phenomenon of fake news. Oraldi(2012) crowns him "a premature theorist of fake news" which "is not merely a matter of the truth or falsity of the representation"; rather, like other simulacra, fake news "concerns the reality principle itself: is the depicted event real? The question precedes whether the event is narrated correctly or misrepresented. It is the reality of the event itself that is increasingly difficult to discern."

Simulacra, hyperreality, and fake news are also part of the broader discourse of postmodernity, influentially diagnosed by Lyotard as a condition of "incredulity toward metanarratives" or the "grand narratives" that had until now made the world meaningful and comprehensible, such as the Enlightenment with its linear scientific progress, or communism with its equally linear historical progress, or capitalism with its end-of-history triumphalism (1984: xxiv). Two years before Baudrillard, Lyotard reckoned that late modernity already delivered "a shattering of belief" and a "discovery of the 'lack of reality' of reality, together with the invention of other realities" (77). He saw postmodernity diffusing this corrosive tendency such that all written and visual works "are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text of to the work.… The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate rules of what will have been done" (81).

Despite the shock of many readers, Lyotard's assessment was not novel. More than a century prior Marx had realized that all that was presumed solid melts into air, and almost exactly a century ago Yeats prophesied in his 1920 poem "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." And all of these thinkers were writing in an era before Photoshop, advanced CGI effects, holograms, video games and massive multiplayer online worlds, virtual reality, augmented

© 2023 Global Journals

reality, and ChatGPT, which have only exacerbated the dissolution of reality and its substitution with simulacra, hyperreality, and multiple truths. Reality would never be the same again.

It is highly consequential that Lyotard subtitled his treatise "A Report on Knowledge," understanding full well that this was a crisis of facticity or truth itself. It was not long after Lyotard and Baudrillard that observers began to perceive the encroachment of post-truth as part and parcel of postmodernity. In the fateful year of 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary nervously celebrated *post-truth* as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Others have filled out the definition of post-truth more robustly, like Prado who asserts that encounters of the post-truth kind "prioritize personal beliefs and feelings, spurn consistency, disregard objective facts, and disdain factual rebuttals and demands for substantiation"; post-truth speech "effectively disallows applicable criteria for distinguishing between the truth and falsity of assertions made" (2018: 7). Kalpokas opines that post-truth is "co-created fiction"—requiring active participation by producers and consumers/transmitters "in which the distinction between truth and falsehood has become irrelevant" (2019: 9), and Hyvönen offers the insight that post-truth is "a two-sided process brought about by mutually dependent structural factors contributing to the irrelevance of factual truths and a particularly political style labelled careless speech" (2018: 31)—careless both about its conformity to reality and about its deleterious effects.

Kirkpatrick, probably correctly, judges that post-truth "amounts to little more than the mainstream articulation of the postmodern condition, or what Frederic Jameson called 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'"; in our late-capitalist age, "the thoroughly postmodern 'marketplace of ideas' has seen truth reduced to a thing or object to be packaged and sold in order to meet individual preferences" (2017: 312)—or, we should add, modified or formulated according to those preferences. Harsin also stresses "truth markets" (in the plural), which like all markets and all other elements of society exhibit "fragmentation, segmentation, and targeted content" customized for equally fragmented and segmented audiences (2015: 4). The relationship of post-truth and truth markets to fake news should be readily apparent, and Harsin makes the connection directly. The news industry unavoidably has also become fragmented, segmented, and targeted, "a many-headed hydra…with literally millions of channels, websites, social media feeds, in addition to the golden age network news channels and national newspapers," not to mention local newspapers and television and radio stations (3). Because these news sources are targeted (and much worse than targeted, as we will discuss below), they are prone to the "new media misrepresentations, hoaxes, plagiarisms," and blatant lying and disinformation commonly associated with fake news (2). On the other practice of fake news, that is, as an accusation against journalists and news sources that askcritical questions and disseminate information that some audience does not want to hear, the link to post-truth is similarly clear: "The supporters of post-truthers stubbornly refuse to believe the real evidence, even when they are confronted with it. Any such material can be dismissed with a brisk assertion that it is 'fake news,' or a claim that 'alternative facts' are available to explain the phenomenon in question" (Sim 2019: 16).

It is plain to see that producing fake news and castigating others for allegedly producing fake news are both essential effects and causes of the post-truth condition, which is itself an inherent feature of the postmodern condition. Moreover, fake news is only one tool in the arsenal of post-truthers and postmodern actors (I would not say "postmodernists" or theorists of postmodernity, who merely describe and analyze the postmodern state but are not responsible for it), along with all of the other well-worn tricks such as propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, rumors, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, manipulated photos and "deep fakes," and the rest. These categories cannot be and should not be completely disaggregated. All of these forms of post-truth communication share the quality of, to use Hyvönen's charitable term, careless speech, careless of the facts they ignore, dispute, or deny and careless of the damage they do in the process.

The much and justly maligned notion of alternative facts raises another crucial issue in the treatment of post-truth and fake news. Opponents of fake news practices tend to protest that, under the condition of fake news/post-truth, there is no longer any truth. But several commentators argue precisely the opposite: in a post-truth/fake news environment, "we do not suffer a shortfall of truth. Quite to the contrary, we are witness to its excess(es), enabled by a circuitous slippage between facts or alt-facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth. Indeed, few to none today openly profess a brazen and callous disregard of truth; instead, truth tellers all!" (Biesecker 2018: 329-330). Watts maintains similarly that post-truth—and its fake news arm—"signifies a kind of excess and excessiveness wherein grammars of common sense making are overrun" (2018: 441). Baudrillard himself said as much in his subsequent essay on media and the masses: we suffer "not from the lack of information but from information itself and even from an excess of information" (1985: 580)—although much of it is not information but rather informulacra.

For that very reason we say that, as simulation gives way to simulacra, so information yields to

© 2023 Global Journals

informulacra, a neologism for statements, images, and other content that have escaped the gravitational pull of reality and bear no particular resemblance to that reality—nor do they aspire to. Informulacra are calculated to be information-like, to resemble information but not actually to represent or communicate the true state of affairs in the world. Informulacra are typically clothed with some of the markers or signs of information. They may emanate from a news (or news-like) source like Fox News, a print or online newspaper, and so forth. They may feature a headline and a byline, as well as photos, video, interviews, and other supporting material typical of news. They may be uttered by an authority or authoritative-looking character—a reporter or journalist, a government official, a scientist, etc. But these are all merely familiar and transferable trappings of information and do not guarantee the factuality of any statement or image. They may be half-true, quarter-true, or perfectly false, pure illusion.

Two actual cases of informulacra clarify our point. The first involves an allegation first reported online that thousands of ballots pre-marked for Hillary Clinton were discovered in Ohio before the 2016 presidential election. Such an illegal act would have cast a pall on the legitimacy of the vote. A photograph even depicted ballot boxes in a warehouse and an election worker identified as Randall Prince. And indeed the warehouse was a real (though abandoned) site, the boxes were real ballot boxes, and there really is an Ohio resident (actually two) named Randall Prince. However, these true facts were bundled into a false attribution of criminal activity, which was perpetrated by Cameron Harris who "admitted to fabricating the story and photoshopping the photograph" (Rose 2020: 203). But by that time the informulacrum was circulating in the media bloodstream. The second case portrays the other side of fake news, an accusation hurled at real information and legitimate news agencies to discredit them. We are speaking of the false and despicable claim by Alex Jones of InfoWars that the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut was staged, that all of the supposed victims and their families were actors, that there were therefore no child victims and that the children were perhaps even fictional. Here, the very factuality of an event is denied and an alternative explanation is offered in its place; a (callous and absurd) informulacrum supplanted the information—and was believed by many.

Although Baudrillard never used the term, maybe he foresaw informulacra when he discussed "information that does not inform" (1985: 580) and indeed misinforms and disinforms. More than that, informulacra like fake news inject "a radical uncertainty" into the realm of knowledge. Or arguably uncertainty is not the right word, as consumers of Harris' and Jones' informulacra were not "uncertain" in the slightest. Many believed wholeheartedly that they possessed the truth and that it was the rest of society—denizens of what one aide to George W. Bush (often said to be Karl Rove) dismissively labeled "the reality-based community"—who were misinformed and deluded. Hungry partisans, fed on informulacra, feel sure they are the ones who are awake, who have taken the metaphorical "red pill" and liberated themselves fromthe vast conspiracy that the masses call reality.

In this regard, it is imperative to understand that informulacra in general, and fake news in particular, are not equivalent to postmodernism. Postmodernists, at least the most radical kind, assert that there is no truth, only Foucauldian regimes of truth and thus at best multiple and labile truths. This is not the message of informulacra and fake news: I think Fuller is right that the producer and consumer of informulacra and fake news "does not deny the existence of facts, let alone 'objective facts" (2018: 19). In the informulacra/fake news dimension, truth is not positional (i.e., depends on where and who you are) nor procedural (i.e., depends on what methods you adopt). Instead, the source and the audience of informulacra/fake news often sincerely believe (1) that there is a truth out there and (2) that they know the truth, while the opposition is lying and conspiring against them. They do not take a live-and-let-live approach to truth; informulacra do not share epistemic or social space with information but dislocate information, which is suspect as elitist domination and manipulation. In short, there are not multiple realities and multiple truths but one reality and truth—theirs. Of course, they may know, as Harris did and as Jones has lately confessed, that their utterances and images are strictly speaking false, but they are not in the business of "strictly speaking" but of carelessly speaking. Ultimately, their communication signals to their target demographic a deeper truth which excuses and valorizes the dishonest means. Without going too far, we might liken informulacra and fake news less to lies and propaganda and more to great literature, which is fictional but also "truer than the truth" or than petty facts to their audience.

IV. Fake News, Affiliative Truths, and Information Wars

What we have said so far in no way minimizes the destruction wrought by fake news or informulacra more generally. Truth does matter, especially for making life-altering decisions, even if it is not always easy to discern what is true. Worse, informulacra like fake news corrode society, both our trust in valid information sources and our confidence in institutions, if not our very grip on reality. And, as attractive and momentarily satisfying as it seems, we cannot subsist on a diet of pictures of food.

© 2023 Global Journals

Though reprehensible, the tidal wave of fake news and other informulacra alerts us to two facts about knowledge, politics, and social life as such. The first, as Kalpokas phrases it, is that "inconclusiveness, contingency, indeterminacy, and plurality are the underlying features of political life" and of life overall (2019: 4). Again, postmodernists did not make it so but simply brought it to our attention. And while Kalpokas proceeds to condemn post-truth practices for "supplanting" the realities of contingency and uncertainty "with a fantasy of mastery and coherence," the old pre-postmodern worldview rooted in the Enlightenment propagated its own fantasy of certainty, stability, knowability, and control.

The second, as we previewed at the opening of this essay, is that, as odious as they may be, it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge and investigate the productive or efficacious side of informulacra like fake news. That is, in a word, whether we like it or not, informulacra get things done; they perform work, motivate action, and leave impressions on the real world. We have known at least since Austin's seminal work on speech acts that the function of language (and by extension any other informational medium, such as photography or video) is not exclusively or even maybe primarily to convey true facts. That is only the locutionary or referential function of speech and frankly its least interesting. Language and all communication media are also social acts in their own right, with illocutionary and perlocutionaryroles. The former includes speech acts that accomplish the actions they utter, like apologizing, promising, pronouncing someone married, or knighting someone; the latter includes the impact the speech act has on the interlocutor's thoughts and feelings and, often if not ideally, behavior, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, angering, and so forth. Certainly a statement, audio clip, video, or social media post need not be "true" to achieve perlocutionary effects; frankly, intentionally and strategically false ones (like the mocked-up story of Clinton's fraudulent ballots) may do the job better.

I suggest we conceive of informulacra as a genus including the species of fake news (and indeed much if not most of information and true statements and images), not as a recitation of facts or transmission of knowledge but as a form of poiesis or "the productive use of words to conjure up worlds" (Fuller 2018a: 17). More prosaically, poiesis is "the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before" (Polkinghorne 2004: 115), a Heideggerian "bringing forth." It is not difficult to tell what specific occasions of informulacra aim to bring forth: Harris' fake story about Clinton clearly wanted to undermine her campaign and get Trump elected, while Jones' disparaging of the victims of Sandy Hook sought to pre-empt gun restrictions and generally to besmirch liberals.

This leads us to a singularly essential realization: while fake news and allied informulacra are typically if not invariably about past events, their productive force does not lie in the past but in the future. Baudrillard intuited this point but did not pursue it far enough. When he wrote of the "precession of simulacra," he meant that simulacra—untethered from reality as they are—come before reality, but he could and should equally have emphasized the succession of reality from simulacra. That is, if simulacra are maps without territory, they can generate a real territory, just as a blueprint precedes a building or a recipe precedes a dish. (The problem, of course, is when people try to live in the blueprint or eat the recipe!) To put it bluntly, simulacra and informulacra can *become real* or revise reality.

This returns us to a comment that Lyotard made, quoted above, about how the writer or artist—often a specialist in simulacra and informulacra—forges the "what will have been done." Roland Boer, in a study of political myth, makes a similar observation: following philosopher Alain Badiou, he reasons that the grammar of political myth (if not all politics) is "the future perfect" such that by the "forcing of a truth" in narrative, at some time in the future the message "will have been true" (2009: 17). But thinking about fake news (which is definitely a kind of political myth) and other informulacra in the future perfect, as the "will have been," changes everything: it is no longer important whether the news item was true at the time of its dissemination but only whether the state of affairs it describes, predicts, or desires will have been true at some future date (e.g. Trump elected, gun legislation defeated).

In this sense, there is nothing especially original or disturbing in informulacra: much of human thought and action is in the future tense. What is different and disquieting about the current plague of fake news is its sociopolitical intention. It is not inherent in the concept of fake news that it should be intensely and virulently partisan, but in practice it has that result. Today's fake news is an exploitation of the human capacity and need to orient toward the future, to invent habitable worlds, for hyper-partisan political purposes—an *unrealpolitik*.

To understand this motivation, we can consider the etymology of the word "truth." Surprisingly, it has nothing directly to do with factual accuracy. Rather, according to etymologyonline.com, the word derives from Old English *triewð* for faith or faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, pledge, or covenant, which is ultimately derived from proto-Indo-European *deru* for firm, solid, and steadfast, like a tree. Steve Fuller instructs that truth is related to troth, which also denotes faithfulness but not necessarily faithfulness to some "true" state of affairs but rather to some speaker or authority. He holds that initially "'truth' meant fidelity to the source. It was about loyalty to whomever empowers the truth-teller, be it the Christian deity or a Roman general. In this context, it

© 2023 Global Journals

was associated with executing a plan of action, be it in the cosmos or on the battlefield" (2018b: 26). In other words, one pledged one's troth to, was true to, a person or party, not to some purported objective reality. Only later was "truth" disarticulated from an individual authority and granted independent ontological status, such that one might defend truth against power rather than pledge troth to power. In that profound sense, fake news and post-truth generally may be more symptomatic of a regression to a pre-truth era.

Now we can better appreciate both information and informulacra, both real news and fake news, as exercises of affiliation as much as or more than of abstract and objective knowledge. Kalpokas convincingly identifies affiliative truths or "ways of knowing, capable of mobilizing audiences" and therefore tailored for those particular audiences (2019: 9)—"tailoring" providing an apt metaphor for crafting a reality to "wear" and inhabit. And when one is true to a source or authority (in the ancient sense), it is inconsequential whether the utterances of that source or authority are true (in the modern sense). People who share affiliative truths are members of distinct epistemic communities, whose standards of veracity and verification are different (if present at all). As long as any asserted fake news or other such informulacra "is capable of becoming true through its own effects (i.e. through producing and/or sustaining a social world that people are willing to live in)," the relationship between fake news/informulacra and facticity "is no longer important" (13).

As our discussion has shown, the notion that humans construct their social reality is not new; Berger and Luckmann taught that lesson nearly sixty years ago in their classic 1966*The Social Construction of Reality* (which, like Lyotard's text, invoked knowledge in its subtitle). What Berger and Luckmann and subsequent scholars overlooked or underestimated is the competitive nature of this construction, which during my graduate school days in the 1980s we mildly dubbed "contestation" or "negotiation." This competition has now escalated into a near-war, with literal war or civil war—complete with body armor and assault rifles—on the horizon for its most adamant combatants. And the information war, or war of informulacra on information, is only the latest phase and battlefield of the "culture war" that has been brewing for decades. At this highly weaponized level of informulacra and fake news, Kalpokas depressingly concludes that "victory is truly what matters," or Watts says of post-truth (but we attribute equally to fake news and similar competitive informulacra including various hoaxes, conspiracy theories, faked photos and videos, and more) that it "is not a set of lies. It is a precondition for tribal war…driven by fantasies of sovereignty, rituals of militarization, and the colonization of expertise" (2018: 441). It is an irony that one of the most deplorable spigots of fake news is the most honest and forthcoming about its martial intentions for and uses of information, namely Alex Jones' InfoWars.

When communicative partners morph into enemies, communication ceases, and concerns of factuality—more precisely, what the other side regards and accepts as true—are abandoned. Speech (or any communicative offering) becomes less an Austinian performance but more an act of espionage (is it any wonder that one of its most skilled and shameless practitioners, Vladimir Putin, is a former spy?). Informulacra, with fake news in the vanguard, are ammunition in a war of words and images that is not only a struggle for power but a struggle for the real. In such circumstances, factuality is far from a virtue and may be a hindrance. A uniquely egregious example is Brenden Dilley, an American right-wing commentator and MAGA "life coach," who unapologetically admitted that "he doesn't care about the truth of the things he says and that he has no problem 'making shit up'"; in his own words, "I don't give a fuck about being factual…. I make shit up all the time" because the "objective is to destroy Democrats. OK? To destroy liberals, liberalism as an idea, Democrats, and anything that opposes President Trump" (Mantyla 2020).

Finally, it is essential to recognize knowledge not only as a tactic in social and political combat but as the ultimate prize. Informulacra have not been activated exclusively in wartime but have often if not always been promulgated to achieve some advantage. Now, though, it is truth—and what enthusiasts can do with and through truth—that is at stake. A battle of and by informulacra is, in Fuller's words, "a struggle for 'modal power,' namely, control over what is possible" (2018b: 181). Or, to paraphrase Orwell, who controls truth controls the future.

V. Fake News and Sovereignty: Rule by Informulacra

Fake news and the entire constellation of informulacra are partly an effect of distrust in and disrespect for traditional authorities, from journalists, scientists, and academics to politicians and parties. One would like to believe that if these authorities were delivering the goods of individual prosperity and collective/national success and security, the crisis of authority would be averted or at least ameliorated. Instead, the shocks of the 2008 global recession, ongoing terrorist threats, the perceived failure of neoliberalism and globalization, the COVID-19 epidemic and the botched response, racist fears of unchecked immigration and a "great replacement," and lately supply-chain problems, commodity shortages, and high inflation have intensified suspicion of authorities, experts, leaders, and fellow citizens.

© 2023 Global Journals

Simultaneously, fake news and other informulacra are partly a cause of the current legitimation crisis, as Habermas(1975) labeled it a half-century ago. Like an acid bath, the torrent of fake reports, fabricated photos, and deepfake videos weakens the bonds that attach citizens to their leaders and institutions and to each other, providing an ideal environment for populist alternatives of a malevolent modern kind. Politics of course has long been an arena for informulacra, as Plato and Machiavelli demonstrate, but the means available to ancient and medieval leaders were paltry compared to today. Accordingly, a generation of post-truth, media-savvy, informulacra-borne populist autocrats has emerged around the world.

All populists share the trait of supposedly speaking for or representing, if not embodying and personifying, "the people" against individuals, classes, parties, or systems that thwart and oppose the interests of "the people." These others include foreigners, immigrants, and despised minorities (depending on the place and time, these may be blacks, Jews, Catholics, Muslims, secularists, etc.) as well as domestic elites (often urban, educated, and technocratic) who are believed to serve their own interests while favoring the just-mentioned others over the true members of the society or nation through policies of multiculturalism and universal human rights. To such demagogues and their followers, mainstream parties and politicians betray "the people," and existing laws and institutions are mechanisms by which these traitors silence the voice of "the people" and usurp their power.

The populist leader styles himself (for most populist characters have been male, with the current exception of France's Marine Le Pen or Italy's GiorgiaMeloni) the *voxpopuli* or more, the literal savior of the nation. Mazzarella (2019) contends that postmodern populism "produces a cult of immediacy" in the sense that the leader claims—and as far as possible accomplishes—direct unmediated contact with followers, circumventing the normal media outlets such as newspapers and television and radio news. Indeed, those mainstream sources are typically portrayed as part of the collusion against "the people" and accordingly lambasted as merchants of fake news. It is fortuitous that this very moment was also marked by a decline in viewership for mainstream news and the proliferation of alternatives news services with less scrupulous standards of reliability, if not with overt partisan biases.

The void of trust, marginalization of traditional media, and alliance between leader and new unregulated partisan media is an ideal breeding ground for informulacra like fake news and hyperreal political figures such as Silvio Berlusconi, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump. All have risen to power by trashing traditional mainstream media as enemies of the people (and in many cases by intimidating, muzzling, monopolizing, and/or prosecuting those media), and all have trafficked heavily in fake news, whether through pre-existing news sources like Fox News (Italy's Berlusconi, for some a model for Trump, owned media companies like Fininvest, Canale 5, and Italia 1 before ascending to political power) or through their own social media accounts, as in Trump's promiscuous use of Twitter.

With the interests of "the people" in peril and with all of the levers of (mis)communication and (mis)representation in hand, informulacra including but hardly restricted to fake news become the discourse and currency of power politics which portends to "turn political life into an exercise of who can lie, or deny, most persuasively" (Sim 2019: 18). And this power only begins with control of decision-making, the ostensible purpose of politics. It extends into electoral politics or who will hold power in the future; informulacra-driven populism shades into authoritarianism as leaders commandeer election laws, rewrite constitutions to enshrine themselves and their party (if there is a party: informulacra-based populists often rule without a party apparatus, which would compromise their immediate connection to their people), and disempower legislatures and courts to challenge them. (A key tactic of the contemporary authoritarian populist is "seizure of the judiciary," packing it with loyalists while curtailing its authority.)

Still not content, the informulacra-dependent populist strives for power over knowledge and truth, until, if there is a boundary between truth and falseness, between information and informulacra, the public cannot discern it. (A singularly hubristic example is Trump's online media project, Truth Social, which literally appropriates truth, with each transmitted message dubbed not a "tweet" but a "truth.") Indeed, decades ago Hannah Arendt opined that an authoritarian or totalitarian regime aspires to a citizenry not of white-hot commitment and "true belief" but one for whom "the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist" (1985: 474). Accordingly, the lies, exaggerations, half-truths, hyperboles, and other informulacra that fill fake news and adjunct sources "are not primarily attempts to convince or persuade," which would still be epistemic acts calling for public debate and judgment; "On the contrary, their main impact is the creation of confusion" (Hyvönen 2018:39). Confusion—and related states of apathy and paralysis—are both means and end, tallied by Kakutani among the tactics of informulacra-based politics like "inundating audiences with information; producing distractions to dilute their attention and focus; delegitimizing media that provides accurate information; deliberately sowing confusion, fear, and doubt; creating or claiming hoaxes; and 'generating harassment campaigns designed to make it harder for credible

© 2023 Global Journals

conduits of information to operate'"(2018: 144). (Kakutani's book is aptly enough titled *The Death of Truth*.)

Corporations indulge in the same chicanery, and conceivably political actors learned lessons from them. First tobacco companies, then others including oil companies, pharmaceutical companies, and many others strove to cast doubt on reports of the unsafety of their products and practices (e.g. production, labor, and waste disposal practices), going so far as to state openly that doubt, not cigarettes or gasoline or drugs, etc. is their product (Michaels 2008). They perfected many of the tricks that politicians would later embrace, such as denigrating scientific experts and journalists, trotting our "experts" of their own or publishing false, slanted, or incomplete data to support their cause, and generally obfuscating the issues. It might be more accurate to say in hindsight that not doubts but informulacra were their product—public uncertainty being their proximate goal and selling their wares without impediment their ultimate goal.

Finally, the appeal to fake news and informulacra seeks power over the very terms of reality. To be sure, informulacra are effective to implement your policies or market your goods and to prevent the opposition from implementing theirs or obstructing the sale of yours, as well as to attain and retain office so as to implement your policies and to prevent the opposition from attaining office and implementing theirs. But much more, informulacra are the highest expression of power at its most raw, the power to dictate reality. Russia expert Masha Gessen(2016) calls it the "Putin paradigm," but it could just as well be the Orbán or Trump paradigm, since all such figures who rule by keeping followers and critics alike uninformed and disinformed—who propagate *agnocracy* or rule by ignorance—"use language primarily to communicate not facts or opinions but power"; in these informulacra regimes, "Lying is the message. It's not just that both Putin and Trump lie, it is that they lie in the same way and for the same purpose: blatantly to assert power over truth itself." Gessen concludes that through flagrant informulacra like fake news, the populist agnocrat is "able to say what he wants, when he wants, regardless of the facts. He is president of his country and king of reality."

We can now complete our classification of fake news. We have already situated it as a subset of informulacra, information-like utterances and images (photo and video) that displace and replace truth, that are more true and real than truth and reality for their audiences. Informulacra themselves are a subset of what Eller (2020) calls agnomancy (*a* + *gnosis* + *mancy*) or practices that conjure or create and perpetuate not-knowing or ignorance of the truth in those who imbibe them. Finally, agnomancy is a subset of acts of sovereignty which assert unchallenged dominion over society and reality. If we think of Schmitt's classic statement on sovereignty—"Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (2005: 5)—then informulacra like fake news are the exception to truth, the will to eschew truth, and the decision of what to substitute for truth. Schmitt fully understood that law does not make authority but rather than authority makes law. We regretfully add that, often and in the end, truth does not make authority but authority makes truth (as the literal "author" of truth).

Fake news specifically, informulacra more generally, and agnomancy most generally facilitate sovereignty (which, granted, is never total or secure) not only by seating an executive in office and brushing away fact-based objections to policies but also, to return to our war analogy, by generating a fog of words (and images), a cloud of half-truths and untruths that muddle the issues and disguise the (mis)leader's actions. This fog of informulacra establishes a zone of freedom of movement for the leader. It also immunizes his troops (government appointees and political supporters) by erecting a pre-emptive shield against criticism and fact-checking. First, his followers are pre-determined to suspect and reject the sources from which such criticism and fact-checking would flow; the sources have already been rebuked as "fake news" themselves. Second, followers are not necessarily concerned with what is superficially true, since they are roused by populist appeals to "the metaphysical truths of race, heritage, culture, and history" that are beyond the reach of mere facts (Vivian 2018: 433). Indeed, ample research indicates that fact-checking and otherwise confronting errors can have a backlash effect resulting in stronger belief in the false information, and fact-checking, if not dismissed as a partisan attack, sometimes perversely "provides autocrats with opportunities to publicly demonstrate allegedly superior control over conditions of truth" (433), which is the very opposite of the desired outcome. And most miserably, research also shows that supporters may know that their hero is a liar but not withdraw support; lying may be a badge of authenticity, of refusing to play the normal political game or bow to political correctness, or supporters may feel that the boss is a liar but he is their liar (Swire-Thompson et al. 2020).

Third, chasing after all the fake news stories and other informulacra keeps the opposition distracted and reactive while breeding public cynicism, resignation, and exhaustion—especially when every fact-check is deflected without inflicting any harm on the source. And "Verbally sparring *ad infinitum* over whose version of truth is correct," Vivian posits, "provides those who practice strategic indifference to fact and evidence with opportunities to promote, and enhance the propagandistic appeal of, metaphysical truths conducive to autocratic rule" (2018: 433). Lastly, as depicted by the plot of the infamous 1938 play *Gas Light*, which gave us the term "gaslighting" (another kind

© 2023 Global Journals

of informulacra and tactic of agnomancy), a persistent fog of informulacra and distorted and undependable truth can drive a person (and a whole society) crazy, loosening their connection to reality and rendering them pliant and compliant. It is a scorched-earth campaign of information warfare, but an informulacra-sovereign doesn't care.

VI. Conclusion: Fake News and the Will to Informulacra

A century before Baudrillard, Nietzsche already interrogated the value of truth: in his 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil* (which we might retitle *Beyond True and False*), he mused that we often say "that we want the truth: why do we not prefer untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?" adding a few sections later that "We do not object to a judgment just because it is false" but instead that "judgments that are the most false…are the most indispensable to us"—that arguably we must accept "untruth as a condition of life" (2008: 5-7).

In place of our vaunted will to truth, Nietzsche posited a will to power, and as history has demonstrated too clearly, politics is closer to power than to truth. Either way, the effective term here is "will," in both senses—as choice/decision/agency and as future tense. Politics, long before the postmodern post-truth era, was and remains the art of getting things done, particularly over the opposition of rivals. That makes politics a matter of will, that is, of imposing one's will on competitors, on society, and on reality itself. This was the fundamental message of Schopenhauer too, that the world is a product of will and representation, idea, or image (*Vorstellung* in German means all of these things). The implication, also appreciated by Schmitt, is that the governance is someone's will or representation/idea/image. The battle for political power becomes a struggle for the real.

When politics (d)evolves into a death-match to vanquish the other side (to "own the libtards" and destroy the Democrats), factual validity is no longer the point, if it ever was. Truth, real news, and information are not then the best tools for achieving one's goals and imposing one's will, especially if the goal is to impose one's will. Under such conditions—which are, tragically, the conditions of postmodern and post-democratic politics in the United States and around the world—untruth, fake news, and informulacra are much more serviceable devices.

Baudrillard warned us four decades ago that our media and society had indeed become detached from reality, although at least in his key book he did not see or draw the implications for politics. But in a world that has traded reality for hyperreal simulacra, how could some clever, malicious, or simply careless politician not abuse the situation? Fake news is the informational version of Baudrillard's simulacra and hyper-reality, where information has been overwhelmed and crowded out by informulacra which in many ways mimic information but serve a function--and a master—other than truth.

Informulacra, a branch of agnomancy or practices that undermine knowledge and fill the void with falsehood and non-knowledge/ignorance, are among the sovereign acts by which individuals, groups, and parties acquire, retain, exercise, and expand power through sheer will. The point of fake news as informulacra is to arouse partisans; disempower challengers, ordinary citizens, and professional truth-tellers; and inoculate leaders and their followers against accountability, including and especially accountability to the truth, which is deliciously freeing. So unrestrained from reality, there is no need to consider the disastrous effects of utterances or actions on institutions, disadvantaged populations, the environment, or the planet.

References Références Referencias

1. Arendt, Hannah. 1958 [1951].*The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Cleveland, OH and New York: The World Publishing Company.
2. Arendt, Hannah. 1967. "Politics and Truth." Https://idanlandau.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/arendt-truth-andpolitics.pdf, accessed 23 June 2020.
3. Baudrillard, Jean. 1985. "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media." *New Literary History* 16 (3):577-589.
4. Baudrillard, Jean. 1994 [1981].*Simulacra and Simulation*.Translated by Sheila Faria-Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
5. Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
6. Biesecker, Barbara A. 2018. "Toward an Archaeogeneaology of Post-Truth." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 51 (4):329-341.
7. Boer, Roland. 2009. *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
8. Eller, Jack David. 2020. *Trump and Political Theology: Unmaking Truth and Democracy*. Denver, CO: GCRR Press.
9. Fuller, Steve. 2018a. *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*. New York: Anthem Press.
10. Fuller, Steve. 2018b. "What Can Philosophy Teach Us About the Post-modern Condition." In Michael A. Peters, Sharon Rider, Mats Hyvönen, and Tina Besley, editors.*Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity & Higher Education.* Singapore: Springer Nature, 13-26.
11. Gessen, Masha. 2016. "The Putin Paradigm." Https://www.nybooks.com/online/2016/12/13/putin-

© 2023 Global Journals

paradigm-how-trump-will-rule, accessed 16 August 2022.
12. Habermas, Jürgen. 1975 [1973].*Legitimation Crisis*.Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
13. Harsin, Jayson. 2015. "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2 (1):327-333.
14. Hyvönen, Ari-Elmeri. 2018. "Careless Speech: Conceptualizing Post-Truth Politics." *New Perspectives* 26 (3):31-55.
15. Kakutani, Michiko. 2018. *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.
16. Kalpokas, Ignas. 2019. A *Political Theory of Post-Truth*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
17. Kirkpatrick, Andrew. 2017. Understanding in a Post-Truth World: Comprehension and Co-naissance as Empathetic Antidotes to Post-Truth Politics." *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 13 (3):312-335.
18. Lyotard, Jean-François. 1984 [1979]. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.
19. Mantyla, Kyle. 2020 "Brenden Dilley Doesn't 'Give a F*ck About Being Factual." Https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/brenden-dilleydoesnt-give-a-fck-about-being-factual, accessed 23 April 2023.
20. Mazzarella, William. 2019. "Populism as Political Theology." Https://www.academia.edu/42286798/Populism_as_Political_Theology, accessed 15 August 2022.
21. Michaels, David. 2008. *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*. New York: Oxford University Press.
22. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2008 [1886]. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Marion Faber. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
23. Oraldi, Antonio. 2021. "Baudrillard's Philosophy: Simulacra and Simulation in the 21st century." Https://www.thecollector.com/baudrillard-philosophy-21st-century, accessed 12 August 2022.
24. Polkinghorne, Donald E. 2004.*Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
25. Prado, C. G. 2018. "Introduction: The New Subjectivism."In C. G. Prado, editor. *America's Post-Truth Phenomenon: When Feelings and Opinions Trump Facts and Evidence*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1-14.
26. Rose, Jennifer. 2020. "To Believe or Not to Believe: An Epistemic Exploration of Fake News, Truth, and the Limits of Knowing." *Postdigital Science and Education* 2: 202-216.
27. Schmitt, Carl. 2005 [1985/1934].*Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
28. Sim, Stuart. 2019.*Post-Truth, Scepticism& Power*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
29. Swire-Thompson, Briony, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky, and Adam J. Berinsky. 2020. "They Might Be a Liar But They're My Liar: Source Evaluation and the Prevalence of Misinformation." *Political Psychology* 41 (1): 21-34.
30. Vivian, Bradford. 2018. "On the Erosion of Democracy by Truth." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 51 (4): 416-440
31. Watts, Eric King. 2018 "'Zombies are Real': Fantasies, Conspiracies, and the Post-Truth Wars." *Philosophy & Rhetoric*51 (4):441-70.
32. White, Leslie. 1959. "The Concept of Culture." *American Anthropologist* 61 (2):227–51.

© 2023 Global Journals