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Fake realities?

After the contentious American presidential election, many who were dissatisfied with the results were quick to blame the emergence of so-called ‘fake news’ for Donald Trump’s surprising victory. Fake news is information spread around on the internet by untrustworthy sources that have no basis in fact. Due to the fast-paced nature of online media, numerous voters accepted these reports without checking their validity, often only reading headlines such as “Florida Democrats just voted to impose Sharia law on women”, or “Hillary Clinton running a child sex ring out of a pizza place”. Despite the fact that these claims are completely unfounded, a large share of the electorate believes them and even bases political decisions on them. How could this happen?

It would be easy to blame technological progress, foreign intervention or ‘domestic propagandists’ who have no code of ethics and would do anything for electoral success. While these factors could certainly play a significant role, there is a deeper issue at hand; a political phenomenon that can in part explain the victory of Trump and other surprising developments around the world that can be connected to the rise of populism. The underlying problem behind fake news is the clash of different realities. Many voters (who vote for populists) have a different view of what reality is than what the mainstream media presents, and this reality is in contrast with what the political establishment and other voters regard as being real. That is why these two sides cannot accept each other’s news stories as having any basis in reality; they are truly not talking about the same reality. Just as Clinton voters call these anti-establishment websites untrustworthy and producers of fake news, Trump voters would say that it is the mainstream media that is untrustworthy and that many of its news pieces are fake or at least misleading.

While the phenomenon of two different realities might seem new, it actually has a long history, and can be traced back at least to ancient Greece. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were talking about something similar when they differentiated between two types of knowledge: doxa and episteme. Doxa is conventional wisdom; knowledge that most
members of society believe and take for granted. In order to acquire doxa, one needs to speak with as many people as possible. On the other hand, episteme is scientific knowledge acquired using logic and scientific methods.

Politicians should base their decisions on a mixture of doxa and episteme. The issue today is that the two competing sides rely exclusively on either doxa or episteme. For example, ‘populists’ say based on doxa that politicians working with economic players are inherently corrupt, while the elite, based on episteme, argue that without the input of actual players in the economy, effective decision-making is impossible, therefore, politicians should involve economic players in the political process. Consequently, ‘populists’ and their followers are certain that the entire elite is corrupt and should be replaced, making experience in politics a negative feature of a candidate, while for the establishment, experience is the number one factor in determining who a good candidate is, since politics is too complex for an outsider to understand. This is why Republicans could not comprehend why the other party had a candidate who spent decades in the corrupted world of politics, while the Democrats did not understand why their rival was someone who has previously not been involved in politics at all, and sought the presidency as his entry-level job.

A reality built on doxa has nothing to do with a reality built on episteme. Mainstream media, that airs news mainly based on episteme, has lost almost all credibility for ‘populist’ voters who rely solely on doxa. Therefore, they turn to news sites that echo their beliefs, sites which the establishment calls fake news producers as their stories have nothing to do with episteme. The separate realities created by this fracture are deeply problematic for democracy. The democratic system is built on the idea of competing ideas, not competing realities. When different ideas clash during a campaign, one side can convince the other to agree on certain issues, compromises can be reached, making public discourse at least potentially fruitful. However, if one side cannot accept anything the other side says – as in their view the opponent's claims have no basis in their reality – public discourse becomes redundant. This process leads to the erosion of trust and social cohesion and accelerates polarization, essentially undermining democracy as we know it. No achievement of any government is accepted as those achievements are not real for half of the electorate.
Therefore, when there is a change in power, no previous achievement is left intact; they are all eliminated as quickly as possible (think about how the incoming Republicans are talking about the most significant achievement of the Obama administration: Obamacare). This makes effective long-term governance impossible.

There is no easy solution to this issue. Hillary Clinton’s proposal that would allow some sort of censorship of fake news altogether is not adequate as reality cannot be prescribed by the government; it would only make fake news more credible for those living in the reality of doxa. Instead, politicians should return to using a mixture of doxa and episteme, accepting that both types of knowledge are important in a democracy and neither should be excluded from campaigns and governing. In the process, they should rebuild social cohesion by creating a single, common reality where, while numerous disagreements remain an integral part of politics, public discourse is relevant and can have an effect on governance. This would be a tiresome and difficult process that might seem unnecessary for many politicians, but it is in their own interest to go down this road, as this is the only way they can have lasting legacies based on achievements that survive in the long run.