Digital Falsehoods and their Analog Consequences: The "Fake News" Strategy and its Mitigation

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Governments worldwide struggle with "fake news" and disinformation. While "fake news" is not an accurate term, it is critical in describing the intentionally disruptive propaganda or disinformation using a news media format. "Fake news" may be executed by malevolent state-level or grassroots actors to disrupt elections and civic life. Current discourses often misidentify "fake news" as simply wrong information, rather than evaluate political motivations for its spread and identify the groups vulnerable to its influence. As more cities strive to adopt an "MIL cities" mandate, the means to tackle misinformation must be included to ensure efficacy. This paper evaluates the dangers of neutral conceptions of "fake news" to MIL, and why addressing discontent rather than disinformation is a better approach for reducing the harms of "fake news."

Keywords: disinformation; misinformation; propaganda; "fake news".

The American Dialect Society named "Fake News," which is a preferred phrase of the US president Donald Trump, its 2017 word of the year. The term is seemingly unavoidable in public discourse—governments, educators, and civil society organizations have turned their attention toward this grim digital specter. Too often, "fake news" is considered as an unintentional omission or accidental corruption of genuine facts: reporting an accident that did not occur because of a misunderstanding or reporting a theoretical prediction as an inevitability. UNESCO officially discourages the use of the term "fake news," stating in its 2018 publication Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training:

Accordingly, the current handbook… avoids assuming that the term 'fake news' has a straightforward or commonly understood meaning. This is because 'news' means verifiable information in the public interest, and information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news. In this sense then, 'fake news' is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest–i.e., real news.

This perspective is naturally significant and meaningful: calling disinformation "fake news" could be considered as an infantilization of dangerous weapons (disinformation, misinformation), which use news media in strategic, narrative ways to deliberately reinforce beliefs among its audience. Yet, the prominence of the term in public discourse suggests that however inaccurate the term is, it must be confronted to reframe public discourse. It is insufficient to say "we do not describe content as fake news" without first addressing the efficacy in the how, why, and what of this weaponized media strategy. Supporting the inverse, in pursuit of an effective MIL strategy, including MIL Cities, "fake news" must be understood as a political tool weaponized for disruption rather than simply ascribed as incorrect information. In examining specific examples of "fake news" used in the UK, Russia, and the USA, this paper explores the influence and political precision of "fake news."

In this theoretical chapter, my research questions are as follows. First, does a neutral conception of "fake news" as simply wrong information—rather than deliberately inaccurate, frequently weaponized misinformation—inadvertently hinder the ability to fight it? What differentiates simple falsehood from "fake news?" Second, how can the MIL cities project (UNESCO, 2019) ensure proactive management and confrontation of weaponized disinformation for the benefit of MIL goals?

ICT Access and the Rise of Fake News

Despite the inaccuracy of the term, the rise of intentionally false media campaigns, i.e., "fake news" has resulted from a critical development juncture worldwide. The past decade observed a considerable increase in digital access (to ICT devices and the Internet) without corresponding increase in digital literacy. Most devices and services are supported through private industry and business, which grow exponentially without a corresponding rapid investment in media and information literacy (MIL) education. As *the Global Framework for Media and Information Literacy Cities* (UNESCO, 2019) notes, "the integration of media and information literacy (MIL) into formal and lifelong learning education systems has not progressed as rapidly as it should."

This education gap can be illustrated through simple misunderstandings of technology itself. A 2015 global study found that in Nigeria, 9% of Facebook users claim that they do not use the Internet; in Indonesia, 11% of Facebook users claim not to use the Internet (Mirani, 2016). The perception of "Facebook" as an entirely different entity from "the Internet" suggests that many users, particularly in developing countries, passively consume information without the necessary tools for critical evaluation.

Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that MIL-limited users have misunderstandings beyond the website/internet associations. Users who trust Facebook but do not understand its functionality may also misunderstand the relationship between trusted platforms and untrustworthy publishers. Many users may still believe in the "newspaper model" of content: if you trust a newspaper enough to purchase it, you also trust that the contents within are accurate. Additionally, in many developing countries, state-sponsored media predominates, creating an uncritical media consumption lens deliberately. Audiences are implicitly encouraged to consume news and news-adjacent media unquestionably for political purposes. Thus, intentional misinformation, shrouded in the visual culture and social pretense of "news," can conveniently propagate society.

Without understanding that websites like Facebook are open platforms (allowing anyone to publish without need for credentials), many users may assume that all contents on trusted websites are truthful. The most dangerous cohort of users are those with sufficient MIL skills to go online but without the necessary critical capacity to evaluate the information they encounter there. However, beyond digital literacy concerns, there needs to be honest assessments of why and how untruths and lies are widely propagated online. Examining "fake news" as a political tool of would-be disruptors and extremist agitators allows MIL specialists to better investigate its spread and how it can be tackled. It is an inaccurate description in the academic sense but an on-the-ground descriptor of a weapon used on citizens' minds.

The Politics of Fake News

Unfortunately, the current structure of MIL education, endorsed by the UNESCO-MIL framework, tends to neglect the influence of deliberate disruption. UNESCO's educational book, *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation,* still structures the basis of its MIL education on an assumption of credible, fact-based reporting, which should be contemplated in a thoughtful way: "Journalists should report on, and signal, lies expressed by various actors; conversely they should never accept claims as facts, nor present them without providing the accompanying qualifications that inform the audience about the actual situation" (UNESCO, 2018).

This book cites an example of a little girl believed to be trapped in the 2017 Mexico City earthquake whose plight received significant attention on Twitter; she was later proven to be unreal, but this was "not perhaps a case of deliberate fakery." Inaccurate reports during a crisis typifies "fake news" but is arguably not the most influential. Sagely, the UNESCO books notes that "authentic news does not constitute the full "truth" (which is something only approximated in human interactions with each other and with reality over time)" (UNESCO, 2018). All of this is accurate but fundamentally unhelpful in detuning powerful falsehoods that form belief sets, like the now-notorious QAnon in the USA, belief in child abduction rings in rural India, or the notion that Muslim minorities were setting temples ablaze in Myanmar. These examples of "fake news" are not based in news but rather are expressions and perpetuations of existing belief patterns—built on preconceived biases and supported by invented "news," not based on "news."

Politically, "fake news" is a type of propaganda: telling false anecdotes to affirm an engineered grand narrative; it is not random. The narratives crafted by purveyors of "fake news," when used most effectively, prey on anxieties, fears, and existing prejudices. Additionally, they use the structure of news media to maximize their perpetuation of lies. For instance, in 2015, the Kremlin produced a story of Ukrainian soldiers crucifying children in the streets (false and hysterical yet provided "evidence" to an anxious Russian public about the barbarism of their neighbor.) The news employed credible formats to stoke fears and justify annexation (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). More importantly, it was "news" because it used easily digestible formats on modern digital devices, which would have been rendered as effectively in an evocative propaganda poster or illustrated leaflet in earlier years. As the communications scholar Marshall McLuhan noted—*the medium is the message*. If people crave "news" and fear "others," then supporting the demonization of enemies is done most effectively through familiar media tools: "fake news."

In India, a public service announcement about child safety featured a skit about kidnapping. The skit was slightly edited to remove government marketing, making the video appear to be genuine hidden camera footage; it spread widely over WhatsApp,

resulting in over 20 lynching of ethnic minority men (Elliot, 2018). Viewers watched the doctored video, assumed or were led to believe it depicted genuine kidnapping, and undertook vigilante justice. Most victims of the violence spoke minority languages in their regions; they were already the target of social stigma, which became affirmed by purported "evidence." In the United States, a notorious "fake news" story concerned an alleged child sex-trafficking ring, hidden in the basement of a pizza restaurant frequented by politicians (Politifact, 2016). While the allegations against the restaurant were wholly disproven in 2017, the story only grew afterwards, attracting a wider audience under the new banner of QAnon or #QAnon.

Accusations of crimes against women or children, particularly sexual crimes, are common in "fake news" narratives, specifically chosen to be as disturbing and incendiary as possible. Like other Internet content designed to "bait" a user into clicking, they are shocking and usually demand that users promptly alert their social networks of probable danger. Beyond children and women, other "fake news" narratives prey on common concerns: immigration and the emergence of visible demographic difference, secularization, and desecration of national symbols. The idea of an objective truth, acquired through evidence, fact, and reason is largely irrelevant to the producers and consumers of "fake news." The more facts presented, the more people tend to dig in their heels: the studies, data, photographs, interviews—fabrications of wicked actors trying to attack them. Belief in fake narratives is rooted not in a world of fact but a basis of prejudice; confronting prejudice with fake narratives often fails to resonate with its audiences.

It is also worth noting that the "fake news" strategy uses the visual culture of trusted news media to intentionally create confusion for its audience. How can one story presented as a news article be true and another be false if they appear so similar? This undermines fact-checking completed whereby well-meaning people attempt to disrupt misinformation campaigns. Refuting one YouTube video with another YouTube video is unlikely to persuade the confused audience about the incredibility of the former. Instead, it perpetuates a new incorrect belief—either that "no YouTube video can be trusted" or "both sides, having used the same medium, must possess some level of truth." This false equivalence in content is a substantial hazard to efforts supporting MIL.

Fake News in Practice

Far-right political leaders broadly buoyed by anxieties about all the above have used "fake news" stories on their social media platforms. Former United Kingdom Independence Party leader, Nigel Farage, claimed on Twitter that pro-refugee

activists were belittling rape victims, including a doctored photograph reading "My legs are open for refugees!" Farage claimed this was a cruel and an unsentimental reference to the 2015 New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne, Germany (the event and its coverage/lack of coverage was the subject of extensive critique by antimigrant political groups).

In fact, the real image read: "my *door* is open for refugees," a common pro-refugee slogan (Kretzel, 2018). The photo editing being poorly completed, with the font barely matching the original, was largely irrelevant to its intended audience. Unlike genuine reporting, which begins with facts and carves a narrative to explain them, "fake news" begins with a belief and manipulates facts to suit the narrative.

In Farage's case, the narrative was simple and brutal: refugees are rapists, and those who support their acceptance are promoting rape; they are so confident in their promotion of rape that they will obliquely refer to it on a sandwich board. Queasy and nonsensical, the false story is not designed to persuade nonbelievers; it is to affirm the fears of those already convinced.

Governments Cannot Fight Stories with Facts

As the term "fake news" has become increasingly prominent in MIL circles (many people have discouraged its use over fears that it is inaccurate), many advocates have noted an urgent need for strategic mitigation against "fake news." One of the commonly suggested modes of fake news management is through fact-checking—ensuring that members of the public have access to neutral resources, where they can confirm or deny information they have encountered through other sources. This is a feasible idea; it presumes that "fake news" information received by the public is incorrect and therefore easily corrected by presenting accurate counter-facts. Unfortunately, this has not proven successful as it fails to confront the aforementioned root of disinformation, which is belief rather than fact.

In the United States, Snopes.com has fought against disinformation since 1994. Having begun with simple urban legends, the website has expanded operations to include corrections against scientific disinformation (affirming, for instance, that NASA is not "dosing Americans with lithium from the sky," a long-time conspiracy theory) (LaCapria, 2018). More recently, the website has included political information, using congressional records, interview archives, and other verifiable sources to verify claims made by politicians.

Snopes became the subject of a "fake news" scandal (perhaps because of its pre-eminence in fact-checking) when misinformation distributor Paul Horner registered domain names similar to Snopes (Snopes.com.co) to deliberately mislead readers

attempting to fact-check (Funke, 2018). Beyond web spoofing, politicians have dismissed Snopes as fraudulent or politically motivated to smear their names—paid by their enemies or foreign entities (Emery, 2018). The case of Snopes illustrates the flaws of the fact-checking approach, which demands that audiences hold the website to the highest standard of trust, assuming that this site will always tell them the whole truth, an approach that UNESCO's models of MIL discourage. Furthermore, notorious fact-checking websites are typically dismissed by fringe agents as "government corruption" or "lies," invalidating their usefulness among the most susceptible readers.

These sites require the audience to have sufficient technology literacy to avoid being lured into reading false fact checkers. A study on German seniors (Friemel, 2016) and young refugees, immigrants, and people living in poverty in the UK (Eynon and Geniets, 2016) found among reluctant or occasional internet users shared traits of lack of intellectual curiosity, discomfort in addressing or confronting material contradictions to their experiences, and unwillingness to acquire additional MIL skills to improve their internet capacity. Unfortunately, both demographics identified are prime victims of "fake news." They are vulnerable to disinformation because of their social status and lack of MIL skills.

"Don't confuse me with the facts"

Among the notions against which specialists and experts must guard themselves is the universal persuasiveness of fact. To academic and academically-adjacent professionals, with well-studied understandings of p-value and peer review, fact is a sacred entity. Yet, many people have never been provided the tools to interrogate the truth of a source—to affirm that X is true because of the demonstrated realities of Y and Z, the multi-variate regression at Q, and the meta-analysis at R.

Suspicion of data is profound among the public. Without adequate data literacy—itself informed by high-level numeracy, scientific literacy, and general reverence for the academic process—statistics are nothing more than rude reminders of the elite's self-satisfaction in their own educational attainment. For example, despite the nation's high level of education, only one in five Americans has great trust in the institution of science, almost a third less than those who have great trust in the military (Funke, 2018).

Some experts presume that the harsh light of truth will correct falsehoods, which is not necessarily the case. In the aforementioned US "fake news case," the restaurant with the alleged basement child trafficking ring *did not have a basemen*t. Yet 46% of right-wing voters surveyed maintained the belief that, yes, their left-wing rivals were

pedophiles trafficking children in imaginary pizza restaurant basements (Rampell, 2016). Despite four years of fact-checking and investigation to disprove this harmful and baseless claim, in 2020, 4% *more* of right-wing voters in the US, an even 50%, agreed with the statement, "top Democrats are involved in elite child sex-trafficking rings" (Beer, 2020). Using fact-based investigation and analysis for a long time did not refute (and may have partially validated) politically-motivated false belief. Thus, we observe the strategic imposition of "fake news" as an extremely effective mode of propaganda: once supported, refutation is extremely difficult.

When a belief is sufficiently deep-rooted, exposure to facts contrary to the belief may reinforce the original belief rather than refute it. Instead, of reconsidering an idea, the believers have additional institutions to distrust. Hence, even when revealed facts demonstrate that narratives could not have possibly happened, the power of the fear-based narrative is so profound that it cannot be shaken. The manipulative core of most "fake news" propagated is: *my gut feeling is correct, my fears are valid and legitimate, and my voice is being silenced in favor of more politically palatable narratives*. Thus, the MIL city must be aware of the politics surrounding "fake news," particularly in support of SDG 16: "*Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*" (UNESCO, 2019). A society whose false beliefs pits one group or demographic against another through persistent exposure to ICT and digital media risks damaging existing institutions. At its worst, this can deepen prejudice, electoral manipulation, social disruption, and violence. Confronting why some groups are more impacted by "fake news" than others must be a part of the MIL strategy, to ensure an inclusive and effective implementation.

The Fake News Strategy

The relationship of high ICT access/low digital literacy is being broadly exploited by agents (government and nongovernment alike) who wish to disrupt democracy, erode institutions, and ultimately create social disharmony.

While propaganda has arguably existed for centuries, "fake news" relies on 20th and 21st century systems and structures, namely mass literacy, mass media, and access to infinitely replicable digital media assets (i.e., memes, videos, or posts). Fake news presupposes a lack of critical perspective from a sufficient size of its audience for misinformation to circulate widely. This combination of strong ICT assets and significant deficit of ICT literacy is perhaps a result of an imbalance in development. Private sector actors have supported getting digital devices and Internet into the hands of billions of people in a few years while educational entities have struggled to

accelerate their curricula accordingly. Mass ICT access greatly benefits communities, but the lack of associated social and educational support on a comparable scale has perpetuated numerous structures required to create beliefs of "fake news." Whether it is conspiracy theorists promoting apocalyptic scenarios to promote their financial self-interest, quack doctors selling snake-oil remedies, or foreign governments attempting to manipulate political strife, the playbook is the same:

1. Identify disaffected groups.

First, the bad actor identifies the disaffected group, which vary widely depending on the context. The disaffected could be ethnic or language minorities who feel devalued by the dominant group, or they could be the dominant group who are concerned about the emergence of minorities. Factors of age, gender, religion, economic status can be exploited.

In the 2016 American presidential elections, Kremlin's efforts to disrupt democracy targeted dozens of distinct sub-groups throughout the United States: African-Americans (disaffected by racism and police brutality), Muslims (disaffected by a climate of broad Islamophobia and xenophobia), Christian conservatives (disaffected by a perceived loss of their values in American society, and secularization), further left-wing Americans and socialists (disaffected by their mistrust of the two-party election system and loss of their preferred candidate, Bernie Sanders), and gun rights advocates (disaffected by increasing discourse about school shootings and gun control), among others (Fathom Fakebook, 2018). In 2020, under COVID-19 public health lockdowns regarded as disruptive to the way of life, more groups became potential targets for "fake news": business owners and employees whose livelihoods were acutely at risk, religious groups whose activities were temporarily restricted, or those in seriously impacted areas who felt the government was treating them unfairly.

By micro-targeting unhappy demographic groups with content that support their distinct point of view, disruptors can be far more effective than their mainstream counterparts. These disruptors are not bound by conventional political confinements to please the majority or the journalistic imperative to represent multiple points of view.

2. Find their anxieties—usually the thing that is making them feel disaffected.

Once the "target" is confirmed, the bad actor identifies what makes the group an ideal target, which varies depending on the audience but is usually easy to note. Whether they fear for their wealth, safety, ethnic purity, religious heritage, or health, the disruptor identifies their most serious concerns.

As has been noted in many countries riddled with "fake news," the subject of mass anxiety is usually well-understood but forbidden to discuss. Minority ethnic or religious groups, and the fear that they might "overtake" the majority, are a common subject. In Germany, supporters of the far-right Pegida party claim that their country risks being "Islamicized" by refugees, and conventional politicians are too timid or too politically correct to react (BBC News, 2015).

Other common anxieties are fears of mass control by shady foreign entities, often evoking anti-Semitic canards through references to Israel; the billionaire philanthropist George Soros; and a "One World Government" headed by hidden elites. (Coleman, 2018). The anxieties are tailored to their audience, but usually coalesced around themes of losing control, losing power, or having no genuine political capital whatsoever—only the illusion of power. While focused on power, these are not necessarily always political anxieties. The growing antivaccine movement in Western nations emphasizes fears about a lack of parental sovereignty and authority over children. COVID-19 has calcified and cemented these anxieties; ordinary concerns about an emergent vaccine can easily be manipulated into a strident antivaccination threat. As COVID-19 vaccination spread across the globe in late 2020 and early 2021, the "fake news" diverged into a handful of subjects: pharmaceutical companies attempting to alter human DNA, the notion that COVID-19 variants are caused by the vaccines, or that COVID-19 vaccines will make women sterile as part of a mass depopulation effort. As previously noted, the anxieties common in "fake news" have recurred in the COVID-19 campaigns (women and children; powerful and secret people).

Hence, regardless of the subject, anxious audiences already believe themselves to be under threat, out-matched, and outgunned by the nebulous agents of power. Consequently, they are receptive to media that speaks sincerely to those anxieties—even supporting it when it is flawed or poorly sourced. An audience willing to embrace media that shares their pre-existing worldview fundamental to effective "fake news" disruption.

3. Affirm those anxieties as genuine threats, using corrupted truths or outright lies.

The *news* elements of "fake news" are essential. Using half-truths, or stories that appear plausible under current conditions, allow disruptors to weaponize the unceasing media diet of the 21st century. The consequences can be tragic, if not fatal. In Myanmar, where Facebook served as a conduit for anti-Rohingya groups to disseminate content that sparked genocide in 2017 (Oppenheim, 2017), long-standing anti-Muslim sentiments were common among the Burmese, Buddhist majority population. Through Facebook, anti-Rohingya militants shared violent images—mutilated bodies, corpses in the streets—claiming that the Rohingya were terrorists who had committed the heinous crimes pictured. Some images were genuine, taken out of context, and associated with false claims. Others were wholly false, either edited, staged, or taken from fictional media. Yet, the visceral quality made the pictures persuasive. The coalition of civilian and military groups affirmed, through their pictures, what many in the country already feared—that minority groups posed a fundamental threat to the safety of their nation. No evidence existed to suggest that the images were of Rohingya attacks, that they were recent photographs, or that they had even been captured in Myanmar. However, in a social context already muddied with fear, no firm evidence was needed for persuasion. The photographs spread like wildfire over Facebook; the news was fake, and the fear and hate were real.

4. Remind them that anyone who attempts to correct the lies and falsehoods is, fundamentally, their enemy.

The last step in "fake news" disruption is to remind the audience that only the news they agree with should be trusted. Casting fact-based reporting as "biased" or based on lies, while claiming that the fake material is the only trustworthy source, deepens the divide between the anxious audience and the rest of the media. Government attempts to correct lies? *Just more evidence of their efforts to obfuscate unpleasant truths*. Investigative reporting, with photographs, video, or eyewitness report? *Elaborate cover-ups, created to sway true believers with increasingly complex webs of lies.* A profound struggle of "fake news": the more a light of truth is shone upon it, the more its supporters can affirm their existing belief sets.
If we were not so close to the real truth, says the conspiracy theorist and "fake news" believer, *they would not expend such effort trying to prove us wrong.* Every input is a re-affirmation.

5. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

The final note of efficacy for the "fake news" strategy is repetition: ensuring that even skeptical people see the misinformation many times across many platforms. When accurate information or recommendations are often changing, disinformation remains comfortingly consistent.

Consider recent disputes about COVID-19 vaccines: first, AstraZeneca was safe; then, it was associated with blood clots; afterward, some countries deemed it unsafe before returning to use it. All of these decisions were made in the context of emergent scientific information but transmitted to the public only via headline. The confusion becomes evident: "AstraZenca Safe!" on Monday and "AstraZeneca Unsafe!" on Thursday begins to appear as "the experts cannot be certain of anything." By contrast, the agents of misinformation and "fake news" would have supported a belief-based (rather than fact-based) message from the beginning—which, as a dogma, does not change as information does. The ability to provide a stalwart, unchanging, unyielding opinion is a comfort to anxious people in difficult times, even (and perhaps especially) if untrue. Herein is the challenge of refuting falsehood: lies do not ever need to change. Once they take root, their efficacy remains the same.

Therefore, what should be done? Can supporters of the truth disrupt disinformation? The answer is "yes," but the methods are highly variable.

MIL Cities as an Antidote

Fortunately, an MIL city has the capacity to be a site of meaningful discourse and refutation of politically-motivated false beliefs—if executed thoughtfully. The MIL city is intended by design to be "aspirational" (UNESCO, 2019); the city emphasizes outreach to groups that may be marginalized by conventional municipal or government outreach. This focus will come handy in the fight against weaponized "fake news."

In a well-executed MIL city framework, the groups most vulnerable to this manipulation should be pre-emptively identified and reached out to—in whatever context they prefer. Depending on local preference and context, outreach should occur through conventional internet platforms (Facebook, Twitter), more unconventional internet platforms (Reddit, 4chan), or in-person outreaches (at schools, colleges, workplaces, and places of worship). Ethnic and religious minority communities should be accommodated as well as majority populations whose intercultural resentments can fuel the influence of "fake news."

What could outreach look like in an MIL city? It may mean presenting upcoming legislation in an easy-to-understand format for an average person, allowing feedback through public officials. Beyond just listening, the MIL city should have the tools to integrate public perspectives—even if it is contradictory to a master plan or frustrating to manage. The public should be invited to provide consultation and suggestion, but beyond this, they will need to receive evidence that their feedback has an impact. Thus, citizen's suggestions must form the basis of the municipal outcomes, whether in legislation, planning, programming, or spending.

An MIL city can dampen discontent by supporting a transparent system, which hinges on open dialog, engaging citizens on multiple platforms (online and in-person) and providing open evidence of how citizens impact their city. The basis of support of "fake news" is not incorrect facts; it is the belief that one's potential is held back by shady and unstoppable forces. In revealing both the structure of the city and the power of the individual, ordinary citizens within it, an MIL city can simultaneously bolster MIL goals and social cohesion. A tangible, participatory MIL city will enable the defusing of some of the worst accusations of the "fake news" by shifting from an inscrutable, technocratic, distant, and intellectualized government. How can the government be controlled by distant entities when you, an ordinary person, help set its course? How can your neighbor of a different ethnicity be a threat when you break bread while discussing the library or a community radio station?

Theoretically, this process can be illustrated thus:

Sample MIL Cities Anti-Fake News Strategy

1. Municipal governments must identify disaffected groups, using whatever tools are available: school rolls, census data, religious groups, and information from healthcare providers and law enforcement.
2. On virtual platforms, municipal governments should conduct specific outreach—information sessions about topics related to major sources of disinformation (like ethnic tensions, COVID-19 vaccines, or other controversial subjects) as well as positive, unrelated subjects of significance to those groups (football, culture, etc.) The former sessions are to dispel myths, but the latter are to foster a positive relationship between disaffected groups and municipal governments. This will strengthen trust and hinder them from falling victim to "fake news."
3. Beyond the virtual targeting, the disaffected people must be provided with opportunities to connect across communities. This can include free social or cultural events in major public places, such as town squares or plazas. Ideally, these events will have a positive message with a secondary intention toward dispelling misinformation. For example, a holiday festival can have

> an intercultural understanding activity, or a sports event can promote the circulation of information in both majority and minority languages. In cities where communities are highly segregated, governments should consciously plan events to include multiple groups. Intercultural contact in positive, low-risk situations is a strong means of disrupting "fake news" narratives—replacing negative messages with positive experiences.

Importantly, this process will not be smooth. Some of the engagements will be fiercely contested, even disruptive; MIL cities should consider plans for deliberate, controlled conflicts in the context of building strong MIL institutions. Like an intentional forest fire set to prevent a wildfire, bringing up controversial "fake" beliefs in a controlled environment, with compassion, will allow cities to support their citizenry in participating in government. The goal is not to fact-check or convince the "fake news" believers that they are wrong or have been misled; it is to reduce the sense of disaffection that fueled the appeal of the false beliefs.

Conclusion: An Alternative to Alternative Facts

Aristotle noted over two millennia ago that successful argumentation is not simply a matter of stating facts better, but about appealing sufficiently to the ethics and the emotions of an audience. ("Aristotle, Rhetoric J. H. Freese, Ed.") Disinformation sticks not because of the reasoned quality of its arguments, but because of its powerful appeal to emotion—usually, fear. Hence, governments and civil society organizations cannot presume that promoting truth—and revealing what makes a lie a lie—will be sufficient to hinder the spread of fake news. Exploring the foundations that make "fake news" effective is as salient (if not more so!) as correcting untruths. Governments and civil society organizations might be better advised to cast a more comprehensive narrative.

Most significant is the change of focus; organizations should go to where audiences can be found and importantly, where audiences are actively receiving "fake news." If the people are getting their news from Facebook, the governments should contribute to their citizens' feeds, circulating information in the same punchy, alluring formats as their disinformation foes. Videos should be a part of every government's media production set, as well as readily shareable "memes." Active staff should circulate through the internet, as they do through parks and at town halls, ensuring that they have heard the concerns of the public—and noting attempts at disinformation spreading before it becomes epidemic.

The scourge of "fake news" will likely increase as the world becomes more connected. How it is battled and managed will ultimately define the relationship between the Internet and the truth… Hopefully, for the better.

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