

» spotlight

# White House



the new era of american spin

by *Tristan Bronca*



**'Fake News'** may be as old as the printing press, but president Donald

Trump reminded us that facts could never be separated from our politics.

**I WAS AT A HOUSE PARTY** when I first heard about the girl who was living with monkeys. A friend brought it up while a group of us were sitting around the kitchen table drinking. According to initial reports, a few police officers found her deep in the jungles of a far northern province in India, naked and playing with a troop of apes. The monkeys even attacked the police officers in an effort to protect her.

So the story went.

A few of us were skeptical, so rather than argue about whether it's even possible for a non-fictional human child to live with monkeys, I looked up the story on my phone. The first news hit was from the *Guardian* which reported that the girl was in fact found by the roadway and not "deep in the jungle." Officials acknowledged there may have been monkeys nearby, but they didn't attack anyone and she certainly wasn't living with them. *Slate*, the *Washington Post*, and several other outlets were reporting the same.

When I mentioned this, our friend wasn't having it. "No, she was living with the monkeys," she insisted.

We all talked about it for a while after that but it was clear the argument was going nowhere. We both knew what we believed.

**FAKE NEWS** has a long history. I know it's lazy, journalistically, to say "I could tell you all about it" and then not tell you all about it, but as far as I'm concerned, you already know false information has left plenty of scars on humanity. You already know rumors circulated through ancient cultures by the privileged and powerful created deeply ingrained prejudices. You already know propaganda has been the fuel that powered every evil regime. But fake news isn't just the tool of some distant boogeyman. It was part of our culture long before Trump came along.

My favourite example is Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the United States. He knowingly spread lies about British officers working with murderous bands of natives to fan the flames of the American Revolution. Another particularly rich one is Joseph Pulitzer: the owner of the late 19th century newspaper *New York World*. He was one of the world's foremost purveyors of yellow journalism, a sensational brand of reporting less concerned with facts than with attracting readers. Today the name Pulitzer is stamped on the highest prize in journalism.

I'd even go as far as saying that "real news" judged by our most modest modern journalistic standards has been a historical exception. There was a period where many of the big networks and newspapers built their brands solely around credibility, but the internet blew up that model too. Those institutions still exist, but they're now competing with upstarts that aren't playing by the same rules.

Today, what most of us call "fake news" is a unique beast, one that couldn't exist without modern technologies or sensibilities. In the online news economy, most content creators make a few pennies for each click they generate, and amidst all the interest in the U.S. election, many discovered that a phony story about the Pope endorsing Trump, or about Obama threatening to move to Canada would get a lot more traction a lot quicker than any piece of honest reporting could. (This was usually aided significantly by bots – robotic users – that can be purchased or programmed by the hundreds to artificially inflate likes, shares, retweets, etc. As these numbers climb into the thousands, the social media algorithms highlight them, which puts them in front of real users, who might then share or like it themselves. Those numbers are also viewed as a proxy for credibility, meaning you're more likely to believe something that's been shared 8,000 times than something that has been shared eight times.)

These content creators have been confronted by actual journalists, but they often say the stories are just satire "like the Onion" or a social experiment to show how easily the public falls for fake news. Those tend to be pretty bad excuses. First, when a social experiment that relies on fooling people becomes a for-profit business, it's no longer a social experiment. Second, even the most incisive piece of political satire cannot compete for traffic with an outrageous news story. The fake news providers know both of these things.

Which brings us to Trump, the world's most clickable headline. Researchers at Stanford compiled a database of fake news stories related to the 2016 election and estimated they were shared a total of 38 million times. They extrapolated the page views and suggested that, on average, every American adult with a computer might have seen three of these fake stories. The 41 pro-Clinton stories in the database had been shared a total of 7.6 million times, but the 115 pro-Trump stories had been shared a whopping 30 million times.

Meanwhile, Trump himself repeatedly told blatant lies (see: his contact with Russia, Obama's wiretapping allegations, claims of voter fraud, etc. ad nauseam). ▀



# well that's just what they want you to **believe.**

PolitiFact reports that nearly 70% of the things Trump said during the campaign weren't even half-true, which are objectively awful numbers even for a politician. He cozied up to Alex Jones who now, as a direct result of Trump, wields more influence than any conspiracy theorist in American history. Trump launched an ongoing assault on the media, claiming that credibly sourced reporting coming from CNN, and the *New York Times* was, in fact, "fake news." He would lie, only to turn around and call the people who exposed his lies, liars.

It would be tough to overstate how destabilizing this kind of behaviour is for one simple reason: People believe the president.

Our understanding of the world is shaped through stories, and those stories are shaped by people we trust. There has always been a political dimension to this. We have always been dismissive of those who challenge our worldview (a phenomenon known as confirmation bias). But never before have we been so ready and willing to dismiss such obvious and readily available facts in service to our politics. We have never seen the most powerful person in the world so openly dispute photographic evidence of a crowd size because it didn't align with his view of how popular he was. More importantly, we have never seen so many dismiss such a bald-faced lie – made by the President's official spokesperson in his first public statement to the American people – as unimportant.

To be clear, this sort of behaviour isn't a trap that uneducated people fall into, nor is it a uniquely Trumpian phenomenon. But what Trump has done is shift our priorities. Winning has always been more im-

portant to him than the truth, and because he's now won, his opponents now have to play the same game.

CNN is a perfect example of this. As Fox News built its empire around its pundits, CNN decided that news – the facts – would be its only star. But today that's not the case. Now, anchors like Jake Tapper and Anderson Cooper are making rounds on the late night circuit and getting profiled in magazines, lionized for simply pushing back against falsehoods spewed on-air by Trump surrogates. Jeff Zucker, a former producer of reality TV shows and current president of CNN, openly acknowledged that what people most want to see is not straight reporting, but pundits sparring over the day's juiciest news piece. The ratings are higher than ever.

Things have become so turbulent, even the facts need a little extra spin – a hero to defend them, say – in order to be heard. Otherwise they're lost in the howl.

**I UNDERSTAND** conspiracies can be deeply appealing. Even before Trump, people who believed them were everywhere, smirking silently at the dinner table as we discussed current events, convinced what we thought we knew was all a part of a massive state-sponsored ruse. The news was always fake to them. What changed after Trump is that it's no longer unusual to think this way. Now we're the ones sitting there in mute disbelief as conspiracy-minded relatives discuss – and this is just a random example – some secret government operation to lace the water with chemicals that turn our children asexual (for more info on this check out Alex Jones' Infowars...or don't, actually please don't).

How do you talk about that? What could you possibly say that couldn't be dismissed with a "well that's just what they want you to believe"? We need to rely on a shared set of unchanging facts that anchor us to reality. For an uncomfortable number of us, our realities are already worlds apart being pushed further by the things we read and watch and choose to believe.

Yes, Facebook and Google have developed new guides and tools to help us weed out fake news but this doesn't really address the underlying problems. Alex Jones fans don't care what some paper-pusher at Snopes or PolitiFact says. A recent study showed that people will turn down cash money to avoid reading opinions they disagree with. The cognitive dissonance is intolerable. Even in the face of contrary evidence, we continue to seek out the stories we want to believe.

Sometimes that won't matter. Sometimes it won't be any more consequential than an innocently mistaken or exaggerated report of a young girl living with monkeys in some distant part of India.

But sometimes when we overreach for the extraordinary, we overlook something important. As it turned out, the story of that Indian girl was much darker than the *Jungle Book*-inspired romp that many people believe it was. She was developmentally challenged and her parents likely drove from a distant town to abandon her at the edge of the park. The officials said that if she did survive even one night there on her own, it would have been a miracle.

It's a horrible story, full of injustice and cruelty. But that's the one we need to hear.