Getting Beyond Fake News

Insight paper by Harmattan Risk

April 2017

_____

Fake news is all over the media in recent months, in terms of reporting on it, and one would suppose, if one recognised it, sometimes also in terms of producing it. The fake news problem is fairly self-evident, and claims against it seem to come from all ideological perspectives.

The fake news question creates a fundamental paradox: We get our news from news, so how do we know if our news is fake? This matters not just because citizens are sometimes called upon to make fundamental choices about their polity, but because opponents of a specific foreign power or bloc can manipulate information in an effort to divide foreign societies, and this tactic makes most sense when applied by authoritarian regimes against democratic ones, because in democracies the people's perception is an important element, if a rather abstract one at times, in how and what political decisions are made. What follows are 10 suggestions for getting some semblance of the "truth" from the various public “news” sources available, including interpreting sources that might have a specific agenda beyond factual reporting.

1. Give some credence to the notion that there is such a thing as good journalism

Established press with a track record of strong investigative journalism tend to have professional staff and high standards, so we can at least rely on this to some extent. In more democratic states, credibility is sometimes indicated by a willingness to challenge the view of official powers from time to time, and even to disclose issues or events which the government or other important figures might prefer forgotten. Even good press is partial, but in terms of reporting on immediate events and ongoing political contests, the better ones provide concise raw intelligence, not an opinion piece (unless clearly labelled as such, and note that some specialist publications are explicitly opinion oriented). In more authoritarian countries, we can't expect too much of even a good paper: a journalist could be arrested or killed just for focusing on a particular topic, the paper could experience dubious tax investigations, etc. In short, we often forget that journalism is a profession with standards, much like engineering or even medicine. Those who come closest to their own professional standards tend to offer better readings on the reality beyond our doorstep (and to note, in authoritarian states many try, to their detriment in many cases).

2. Account for the ownership and business interests of your preferred press or source

Even if your preferred paper or outlet seems sound, check out recent ownership - papers and outlets can change hands and owners can have strong ideological persuasions, other businesses they need to look out for, and political connections that impede impartial reporting. This is especially, though not only, the case in authoritarian countries where a press company's advertisers might be state companies or subject to regime pressure. This means that the paper might lose revenues if it goes against the preferred regime editorial line.

3. Look at the ideological source of your preferred news source, then look at the other side

Even in government or corporate intelligence analysis, bias is an issue (even when all analysts work under one roof). One can expect a media company to have both institutional biases, and within it individual biases among different reporters and writers. Try to discern a bias in our preferred sources in the context of current socio-political issues, and then search for the opposite, i.e. opposite to "my" perspective, and alternative points of view. We can also read from other international sources and other countries' state news agencies to see how "my country's perspective" lines up with their facts. Often, the very complaints and issues that one outlet posits in terms of bias or favouritism are turned on their heads when seen from the other side. Knowing both sides one can better gauge bias and how to filter it out.

4. Don't overrely on social media or "friends"

Facebook et al will have links to myriad news sources, most likely supporting the predisposition of the "member". We can be inclined to regard published information (via such links) as somehow researched or corroborated, and linking to one of these sources might be instructive in getting another perspective on things, but it might ultimately be from an outfit established with an ideological bone to pick. Social media tends to feed into the "I look for what corroborates my own thinking" problem - our friends likely think like we do, so it's not news, it's just kicking a dead horse in terms of our opinion forming.

5. Try think tanks and university research centres

Think tanks and university research centres can present some heavy reading, but many are getting better at more concise and digestible reporting. Unlike journalism, which necessarily has a short schedule, think tank reporting is usually about longer-term trends and nuanced causal linkages, so it gives a much wider perspective. Of course they can be ideologically biased too, so seek to learn their origins and spread your reading around. If you come up against terms you don't know (common for the author when it comes to economics for example) look it up and see what it means. In this vein, it doesn't hurt to check out government and even better transnational organisation statistical indicators - numbers can lie, but it takes considerable creativity to slip lies through a wider professional organisation, and numbers can help to get a sense of policy outcomes and issues (e.g. did we really increase employment by 5 % last year under King Halquin? The World Bank might differ on that...).

6. Read some books

I'm interested in China but have thus far nearly ignored it because it's very complex for me, but it's something I can't ignore anymore. So far, when I hear the news on China I have a very limited contextual understanding so I don't know if I'm getting guff or the goods. Answer: Read some books on China. We generally only buy a book after a bit of prior research in terms of author and focus since they actually cost money (libraries are an option too - free but still more work than clicking on a link, so more compulsion to be selective in what we carry home). Books can be compelling in themselves, but they also provide in-depth context missing in most news reports or short papers. We can buy one that has an obvious "angle" and get a basis for one line of argumentation, and we can try another from a different perspective (for those over 40, remember university library days?). Books might be heavy on text and time, but they tell a story and explain long-term patterns and causal linkages better than most news stories can, and can make great down time reading. The same cautions as any other source apply, and we need to be a discerning buyer (and reader).

7. Read about and understand logic and critical thinking

There is much available online and in books about the psychology and structure of rationality, knowing, confidence and perception. It can make fascinating reading, plus it helps us to become better at discerning false or emotive arguments. Again there are the good, the bad and the ugly, but the best of such pieces will help us to recognise "good" news when see it, to discern and account for bias, and to better shape our own interpretations for a uniquely solid perception of our socio-political reality amidst the myriad "truth campaigns". A warning is that it can be more interesting to

read pieces on logic and critical thinking that have a story to tell or a cause to sell, but the most value comes from books written purely about thinking about thinking, divorced from polemics. Books on thinking tend to be better than web sources, but online stuff can be decent.

8. Understand how real political processes and conflicts work for the influencing context

If we know how political decisions are ultimately made and the axes of significant political contests, we will better know how our own perceptions and attitudes matter, and thus how different sides in the equation might try to influence us, so we can better filter that influencing when looking for real indications of what's going on. In the same vein, if we understand who in the international arena is trying to achieve what, by what means, we can better see how different international news sources might be aligned to a particular national agenda.

9. Be wary of the loudest bark or shrillest voice

Quite often the noise with which a message is delivered is in direct contrast to its validity - someone insecure in their information but seeking to put perception over substance will rely heavily on tone, style and hyperbole to make a point. We might well see this in direct face to face conversation too. Even if we at first agree with something, check out the delivery style, and if in doubt check out substance.

10. Understand the psychology and methods of influencing

Mind control in its broader sense is not just something from the Manchurian Candidate or some sci fi show. We all try to influence each other and apply a range of techniques from the subtle to overt pressure tactics, and some corporations and governments (and some news agencies, PR companies, lobby groups, and indeed stage magicians, etc.) actually invest considerable resources in trying to optimise "mass" influencing methods. Getting a grip on such methods allows us to see how they might be applied to us, to enable us to filter out influence that is not based on reasonably robust facts and rational analysis. Again look for sources from experienced researchers rather than latching onto the first things we come across - as with popular science books, there is a trade off between easy reading and in-depth learning. The author, for example, recently slogged through a book on "brainwashing" written by a neuroscientist - it was not fun and it took a while, but it was somehow compelling and examples from my own experience and from reported political behaviour in recent contests and conflicts kept coming to mind as examples of the methods described in the book. Ironically, being from government agencies, often the worst offenders in terms of ideological influencing, studies on intelligence analysis also provide useful insights on keeping a clear perception

(not influencing, but its opposite - how to see through the "haze" and to not be influenced by others' efforts or one's own biases). Influencing is not necessarily a bad thing - we do it all the time as a normal part of social interaction, but when it is driven by narrow agendas or resorts to deception or pressure tactics, it can create a significant disconnect between "what's really out there" and how we see it, and we do need to be wary of such efforts if we want to retain a clear-sighted perspective.

A potential 11th point - not for most of us, but some of us sometimes...Direct observation and discussion

Before concluding, we'll add one more approach to addressing the risk of fake news and more generally getting a clear perspective on an issue, area or society. Because this is not very accessible or likely for most people, we don't make it an explicit 11th point but it's still worth bearing in mind. This is direct, on-the-ground, observation and interaction.

For the author (a political risk consultant), for example, there is a world of difference between an assessment for a client done from a desk, even using sources familiar with the terrain in question, and actually being there for a period. While desk-based assessment can yield reasonable indications of a situation and issues, "being there" adds the third dimension, and even more so do face to face discussions with people directly involved in, affected by, or long experienced in studying a political contest or conflict.

The author would never really have understood the prevalence and influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon without having been there, seeing their flags on every street corner in the south, watching their TV channel in half-rebuilt hotels, and talking to both people who were supportive of their social investments and local administration (compliments of Iran to a large extent) and others who were fearful of their wrath. Similarly, without having gone to Algeria, the author would never have known how pervasive the intelligence service was (or is), with local face to face contacts warning to be discrete even in secluded cafes because "the walls have ears", and regular insistence that the intelligence service was (at the time anyway) a shadow government. Before this, being responsible for the "final product", I had to rely on the regional expert, but he was quite intense about his views and I didn't know if he was just paranoid or had a bone to pick (the visit did seem to validate his perspective but it also somewhat altered what would have been a one-sided assessment). Again, in Palestine and Israel, actually speaking to people involved in and affected by the conflict was enormously instructive in learning on-the-ground attitudes, and the assessment would have lacked substance without really seeing how small, intimate, and fratricidal the situation was. Similarly in other places.

As an aside, the above and any other case was in the context of open / above board consultancy, and trying to hide one's intentions in some places is a recipe for disaster (if it's too sensitive to record, then just remember it). A necessary caveat: this suggests that direct interaction / observation is a great thing, and it is, but be discrete and cautious. When a journalist or consultant is there for a clear reason, people understand the context of the questions. If you are there for casual or tangent purposes, questions can be misinterpreted. In our own societies this is of course less risky and still beneficial.

To wrap up this ostensible 11th point, direct observation and discussion expands the mind. Most of us won't be planning on our next holiday to observe and directly discuss a regional issue, but just be aware that we don't really get that third dimension until we directly see it. Again, one can rely on sources (including journalists) close to the terrain in question, but it's still just more news. And if any prospective clients happen to be reading this, it's useful to understand the value of visits and "being there", not just to observe and interact with the local scene, but to directly see how an organisation is doing in terms of fitting into that scene, and the concerns and lessons shared by experienced personnel (it's not usually additional fee and the reasonably limited additional expenses are well worth it).

Summary

When we become inert in terms of learning and openness to new concepts, facts and arguments, and subject instead to our own biases or too lazy to question them, we open ourselves up to the loudest and most compelling speakers who make it easy for us to absorb what they have to say. We all seem to be concerned about this (no one wants to be a stooge), so perhaps in view of the apparent fake news deluge it's time to do something about it. Societies are made of up of individuals, and societies are what politicians and marketers seek to manage or manipulate, and what foreign powers target when they want to divide an "enemy" in order to weaken it. It starts from each of us. The Inter-webby thing was supposed to be the great leveler - equal access to information. It can be a great source of information, but only if we are a very discerning audience, capable of evaluating "news" and adjusting our assessments on the basis of the best available evidence and argumentation. We're likely stuck with many of our ideological biases and preconceptions, and indeed preconceptions can help to simplify a complex reality and make it manageable. That doesn't mean, though, that we can't be well informed, and aware of both of our own biases and how others might use them as a hitch to pull us towards their own agendas.