

CHAPTER FIVE

WE ARE ALL LIARS

*Everywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages.
Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial*

Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation

*A human being takes in far more information than he or she can put out.
'Stupidity' is a process or strategy by which a human . . . commits him- or
herself to taking in no more information than she or he can put out*

Samuel Delany, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

Not to lie about the future is impossible and one can lie about it at will

Naum Gabo, The Realistic Manifesto

I.

Edgar Maddison Welch carries two guns, one of them an automatic assault rifle bigger than his arm. It's an AR-15, a lethal weapon adored by the National Rifle Association, repeatedly used in several mass shootings. He has a third gun in his car, in case of trouble.

A young man with dirty fair hair and a scraggly beard, he is a small-time screenwriter and bit-part actor with minor credits in a string of slasher horror movies. He has come, dressed in light blue jeans and t-shirt, to 'self-investigate' rumours of an elite paedophile ring. Internet stories say that Hillary Clinton and top-level Democrats are trafficking child sex slaves out of the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington DC: the infamous 'Pizzagate'.

Staff and diners at the pizzeria are faced with an agitated, gun-toting man who may be about to kill them. They flee, in hectic panic. He fires some shots into the floor and begins stalking the restaurant looking for the tunnels through which the children are allegedly being hustled. A restaurant employee who has gone to get some pizza dough from the freezer in the alley, comes back in to find Welch turning the rifle on him. He turns and runs, escaping with his life. After about twenty minutes, satisfying himself that there are no underage children on the premises, Welch surrenders peacefully to the police surrounding the restaurant.

All of this takes place within half an hour on a December afternoon in 2016, and it is more ridiculous and compelling than any script Welch is ever likely to write. He is not the first to go to the restaurant to investigate

these claims. Since these allegations went viral, the owners have been bombarded with death threats and abuse, and vigilantes have turned up to look around the premises and live-stream their investigations. But Welch, clearly anticipating the sort of scenario in which he might have to be Vin Diesel, goes in armed and ready to kill. He ends up with a four-year jail sentence.

All of this derangement is apparently driven by a 'fake news' story, originating with far-right conspiracy websites and circulated on Facebook. There appear to be a surfeit of stories alleging Hillary Clinton's involvement in child sex trafficking. Lt Gen. Michael Flynn, then Trump's national security adviser, shared a similar tale, breathlessly tweeting about 'Money Laundering, Sex Crimes w Children, etc. . . MUST READ!'

It is not clear, could never be clear, whether the story is a deliberate troll or earnest lunacy. It may have been a dupe, or the true confession of someone who, as far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones once put it, smelled the body under the carpet. At this level, the difference between a fake story and a confession becomes moot. Nor is it possible to say whether, or why, people really believed it, or merely entertained it, or why either way they acted on it. Is it really a problem of 'fake news', or just another example of the paranoid vigilantism that has seen the rate of mass shootings in America soar, even as other violent crimes have plummeted?

In the same month that Edgar Maddison Welch undertook his one-man vigilante operation in Washington, the Pakistani defence minister was gulled into threatening Israel with nuclear strikes. He had read a story about Israel contemplating a nuclear attack on their country in the event that Pakistani troops entered Syria. Pakistan, he reminded Israel, was 'a nuclear state too'. The story was a fake, but it revealed something real nonetheless. The prospect of atomic genocide had been distilled for infotainment, only to expose a very real possibility already lurking in the global order.

In Giorgio De Maria's cult horror novel, *The Twenty Days of Turin*, high-minded city administrators are struggling to cope with the alienation of the dislocated migrants arriving in the city. A band of charming, fresh-faced youths, apparently idealistic and impossible to distrust, propose

'the Library'. In the Library, they don't want high-flown artifice; they want 'popular' literature: the confessional. In the Library, anyone can read anyone else's personal diaries, confessions, complaints, cries from the heart. One woman wants a young man to help her with constipation and is 'ready to give and give and give'. Another aches to satisfy 'some kind of poetic desire'. Old scrapbooks, notepads and diaries are recovered and enlivened by the invention of a new kind of audience.

Here is the Library as a kind of psychopharmacopoeia, an antidepressant, administering the suffering soul with writing. Appropriately, it is based in a wing of the sanatorium. For the blessing of an audience, some attention to their pains and yearning, citizens willingly give up their intimacy, their privacy, to the Library. Their confessions grow macabre, dark, malicious. Pages and pages of screeds are confected just to injure someone, or else disintegrate 'into the depths of bottomless madness'. They go from celebrity to trolling. And slowly it becomes clear that they have birthed a malevolent force, a 'collective psychosis' resulting in nightly mass murders.

The horror story of the Twittering Machine is told, cumulatively, in vignettes about 'fake news', in sustained augury about the 'post-truth' society being birthed, and in pithy denunciations of 'echo chambers' and 'content silos'. But what if we are in the position of De Maria's investigator, not knowing what we are faced with? There is a collective writing experiment, a descent into madness and violence. What force connects them is still, to us, an occult knowledge.

II.

Old media is not dying. The advertising-driven print and broadcast media will live, albeit smaller and much weaker than before. They are being inscribed within a new hierarchy of writing dominated by the digitus. And the characteristics of that new hierarchy are determined by the way that Silicon Valley venture capital has found its profit model.

The social industry is one powerful faction within a wider platform economy: what Nick Srnicek calls Platform Capitalism. This sector began to arise after the dot-com bubble burst, when a glut of spare

financial capital was invested in tech upstarts experimenting with ways to make money. The 'platform' model, where the service is to connect businesses, customers and other businesses digitally, was a clear winner. As Srnicek documents, the logic of this platform connection is to make the processes of consumption and production more visible. Spotify, renting its musical product through a cloud-based streaming service, collects digital information from customers that enables far more precise marketing. General Electric, offering a cloud platform to allow industrial firms to connect production processes by sensor and chip all over the world, makes production systems legible in the form of electronic writing. This also permits a new form of rent-seeking. Instead of selling products, increasingly firms adopting the 'platform' structure just lease them as services. Rolls-Royce, rather than selling a jetliner engine, will now rent it out at an hourly rate.

The social industry giants have created a new form of advertising platform. The flow of marketing revenue is being massively redirected from newspapers to Facebook and Google. World advertising revenues for the newspapers fell by more than \$15 billion from 2013 to 2017. In the US, newspaper readership fell to its lowest level since the 1940s. In the UK, print circulation is heading for a cliff fall. British press barons are discussing the formation of a cartel to negotiate advertising revenues, as a result of losing out to the internet. The same decline befalls the broadcasters, where social media ad spending is projected to be larger than the entire global television advertising market by 2020. The new giants are Facebook and Google – and their respective services, Instagram and YouTube. These companies took 90 per cent of all new digital-advertising revenue in 2017. Most of it came from smartphone users. Were it not for the smartphone becoming ubiquitous around 2011, things would be different.

Facebook beats a newspaper, hands down, precisely because it has nothing to do with journalism. Newspapers sell the attention of a cluster of demographics purchasing a fixed bundle of products. Their product is conditioned by factors extraneous to advertising, such as the ideological agenda of the owners, the professional ideology of journalists, and certain inherited cultural ideas of what a newspaper is and what 'news values' are.

Facebook doesn't care. It detaches the organization and distribution of content from that sort of editorial control. A piece of content originally procured for a Sunday newspaper, or a half-hour television news programme, is now an item in a flow of homogenized posts organized by algorithm. Facebook automatically selects for information what is impressive and seductive, rather than accurate or even meaningful. It degrades the ecology of information, while inflating it and adding a new volatility to it. And it radically accelerates the existing drive to infuse journalism with the imperatives of amusement and entertainment.

For the advertisers, this results in much better data. Attention is organised by far more exact demographics, indexed to clicks, searches, shares, messages, views, reacts, scrolls, pauses: the complete digital package. Google has an even more comprehensive set of tools. It is not just the search engine which allows Google to see what people are up to online. They have the Google Chrome browser, their Gmail service, their DNS server, YouTube, website analytics, Google Translate, Google Reader, Google Maps and Google Earth. They can analyse messages, contacts, travel routes and the shops visited by users. They have a deal with Twitter, giving them access to all tweets. Users hand over immense amounts of raw material to the platforms every time they access the app.

This new revenue system is transforming both the consumption and production of information, ripping it out of the control of Cold War-era broadcasters and print giants allied to the liberal state. Already in 2016, 62 per cent of Americans got some news on social media, and 44 per cent got their news regularly from Facebook. No other single company comes close. Those that are even remotely competitive are themselves advertising platforms. YouTube ranks second, with 10 per cent of American adults getting their news regularly from the video service, followed by Twitter with 9 per cent.

If the old news giants were advertising platforms in denial, Facebook is a media organization in denial. Neither Facebook nor Google invest in journalism. Indeed, they don't invest much in any new production at all. Their profits are so high and their costs so low that the vast majority of their wealth is invested in liquid financial stocks or hoarded offshore. In 2016, it was reported that Google offshored \$43 billion.

Facebook uses the same tax-avoidance scheme. They are leaders of the pack among the top fifty American corporations hoarding \$14 trillion offshore. Facebook, attempting to mollify old media monopolists losing out to Facebook without giving them a dime, has launched the 'Facebook Journalism Project'. The project proposes a new partnership with publishers, from *Bild* and *El País* to Fox News and the *Washington Post*, to help them use the medium to get new subscribers. This merely maximizes the ability of a small number of old media survivors to attract a diminishing pool of revenues. Google, in a similarly minuscule gesture, has set up a journalism fellowship.

Nonetheless, precisely because they have no responsibility to journalism, the social industry platforms are in a sense much purer media companies. When Mark Zuckerberg writes that 'news and media are not the primary things people do on Facebook', a claim he repeated to Congress in 2018, he is concealing something in plain sight. Facebook, Google, Twitter, YouTube, are nothing but media. They exist to generate information, as part of a cybernetic system of surveillance, control and extraction, without bias. Bias is about meaning, whereas social media platforms are fundamentally nihilistic.

This agnosticism about content purifies an existing trend in the old media. While newspapers owned by Axel Springer, or Rupert Murdoch, or the allies of ruling parties like *El País* in Spain, all had ideological axes to grind, they were also advertising platforms. And that business model was tendentiously already agnostic about content, as long as attention backed up by purchasing power was secured. In fact, this is true of all commodities produced under capitalism: investors are in principle (never entirely in practice) indifferent to content provided it increases the return on investment. Mark Zuckerberg's extreme agnosticism, to the extent that he openly declares that he has no problem with Holocaust denial appearing on Facebook if some users want that, is a pure distillation of this tendency. The fact that most of Facebook's editorial work is delegated to proprietary algorithms – automated agnosticism, digital nihilism – doesn't make it less of a media organization.

Facebook's old media competitors miss the mark by insisting, as the *Guardian* did in 2016, that Facebook covertly relies on old-fashioned

'news values'. The paper's story was based on leaked documents showing human intervention at various stages in its 'trending news' operation, 'injecting' some stories and 'blacklisting' some topics. As the documents suggested, Facebook's criterion for determining a top 'trending news' topic was its prominence in broadcast and print news outlets. But the point about any 'trending news' system is that it is, like 'trending topics', an echo chamber. It magnifies attention to a story simply because it already has attention. Facebook's editorial operation is a digital shrug at 'news values' which, exactly on that account, canalizes attention more efficiently.

The widespread recognition that the social industry giants are media organizations, the primary source of news for hundreds of millions of people, with enormous public agenda-shaping power, is leading to new pressures on both Facebook and Google. In Spain, in 2014, an intellectual property law was passed forcing Google to pay for links and excerpts of content displayed on its Google News feed. Google reacted as any good monopolist would, by shutting down its service in that country. This was a message for countries considering similar ideas, as the UK currently is, under pressure from its newspaper industry.

This is an extraordinary climatic shift. The old news industry, for decades, has told us that journalism is best served by private enterprise, free market competition and as little state intrusion as possible. Now they want the state to bail them out, but without as yet any serious conversation about what publicly funded, public interest journalism should look like, and to whom and how it should be accountable.

Rather than have this public conversation about what is happening with our degraded information ecologies, however, states are increasingly bringing the social industry giants to book over 'fake news'.

III.

Donald Trump's gleeful appropriation of the term 'fake news' ought to have been a red flag. It ought to have alerted us to the intrinsically authoritarian cadences of this language, and to the fact that it isn't saying exactly what we'd like to think it is.

In the United States, the term gained currency as part of an attempt to explain why the paragon of the Washington governing class, Hillary Clinton, lost to the far-right rank outsider Donald Trump. After all, Trump's candidacy was supposed to assure a Clinton win; leaked Democratic Party strategy documents showed that they sought to encourage the Republicans to veer as far right as possible, in the hope of building a broad centre to rival them. The *New York Times*, a paper very much of the Democratic Party establishment, conducted an in-depth investigation into these 'fake news' stories that it said had warped the outcome. Its showcase example was a tweet that went viral, claiming that anti-Trump protesters gathering in Austin were being professionally bussed in. The claim was illustrated by a photograph of ranks of buses and coaches that, it turned out, were for participants in an unrelated conference. This false claim was shared 16,000 times on Twitter and 350,000 times on Facebook, and the rumour was endorsed by Trump.

Other examples unearthed by the *Times* were far more morbid. Clinton was paying pollsters to skew results. Her campaign was planning a 'radiological attack' to stop voting. Her strategist John Podesta partook of occult rituals. Her opponents tended to die in suspicious circumstances. 'Fake news', so the argument went, had undermined the consensus necessary for effective government. As Martin Baron, executive editor of the *Washington Post*, complained: 'If you have a society where people can't agree on basic facts, how do you have a functioning democracy?'

The problem here is that this wasn't simply about disagreement as to the 'basic facts'. Disagreement about 'basic facts' is a condition of a functioning democracy. A fact is just a measurement, and there is always some legitimate disagreement over the relevance of the measurement, the tools used to make it, the authority of the people doing the measuring, and so on. There are no facts without values, so only in a police state can there be a factual consensus. The would-be arbiters of 'basic facts' once assured readers that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, enabling the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. No, the problem was deeper. These beliefs were, to differing degrees, suggestive of conspiracist

paranoia. The kinds of people prepared to believe such stories were not only far from Clinton's core demographic; they were not even rooted in the sort of epistemological presuppositions that would be susceptible to a liberal press 'fact check'.

There is also little evidence that 'fake news' had much effect in 2016, and attempts to blame belief in 'fake news' stories risk shuffling cause and effect. For example, a study by researchers at Ohio State University looked at the correlation between belief in 'fake news' stories and defection from the Democratic ticket in 2016. It, quite ingeniously, controlled for alternative factors such as age, education, gender, race and ideological orientation. Remarkably, though, it omitted to control for the impact of Clinton's policies, statements or campaigning strategies. While establishing a weak correlation between belief in a fake news story and likelihood to defect, it was still unable to say whether this was a cause of defection or an effect of other factors causing defection. These other factors might include the effects of the credit crunch, the record of the Democratic Party in its rust-belt constituencies, and the disintegration of the political legitimacy of the party establishments.

There is a further difficulty posed by the way in which Clinton was damaged by true claims, which Trump was able to put to work. Among the leaked emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign, for example, was one discussing Clinton's speeches to Wall Street, wherein she is supposed to have said 'you need both a public and a private position'. In another, Democratic National Committee chair Donna Brazile said of the Democratic primary debates that she had received questions in advance from CNN. Another story, allegedly spread by Russian troll farms to depress black voter turnout, was that Clinton had once dubbed young black men 'superpredators'. This was also true. Trump's claim that she lied repeatedly and pathologically about her alleged heroics in Bosnia was also true.

If the term 'fake news' is widely used by the Right, including such conspiracy theorists as Alex Jones, this suggests it is semantically loaded. Indeed, Trump's appropriation of the term prompted a momentary fumbling for fine distinctions. The BBC suggested that 'unverified' was not the same as 'fake': fake news was untrue, whereas unverified

news had not yet been proven to be true or false. The problem with such Jesuitical distinctions is that all 'fake news' is 'unverified' until someone proves it is 'fake'. When Trump used the term, he was using it to describe media organizations publishing a document concerning his alleged relationships with the Russian state that, they admitted, they couldn't verify. Moreover, this definition of 'fake news' would cover many stories critical of Trump. For example, the *Washington Post* alleged that Russian hackers had 'penetrated' the US electricity grid during the election, and that a range of left-of-Clinton websites were part of a Russian disinformation campaign. Both stories, aggressively promoted by the Post, were later humiliatingly edited, their central claims withdrawn.

Those bewailing 'fake news', overwhelmingly journalists from the legacy media, are also missing the real scoop. 'Fake news' is old news. After all, exactly when was the era of unalloyed truth-telling? It is child's play to list a century of official hoaxes, from Germany's 'corpse factory', to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, to Kuwaiti babies being ripped from incubators, to weapons of mass destruction capable of being unleashed within forty-five minutes. The availability of old media for state management is well documented, from the CIA's extensive operations in American newsrooms during 'Operation Mockingbird' to MI5's vetting of BBC journalists (and the BBC's covering up of this fact). Equally well documented is its involvement in what journalist Nick Davies called 'churnalism': the recycling of press releases as news. These include not just the usual run of celebrity fare or commercial propaganda, but also false stories from right-wing organizations like the anti-immigrant Migration Watch or the anti-Muslim Gatestone Institute.

To this extent, 'fake news' is a culmination and fusion of existing trends in the media: propaganda, churnalism and infotainment. The genre of faked celebrity deaths builds on a form of 'soft news' that emerged out of the fusion of entertainment and twenty-four-hour news. Alex Jones's far-right conspiracy website, Infowars, builds on talk radio's tradition of right-wing rage, conspiracy-as-infotainment and 'home shopping'. Much of what is classified as 'fake news' is just satire taken literally. For example, the satirical claim that the US would house a

quarter of a million Syrian refugees at the Standing Rock Reservation was repeated in earnest by Sean Hannity of Fox News, and Donald Trump. In other cases, the old media concocts a false news story out of random detritus found on the internet. The *Toronto Sun*'s false story claiming that asylum seekers being temporarily housed at the Radisson Hotel Toronto East had 'slaughtered goats' in the bathrooms, was based entirely on unverified reviews left on the TripAdvisor website.

Nonetheless, 'fake news' has galvanized governments to act against Facebook, as part of the general attempt to invigilate liberal states against the populist menace. And Facebook's reticence has been noted as a black mark on its corporate character. In July 2018, for example, the head of Facebook's News Feed, John Hegeman, was asked by CNN to explain why Alex Jones's Infowars site was hosted. If Facebook was dedicated to eradicating fake news, why did it tolerate a site that disseminated nonsense rumours that the victims of the Sandy Hook massacre were 'crisis actors'? Hegeman insisted that Facebook was simply a place 'where different people can have a voice'. The baser truth is that Facebook profited from allowing advertisers to target people who liked the Infowars page. Facebook ultimately caved, only after Spotify and iTunes banned Infowars the following month. The result, illustrating how much value the platforms had added to the conspiracy site, was to cut its audience immediately in half.

In 2017, Facebook launched a 'war on fake news'. Having at first resisted attempts to hold it responsible for political events in 2016, the company struck a collaboration with the rumour-checking site Snopes, FactCheck.org, ABC News, and PolitiFact. Zuckerberg admitted that the problem was integral to the online attention economy: 'fake news sites are on the rise due to the profits which can be made from web advertising'. Subsequently, following Zuckerberg's appearance before Congress, the company released a mini-documentary pledging to join the 'fight against misinformation'. It would use AI and machine-learning tools to devalue 'fake news' so that it appeared in fewer feeds and thus had less effect. Predictably, the Trump-supporting Right claimed that Facebook's partners all had a record of 'left-wing' bias.

Twitter, which has been more resistant to this sort of policing operation, initially refused to join the 'war on fake news', sticking to its 'free speech' line. Twitter founder Jack Dorsey declared that Jones would continue to be welcome on the platform. If Jones 'spread unsubstantiated rumours', this was best dealt with by fact-checking journalists (acting at no cost to Twitter). The answer to bad speech was more good speech. This was either naive or sly. Hardly anyone is susceptible to 'fact-checking', particularly when it comes high-handedly and coercively from a self-appointed authority. Fact-checking is never as exciting as the 'facts' being checked, and it can have the perverse effect of driving certain stories up the ranks of the attention economy. Dorsey ultimately caved, too, but the social industry companies remain committed to minimizing the loss of content. By algorithmically orchestrating feeds with the aid of machine-learning, they hope to reduce the political pressure on them to ban users. In an effort to circumvent hate-speech restrictions, some alt-right activists flounced off to a right-wing wannabe Twitter, 'Gab', which gained almost half a million users within two years. But the majority of activists simply adapted their content and stayed put.

The Twittering Machine, in purifying existing tendencies towards informational nihilism in the media, has clarified that the truth value of information is not the same as its economic value. But 'fake news' is not, strictly, the issue. Insofar as outright fakery happens, it is easy to understand. People lie about their political opponents, or spread misinformation about celebrities, for obvious reasons. But the 'fake news' trope is like a conspiracy theory in that it asserts a huge epistemological gap between the knowledgeable elect, and a mass of deluded 'sheeple'. It is always assumed that someone, somewhere, knowingly concocted a lie that others are simply deceived by. But if a story is believed by tens or hundreds of thousands of people, it may have been believed by its original author.

And that's the hard question. Why did so many people want what Infowars was giving them? There are, of course, such things as conspiracies, political murders, occult rituals, terrorist false flags and sex slaves. These things are part of the world we live in. But growing numbers of people seem to want networks of conspiracy to do the work of shorthand political

sociology, explaining how their lives got so bad, and how official politics became so remote and oppressive. They seem to want to believe that, rather than representing business as usual, today's centrist state managers are malign outsiders usurping a legitimate system. What accounts for this extraordinary hunger for paranoid tales of subversive evil?

IV.

We face a crisis of knowing. According to the explanation offered by theorists of a 'post-truth' society, this is a legacy of postmodernist dogma that also seeps into and informs today's insurgent right.

The argument about 'fake news' is thus further limned by a folk history of intellectual decline. According to this view, if false beliefs now gain acceptance, this is because the canons of Western reason have fallen into disuse.

This view arises in part because of the new political potency of the uneducated and unqualified. For the philosopher Steve Fuller, one of the red flags signalling the triumph of the post-truth situation was the defeat of Hillary Clinton, 'perhaps the most qualified person ever to run for the presidency', by the wildly unqualified Donald Trump. Michiko Kakutani, the esteemed journalist, likewise excoriates the Trump administration's appointment of 'unqualified judges and agency heads', as though the problem with the far right was their (often very real) incompetence. As though a competent far-right administration would not represent a far more assured doom. This reflects the spontaneous ideology of professionals, for whom education, qualifications and 'credentials' are the condition of good governance.

To treat political contests as elaborate job interviews implies a consensus: we already know what the job is, and only need to work out who can do it best. And if, rather than a struggle over competing interests and visions, an election is a meritocratic selection process, then Clinton's defeat can only be an injustice: popular sexism and unreason getting in the way of a logical career progression. From this perspective, democracy looks like lousy quality control. Indeed, the *New York Times* has reported survey evidence showing that it is political centrists who

are most likely to overtly disapprove of democracy – especially in the United States. Unsurprisingly, both Brexit and the Trump victory have generated a flurry of ‘scandalous’ liberal think pieces asking whether democracy is such a good idea after all. As though the problem with the far right was too much democracy.

However, a clique of journalists and academics spearheaded by Michiko Kakutani argue that the crisis of knowing is a legacy of the ‘postmodernist’ assault on knowledge and the Enlightenment. The idea turns up everywhere. Philosopher Daniel Dennett complains that ‘what the postmodernists did was truly evil’. The journalist Peter Pomerantsev, in a mini-documentary for BBC *Newsnight*, attributes the rise of politicians like Trump to postmodernism. The theory that postmodernism has promoted a pernicious subjectivism which relativizes truth to such an extreme degree that it provides cover to right-wing science-deniers, is ubiquitous.

‘Postmodernism’, however, turns out to be an elusive, slippery opponent. No one seems to be entirely sure what it is. For example, Kakutani cites without apparent irony a preening comment made by the American alt-rightist Mike Cernovich in an interview with the *New Yorker*. ‘Look,’ Cernovich explained, ‘I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative. I don’t seem like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?’ Cernovich may have read a little Lacan at college, but he is as likely to have understood him as Trump is to have ghostwritten *Finnegans Wake*. Lacan, a clinical psychoanalyst in the Freudian tradition, was as classically modernist as it was possible to be, and in no way aligned to the view that ‘everything is a narrative’. In this context, ‘postmodernist’ appears to mean ‘snooty French intellectual’. Yet Kakutani cites Cernovich’s clueless aside as an example of ‘the populist Right’s appropriation of postmodernist arguments’.

The ostensible core of this appropriation is the denial of ‘objective reality’. According to the thumbnail sketch of postmodernity offered by Kakutani and her co-thinkers, Foucault and Derrida can be blamed for this scandalous treason against reality. For British journalist Matthew D’Ancona, they were typical of the sorts of postmodern intellectuals who

treated 'everything' as a 'social construct', thus engendering an extreme relativism. According to philosopher Lee McIntyre, Derrida interpreted 'everything' as a text. For Kakutani, the assault on reality independent of human perception has the insidious effect of demolishing 'rational, autonomous individuals', leading to the unwholesome claim that 'each of us is shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by a particular time and culture'. This argument would be appealing to those for whom Foucault and Derrida were unpleasant set texts at university. Among generic complaints about the oppressive abstruseness of their prose, it is reassuring to discover from third-hand distillations that it all boils down to the affirmation that 'everything is, like, a narrative or a social construct or something'.

Yet the argument disintegrates on examination. Neither Foucault nor Derrida had much to say about social construction, or the status of objective reality, or even postmodernity. The idea that people are shaped 'by a particular time and culture' is an Enlightenment, materialist hypothesis. Indeed, it is also just common sense. So is the motif of 'construction' which, Ian Hacking argues, can be traced to Immanuel Kant. To say that something is 'socially constructed' is to say that it wasn't handed down by a deity, but was built by humans: another Enlightenment idea. The way the term is often used today, to refer to how we partially 'construct' objects in the world by how we name them and talk about them, owes itself to the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, who was about as postmodernist as a gramophone. The belief in 'objective reality' independent of human perception is not so much Enlightenment as pre-Enlightenment, traceable as much to Augustine of Hippo as to Kant. Scepticism about a reality independent of perception is really scepticism about the existence of unobservable entities, which is what in another context would be known as atheism. The atheist critique of religious belief often amounts to the claim that the theory is underdetermined by the data, so you may as well believe in a flying spaghetti monster. Beyond this, the fug about Enlightenment and 'postmodernism' is riddled with basic category errors, where these authors tend to juggle perfectly distinct concepts – language, objective reality and truth – as though they were equivalent.

Unfortunately, behind this scarecrow 'postmodernism' that is being waggled at us, there also lurks a fundamental misapprehension of the Right. The latter are disconcertingly instrumental in their approach to the facts. They are alert to the performative dimension of speech, the way in which statements make things happen. From Bolsonaro to Brexiteers, they show a keen appreciation of how information can be made to work. As Karl Rove put it, 'we create our own reality'. But, a few intellectual outliers notwithstanding, Trump and his supporters do not claim that truth doesn't exist, and that everything is narrative. They may disdain the truth claims of established experts, but they do not claim that there is no truth to be had. Far from it; the alt-right frequently claims to uphold reason, logic and facts against the 'snowflakes' of the Left, for whom feelings are said to be incorrigible. The meme, 'Not An Argument', popularized by the alt-right activist Stefan Molyneux, encodes a popular right-wing response to, for example, statements such as 'Trump is a racist'.

Moreover, like the 9/11 Truth movement, they are frequently distinguished by a touching faith in the existence of a discoverable and mind-blowing truth. From 'jet fuel doesn't melt steel beams' to 'Hillary traffics sex slaves', we are as far as can be from the terrain of epistemological relativism. Conspiracy theory covers the majority of the right-wing discourse called 'fake news'. And it is, if anything, a kind of epistemological absolutism, admitting of only one kind of truth: the clickbait kind of truth, the kind that says 'This One Weird Thing about the World Trade Center will Shock You'. It is also a kind of theodicy, an attempt to expose a 'hidden truth' that explains evil and suffering. But it is also an attempt to explain it away, to dispose of a complex problem by externalizing it: whether it is the Antichrist, Freemasons, the 'yellow peril', communists or Jews who are to blame, it is always an outsider sabotaging what would otherwise be a peaceful and just society. The telos of the clickbait economy is not postmodernism, but fascist kitsch.

Today, one of the dominant conspiracy theories of the Right is that left-wing intellectuals have been waging a slow, successful battle to overturn the canons of Western reason, logic and science: a process they describe as 'cultural Marxism'. This theory first gained notoriety

when it appeared in the manifesto of neo-Nazi murderer Anders Behring Breivik. It has since gained ground in the alt-right, being repeated by the popular right-wing guru Jordan Peterson, best known for his theory that human gender relations are equivalent to the sexual habits of lobsters, as well as his curmudgeonly potpourri of self-help and Jungian mysticism. The sacked National Security Council officer Rich Higgins blamed 'cultural Marxism' for the opposition to Trump. It has also appeared in more mainstream quarters. The anti-Trump conservative Australian television news anchor, Chris Uhlmann, has decried the work of 'neo-Marxists' using 'critical theory as a vehicle for. . . the deconstruction of the West'.

This theory bears some alarming resemblances to the 'post-truth' accounts just assayed. The theorists of 'post-truth' share with their right-wing opponents a vocabulary, a counter-subversive zeal, a drive to externalize a complex problem, intellectual incuriosity and an authoritarian streak a mile wide. Their 'postmodernism' is a straw figure, the bogey-scapegoat of anglophone centrists losing an argument. Their 'Enlightenment' is, as Dan Hind once wrote of a similar frenzy of earnest rallying to reason, a kind of 'folk Enlightenment', a 'bowdlerised and historically disembodied Enlightenment' with eighteenth-century philosophers reduced to ciphers in contemporary battles. The native pomophobia of John Bullshitter was once leveraged as a kind of moral blackmail against the anti-war Left, who were blamed for an extreme cultural relativism that supposedly left the West defenceless. Now a similar rhetorical move aligns a disintegrating political consensus with, per Kakutani, 'the rule of reason'. With admirable economy, it thus creates a starkly simple polarity between the reasonable upholders of the status quo, and the beyond-reason hoi polloi. But, in appealing to an 'age of reason' that never existed, it seems to be far less interested in moral blackmail than in recovering what has been lost: the sure footing of the liberal state and its solid foundation in reason.

Conspiracy theories, though they have often come from threatened powers, today seem to be emerging from a more radical breakdown in meaning. They are the morbid symptoms, the excrescences, of a declining authority. When long-dominant ideologies break down,

and when social interactions are increasingly governed by a confusing war of all against all, paranoia is a natural response. The rise of social industry platforms adds a new dimension to this. For they have created a machinery whose natural hero is the antisocial outsider, the hacker with no ties, the troll, the spammer. They have created a regime of competitive individualism in which perplexity and paranoia are a constant state of being. In that sense, the use of the platforms to create online communities galvanized by amateurish sleuthing, is an attempt to reclaim meaning.

This was already apparent in the early '9/11 Truth' communities. In surprise bestsellers by David Ray Griffin and Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, as well as a plethora of tantalizing websites, the overwhelming thrust of the argument was that the official narrative makes no sense. These authors obsessively pored through the unfolding news narratives of events for contradictions, holes, oddities. Of course, there often are holes in the news, not to mention official redactions. And the '9/11 Truth' communities were often trying to exercise the kinds of critical reflection that there is generally little opportunity for. But they poked holes where there were none and interpreted those that did exist tendentiously. They were convinced that there was some hidden, forbidden knowledge somewhere, which only citizen journalists could uncover. This conviction that 'they' are hiding something from us was the shared ground of all the 'Truth' groups. Specific theories, such as that the Pentagon was hit by a missile strike, were secondary speculations.

Some of those used to being in power now feel embattled, and are beginning to collapse into the same logic. This is not unusual. As Emma Jane and Chris Fleming's analysis of conspiracy theories shows, the debunkers tend to share 'the epistemological orientations and rhetorical armoury' of those they critique. The performative contradictions become absurd, as when the behavioural economists Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule recommended to the White House that it should take stringent measures against conspiracy theories – such as covert 'cognitive infiltration' of online communities, so as to plant doubts and undermine these groups from within.

Rather than emulate the paranoid style, the displaced centre needs

to look deeper, because the collapse in sense that they are just now encountering goes back a long way.

V.

Expertise, as the ebullient Brexiteer Michael Gove reminded us, has made us sick. The crisis of knowing is, in part, a deep-rooted crisis of political authority: a credibility crunch following the credit crunch.

The decline of print giants linked to established parties and ideologies, and the rise of the social industry platforms, has accelerated the crisis. But it has done so largely by sharpening tendencies that were already in play in the old media. The complaints about 'fake news' indicate that the embattled political establishment has not yet mastered the new media. But the problem goes even deeper than that and, in a strange way, the myth of a 'post-truth' society is a bungled attempt to diagnose the rot.

In the sciences, there is an ongoing 'replication crisis' afflicting medicine, economics, psychology and evolutionary biology. The crisis consists of the fact that the results of many scientific studies are impossible to replicate in subsequent tests. In a survey of 1,500 scientists in the journal *Nature*, 70 per cent of the respondents failed to replicate the findings of another scientist's experiment. Half of them couldn't even replicate their own findings.

According to the historian of ideas Philip Mirowski, one of the main causes of the problem is that science is becoming commodified. As it becomes an outsourced research engine for corporations, quality control collapses. A 'parallel universe of think tanks and shadowy "experts"' emerges outside of academia, while inside, the state demands policy-oriented research but is increasingly indifferent to quality controls. Corporations – especially big tech – have little interest in research that doesn't pay off quickly with monetizable innovations and gizmos. Google has backed a proposal to incentivize scientists to think about the bottom line, wherein they place research ideas on something like a scientific stock market and the most promising ideas are snapped up by venture capitalists.

Among the worst examples of this degradation of scientific research by business might be the world's pharmaceutical industry and its effects on medicine. The industry is riddled with ostensibly scholarly papers ghostwritten by corporations, clinical trials carried out with unrepresentative samples and cherry-picked data: a 'murderous disaster' for patients, as Ben Goldacre aptly calls it. When a peer-reviewed survey of scientists published in 2009 found that 14 per cent admitted to personal knowledge of a fellow scientist falsifying results, medical researchers were the worst offenders.

This problem reverberates well beyond academia, because in the modern era the laboratory is the benchmark of legitimate knowledge. It is the historic model for authoritative truth claims, everyone implicitly trusting the boffin in the white coat. The industrial production of scientific deception would probably already be enough to make us sick of experts, even if we hadn't been through the global financial crisis with its damning implications for the economics profession, the majority of politicians and the global institutions supporting the economic system. If, for example, people were willing to believe that the MMR vaccine gave children autism, against the scientific consensus, or that Aids was a US government conspiracy, this suggests that the authority of science was already diminished. In some cases, this authority was weakened by real abuses, such as the Tuskegee experiment in the US, wherein syphilis-infected black men were misled, used as guinea pigs for medical experiments and never treated for their illness. This may be among the reasons why fact-checking and hectoring about 'the science' is so ineffectual.

For a while, 'big data' was offered as the answer to the problem of knowledge. Data was hailed as 'the new oil', and the raw material for a 'management revolution'. By turning company processes into readable electronic text, it would replace unscientific management techniques, hunches and intuitions with the brute force of facts. Google boss Eric Schmidt, exulting in the revolutionary potential of data, described it as 'so powerful that nation-states will fight over how much data matters'. In an excitable piece for *Wired*, former editor Chris Anderson enthused that such a scale of data collection would soon render theory and even

the scientific method obsolete: 'with enough data, the numbers speak for themselves'.

The bonus of big data is omniscience: 'a full digital copy of our physical universe', as scientists Carlo Ratti and Dirk Helbing put it. We will be able to see all of existence as a stream of electronic writing. And for a while, it was even possible to believe this, if one set aside just how much of the physical universe is unknown and potentially unknowable. After all, the scale of data production is vast. The scale at which messages were exchanged was already quite enormous in the era of the analogue telephone. In 1948, 125 million telephone conversations were had in the US each day. But this was not captured and commodified information. The internet, as a writing machine, takes a note of everything.

Already by 2003, more data had been produced since the turn of the millennium than in the entirety of human history. By 2016, 90 per cent of the entire bulk of data in the world had been created in the previous two years, at a rate of 2.5 quintillion bytes of data a day. An increasing share of this data is on the internet, rather than on television or in print. By 2017, users had shared more than half a million photos on Snapchat, sent almost half a million tweets, made over half a million comments on Facebook and watched over four million YouTube videos every minute of every day. In the same year, Google was processing 3.5 billion searches per day.

With this much data, surely things would start to work without any applied theory. A prize example of this, for a long time, was Google Flu Trends. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Google began to develop the tool by comparing searches on its own search engine to the likelihood of outbreak. For a while, the results were eerily accurate. Google was able to predict the next outbreak up to ten days before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Then, by 2013, it began to break down. Google's estimates overstated the spread of illnesses by almost a factor of two. And when that happened, the hyperbole of Google's promise became obvious.

The numbers never speak for themselves. Every data set requires treatment, processing and interpretation. The volume of data is not a sufficient criterion for judging how useful it is. And the treatment of

it always implies a theory, whether or not it is acknowledged. Google, unwilling to concede that its own work implied a theory, simply developed a model for extrapolating from correlations established by the sheer bulk of data. They never tried to work out what the causal relationship was between search terms and the outbreak of flu, because that was a theoretical problem. Ironically, because they were only interested in what worked, their method stopped working.

Big data is no substitute for the scientific method. Far from having the magical cure, the pioneers of data extraction and analysis have contributed to today's degraded ecologies of information and research.

VI.

If our existing language could adequately account for the rapid degradation of information, we might know what a solution could look like. In shooting the messenger, however, 'post-truth' theorists are depriving themselves of some of the ways in which they could make sense of this situation.

Insofar as 'postmodernism' means anything, it refers to an attempt by a number of theorists to name something that seems to have changed. The 'postmodern' démarche, once faddishly declared across all fields of knowledge and culture, was more diagnostic label than manifesto. Some postmodern eristic came with emancipatory stylings, as though the collapse of totalizing claims and grand narratives would be innately liberating. For the ex-Marxists among the postmodernists, this was clearly an attempt at sublimating their historical defeat. Nonetheless, the identification of a postmodern era was an attempt to describe something that had happened to capitalism. That something – whether it went under the name of the post-industrial society, the knowledge economy or informational capitalism – was the growing importance of images and signs in everyday life.

The rise of information technologies and whole industries based around communications, signs and images, altered not only the economy but the structure of meaning. The growth of information economies fits well with the inherent and ever-increasing celerity of

capitalism. Capitalism encounters time and space as obstacles in the way of making money. They would ideally like to realize their investment here and now. The development of information technologies enabling the instantaneous transmission of symbols and images around the world makes possible, as Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto' anticipated, the death of time and space. These technologies have been of most use in the financial sector. But now big data, by way of 'the cloud', claims to extend similar advantages to traditional manufacturing firms, by enabling them to choreograph production processes all over the world.

Ironically, the growth of information economies is catastrophic for meaning. No doubt, we have lived through a massive expansion in the amount of information that we are exposed to. In 1986, the average American was exposed to forty newspapers' worth of information each day. Two decades later, it was 174 newspapers. By 2008, the average American consumed about 36 gigabytes of information each day. And most of this information, insofar as it reaches us on social media, is designed to keep us typing and scrolling, producing more information. A headline tells us that a man was stabbed in front of his son on a train. A status argues that the poor and stupid should be sterilized. A viral video shows a politician dancing. A tweet claims that immigration makes us poorer. These snippets of information, appearing within microseconds of one another, have in common that they each set the wheels whirring, triggering mental and emotional work that often goes on throughout the day.

But we make a fundamental mistake if we assume that an increase in information corresponds to an increase in knowledge. When engineer Claude Shannon declared that information is entropy, he was saying something that would become starkly relevant in the age of social media. As an engineer, Shannon was interested in information as a storage problem. A coin toss could be said to contain two 'bits' of information, whereas a random card selection has fifty-two 'bits'. The more uncertainty, the more information. The same principle, applied to sentences, means that statements with less sense actually have more informational capacity. An increase in information could be proportionate to a reduction in meaning.

In the social industry, the incentive is to constantly produce more information: a perpetual motion machine, harnessed to passions of which the machine knows nothing. This production is not for the purpose of making meaning. It is for the purpose of producing effects on users that keep us hooked. It is for the purpose of making users the conduits of the machine's power, keeping its effects in circulation. Faked celebrity deaths, trolling, porn clickbait, advertisements, flurries of food and animal pictures, thirst traps, the endless ticker tape of messages, mean less than they perform. The increase of information corresponds to a decrease in meaning.

Moreover, this production is taking place in a simulacrum much like that described by the theorist of postmodernity Jean Baudrillard. A simulacrum is not a representation of reality. It is reality, albeit reality generated from digital writing and simulated models. It is simulation woven into our lives, with effects every bit as real as stock-market values, or the belief in God. It is reality as a cybernetic production. Like video game images, or virtual reality, the simulacrum is uncannily too perfect, too real: hyperreal, even. We are now far more incorporated into the system of images and signs, from gaming to feeds; but this simulacrum has its roots in capitalist culture's airbrushed advertising, seductive Hollywood dreams and slick gaming and infotainment industries.

With the coming of new virtual and augmented realities, the Twittering Machine may prove to have been a stage in the spread of the simulacrum - one with darkly dystopian potential. Jaron Lanier, effectively the inventor of virtual reality, argues that to make it work, you need to give the machine far more data about yourself than you do on the platforms. The result could be the most elaborate Skinner Box in history. What seems like a device for adventure and freedom could become 'the creepiest behaviour-modification device' invented thus far.

VII.

'Post-truth' politics is what we have long been living under in various forms: a technocracy, in a word. The rule of 'big data', now the most plentiful raw material in the history of the world, is not a

departure from this: it is nothing but the rule of brute facts. It is the rule of technique, not truth, which has recently been found wanting. Or, as Wilde called it in 'The Decay of Lying', the 'monstrous worship of facts'.

But if the simulacrum is indeed the epitome of technocratic rule, disappearing meaning behind the coercive rule of information, it also represents a problem for power. The world of the simulacrum, a world increasingly drained of meaning, deprives power of its seemingly obvious legitimacy. The authoritative statements of politicians, attorney generals, senior journalists and academics come to seem arbitrary. The attempt to reinject meaning into the system by reviving Cold War ideologies and arousing public opinion against a scapegoat 'postmodernism' is doomed to fail, however. Since these efforts are themselves part of the simulacrum, they slip easily back into the cycle of meaningless information. The more sophisticated propagandists recognize this, and instead work with the grain of the collapse of meaning. For example, the BBC alleges that Russian disinformation campaigns no longer bother to promote a single narrative, but instead flood the internet with so many competing versions of a story that no one knows what to think. It would be prudent to assume that all parties now involved in disinformation are using similar techniques.

The problem is not that the internet is a web of lies. Of course it is. In 2016, a team of researchers published a study of online conduct which found that less than a third of users claimed to be honest about themselves on the internet. But the machine was invented to help us lie. From its first beginnings, even in the precocious French public-sector internet known as Minitel, the first thing users did was dissimulate their identities. Anonymity made it possible to wear new textual skins. In the early days of Silicon Valley idealism, anonymity and encryption was all the rage. The ability to lie about ourselves was thought to bring freedom, creative autonomy, escape from surveillance. Lying was the great equalizer. Silicon Valley, as it emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, was shaped by an aleatory fusion of hippy and New Right ideologies. Averse to public ownership and regulation, this 'Californian Ideology', as Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron dubbed it, was

libertarian, property-based and individualist. The internet was supposed to be a new agora, a free market of ideas.

This connection between lying and creative freedom is not as strange as it may appear. Milan Kundera, reflecting on Stalinist tyranny, argued that the injunction not to lie was one that could never be made to an equal because we have no right to demand answers from equals. Indeed, it is only when we acquire the capacity to lie that we really discover freedom of thought: since only then can we be sure that the authorities can't read our minds. It is only when we can lie about the future, the constructivists exhorted in the Realistic Manifesto, that we can begin to transcend the rule of brute facts. In this sense, there is a genuine utopian kernel to the Californian Ideology, even if its embodiment within social media is a utopia only for trolls and other sociopaths.

The problem is not the lies. It is information reduced to brute fact, to technologies with unprecedented and unforeseen powers of physical manipulation by means of information bombardment. We naively think of ourselves as either 'information rich' or 'information poor'. What if it doesn't work that way? What if information is like sugar, and a high-information diet is a benchmark of cultural poverty? What if information, beyond a certain point, is toxic?

One is struck, therefore, by the palpable timidity of commonplace diagnoses of 'fake news', opinion silos, filter bubbles and the 'post-truth' society. This, the 'sour grapes' theory of communications, is sensationalism. But all sensationalism is a form of understatement, all moral panic a form of trivialization, and this is glaringly so in the case of our 'fake news' panic. The problem is not the lies, but a crash in meaning. The problem is what the survivors, scrabbling in the rubble and detritus of the internet for answers, will believe.

The crisis of knowing has roots which run deep into the institutions from which authoritative knowledge was hitherto produced. The Twittering Machine didn't cause this crisis, but it is its current culmination. The Twittering Machine is a furnace of meaning.