

# Hell is Truth seen Too Late

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# Rough Outline of Talk

- Existing Analyses of 'fake news' too parochial, limited
- Start with 'Neoliberalism' and its central connection to 'market epistemology'
- Role of business model, economists
- Draw out implications for truth, politics

# Neoliberal Epistemology

[1] 'People' are sloppy undependable cognitive agents

[2] Not to worry. "The Market" is the greatest information processor in human history

[3] The problem is to get people to accept and subordinate themselves to The Market. This is called 'freedom'.

[4] The politics of [1-3] can be a little tricky. Best not to be too literal about it.



# Hostility to Experts

- [1] Dates back to 1920s, Walter Lippmann, Dewey debate, etc. NTC hated the Cold War 'solution' of dependence upon **experts** to offset irrationality.
- [2] Friedrich Hayek treated as major figure of NTC because he initiated this doctrine of market as information processor.
- [3] Milton Friedman: "Businessmen, who may be bankrupted if they refuse to face facts, are one of the few groups that develop the habit of doing so. That is why, I have discovered repeatedly, the successful businessman is more open to new ideas... than the academic intellectual who prides himself on his alleged independence of thought."
- This becomes the *central argument* of the NTC as to why socialism must fail.

# Further Commentary

- [3] Doctrine hives 'liberty' off from autonomy and (Kantian) self-determination. You can't trust people to 'know' if they are 'free'. Education is just lumps of 'human capital', not a prereq for a democratic citizenry. Only entrepreneurs live fully realized lives— everyone else just are drones.
- [4] But of course, you cannot just *tell* people all of this. **'Truth' becomes unmoored from argumentation.** Hence one must develop special 'double truth' precepts to pursue politics to take over the government and impose this kind of order.
- Simple example: How many in audience think neoliberalism is about deregulation, shrinking government, legal restraint, low taxes for everyone, political withdrawal from private endeavors?

# Using the Epistemic Understanding of Neoliberalism to Clarify Fake News Phenomenon



# Just as with neoliberalism, some on left simply deny fake news even exists

I think this discussion about fake news is largely a bunch of bullshit. It's become this category, nobody knows exactly what it means, and it's become applied to everything from stuff that's intentionally deceptive to stuff where people are trying to get the answer right but they get something wrong. ...I never use the term 'fake news' – Joshua Cohen

“Fake news is but one symptom of a shift back to historical norms, and recent hyperventilating mimics reactions from the past.” –Uberti, *CJR*

**“Fake news was a term specifically about people who purposely fabricated stories for clicks and revenue. Now it includes bad reporting, slanted journalism and outright propaganda. We're doing a disservice to lump all those things together.” –  
*Quote founder Snopes.com***



# Fake news as neoliberal innovation

- Fake news is something far more insidious than Orwell's Ministry of Truth. Once the neoliberal image of the market as both means of conveyance and validation of ideas took hold, then it shaped and informed changes in the very means and conduct of argumentation in general. **Befuddlement became an active political strategy very different from the top-down broadcast model of early 20<sup>th</sup> century 'propaganda'**. Rather, these days, disinformation is predicated upon the creation of a fog of confusion and disillusion, and less directly promoted by straightforward media manipulation (the bugaboo of the nostalgic left) than the harvesting through social media of the inchoate folderol of the general populace, subsequently feeding it back to the masses through platforms like Facebook and new model 'journalism'

Of course, Neoliberals did not 'invent' the Internet...

- **Privatization of Internet in 1990s supercharged the neoliberal vision:**
- **Recast the market as an amplifier to recycle vulgarity, twaddle, gibberish and overall noise back into the public that generates it in the first place, in a cybernetic feedback loop, to such an extent that they have no clue what is actually going on in their own world.**
- Objectives: [1] The transformation of the endless befuddlement of the masses into a lucrative source of recurrent profit; and simultaneously, [2] the rendering of the populace more docile in the face of neoliberal takeover of the government.

# Market Epistemology Inspires Fake News

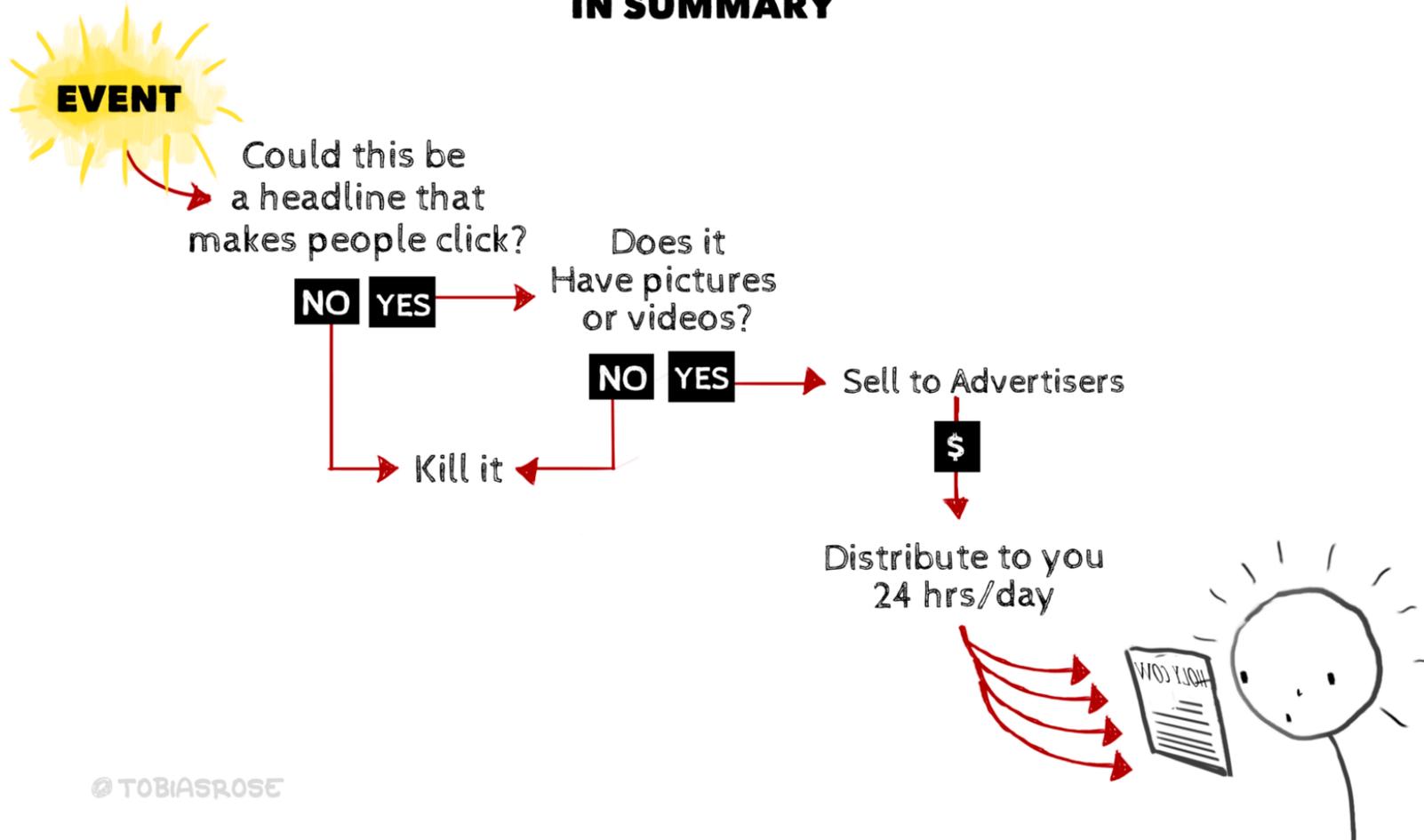
- 4 Stages of the enabling of fake news
- [1] Deskilling and casualization of journalist labor
- [2] Replace people with algorithms to cull, curate and convey news through platforms
- [3] Automate the selling and placement of advertising which funds the platforms performing [2]
- [4] Automate agency itself with political bots

# Automation Logic on Facebook

- *This illustrates how neoliberals were involved in this dynamic*
- Facebook adds function to curate news through its 'Trending' box
- in May 2016 when a poorly sourced anonymous 'insider' claimed that the human editors who curated the 'Trending' box on Facebook were biased and routinely suppressed so-called conservative websites.
- In other words, someone at a neoliberal think tank was miffed that Facebook would actually take into account the credibility of the source like Breitbart before listing it to a generic news feed. *Gizmodo* and the neoliberal echo chamber blew this up into a *cause célèbre*, crying censorship, and Mark Zuckerberg was forced to grovel before some right wing media celebrities
- 3 months later, human editors fired & replaced by algorithms
- Immediately, the volume of fake news on the feed began to explode

# Facebook Newsfeed Algorithm, Simplified

## HYPERBOLIC MODERN NEWS IN SUMMARY



## Not the Only Way Automation fosters fake news

- **Advertisers can't keep track of where all their ads appear, so they automate the 'market' that places them**
- Joe Marchese, president of advertising products for the Fox Networks Group, said the system, set up to reward clicks and impressions, had fueled the growth of low-quality sites well beyond those focused on made-up political news. "Honestly, the long tail is to advertising what subprime was to mortgages," he said. "No one knows what's in it, but it helps people believe that there is a mysterious tonnage of impressions that are really low cost"
- Facebook introduced ads into NewsFeed in 2012
- **Advertisers don't even know what manner of dreck they are supporting, because they have left all that to opaque market algorithms, which *neoliberal doctrine tells them are better than any human being in sorting out the truth***

# Ultimate Apotheosis of Algorithmic Intervention

- **Why not automate the audience as well!**
- Samuel Wooley and Philip Howard have pointed out, it has become widespread practice for some political entities to make use of technical proxies in the form of semi-automated bots to explicitly manipulate public opinion.
- They define *political bots* as algorithms designed to operate over social media, able to 'learn' from and mimic real people so as to create misleading impressions concerning the nature of internet interactions. Political bots are deployed to boost follower numbers and retweet the messages of politicians or other celebrities on Twitter, to attack and mislead political opponents on Facebook and the discussion sections of news sites, or drown out activist conversations on Reddit and elsewhere (Woolley & Howard, 2016).

# Bots are already here

- It is estimated by Woolley and Howard that bots comprise nearly 50% of all online traffic; on Twitter, approximately 30 million active accounts are bot driven. In a separate study, a sample of election-related tweets from 16 September to 21 October 2016 revealed an estimate of 400,000 Twitter accounts were in fact bots, and that bots comprised nearly 19% of the total conversations.
- **Nothing is better tuned to induce despair in the populace concerning democracy than to trick unsuspecting humans into engaging in political discourse with soulless robots. Not only are they bamboozled into a generalized ignorance about almost everything they encounter online; but now, they can't tell political discourse from a video game. The very notion of a deliberative democracy becomes a bitter joke.**
- **the only party in the German elections of 2017 who refused to refrain from use of political bots was the Alternativ fur Deutschland**

# Fake News & Platform Capitalism

**Both are based in an explicit neoliberal understanding of the epistemic weakness of the crowd and the superior epistemic capacities of market-like validation systems**

**Both are exemplifications of a novel formation sometimes called “platform capitalism” (Srnicek) which makes profit not through fabrication, but rather through the control and manipulation of data – and as such are intimately bound up with Internet technologies**

**Both sell themselves as ‘democratic’ and open, but in fact exist to undermine previous democratic structures and move governance to the corporate sphere**

**Both are effective in co-opting a Left that lacks understanding of neoliberalism and its political projects**

**Both subordinate ‘truth’ to market validation**



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too late.

—Thomas Hobbes

The Owl of Minerva...