



LINKER: TJPPMCJE

The Journal of Philosophy, Policy Making and Criminal
Justice Education



Fake News and Truth: Levinas' on the Responsibility to One's Being

Jerome D. Requidan

Department of Language and Literature, Far Eastern University, Manila.

jrequidan@feu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

The threat posed by the proliferation of fake news today is a growing concern. It has been successful in manipulating minds into believing that which it seeks to advance. While many who are on the side of responsible journalism make great efforts to combat it, the phenomenon still thrives and continues to be a weapon of value for those who benefit from it. This paper seeks to shed light on the dangers of the same phenomenon in the light of Levinas' philosophy. It is an attempt to draw attention to the dangers of fake news in leading one away from the truth of one's being.

Keywords: *Ethics of the Face, Fake News, Language, Responsible Journalism, Threat, Violence*

INTRODUCTION

THE PHENOMENON OF FAKE NEWS

Miscommunications are unavoidable. It has the potential to be the last line of communication. While it is true that language is supposed to be understood, it is equally possible to be misunderstood. What if, on the other hand, language communication is used to intentionally miscommunicate? Worse yet, what if the goal is to cause confusion? On this premise, the researcher looked into the topic of fake news.

According to Rappler (2017), fake news is not a 21st-century phenomenon; what is new is its scope. Trust in responsible journalism has somehow diminished because of the proliferation of fake news. Attempts to combat the same present a great challenge to those committed to truth-telling. Indeed, fake news is a big threat not only to democracy, to the integrity of mass communication in general, and to the education of everyone, especially the young. (cf. Rappler, 2017). The surge of fake news on social media is alarming and requires intervention as an imperative.

Fake news is defined as news that is purposefully and verifiably false and may mislead readers (Allcott, 2017: 213). As such, fake news takes the form of deception. It finds joy in creating mass deception. And those behind it use it as a weapon

against individual(s). Fake news has the character of a weapon of mass deception. There appear to be two primary incentives for disseminating false information. The first is monetary: when consumers click to the original site after reading a viral news piece on social media, the original site can get considerable advertising money. The ideological incentive is the second. Some fake news outlets aim to help the candidates they support (Allcott, 2017).

The destructive effect of fake news is real and something to be seriously attended to. It can trigger outrage by exploiting social media virality. (Cf. Cerase, 2018: 337) Needed interventions are necessary. One positive move was when the mainstream media intervened to blame, debunk, or refute a racist hoax in an attempt to assuage public fears about the effects of fake news or rumors spreading on the internet (Cerase, 2018). It's also worth noting that (fake) news sparked media hype dynamics in 42 of the 85 cases studied, with varying degrees of intensity, duration, and scale (Cerase, 2018: 345). Fake news is a form of violence that today is taking advantage of cyberspace as its platform to attack or advance a particular end. Propaganda statements are proliferated through fake news in cyberspace. *As the media hype hypothesis argues, the fact that a hoax is based on fake news does not prevent it from eliciting a barrage of angry responses (such as content sharing and comments). They can be*

broadcast on both digital and traditional media in certain circumstances (Cerase, 2018: 346). Fake news may, in the end, result in hostile activities. Thus, the seriousness of the matter cannot be taken lightly. The present media frenzy about fake news appears to be centered on a theoretical discussion about the struggle of political elites. On the other hand, dealing with this problem as a philosophical debate about the epistemology of news or the ethics of propaganda may be deceptive. In reality, as the analyzed case catalogue demonstrates, such an approach ignores false news' true implications as well as the associated impact of sustaining the racial status quo (Cerase, 2018: 347).

Fake news, as a form of propaganda (cf. Prier, 2017: 52), has unwittingly created and instilled in the minds of people a sense of normalcy that allows the presence of the same alongside mainstream media to some extent. Over time, the normalization of these sorts of rumors, together with the speed and volume of fresh false narratives on social media, paved the way for fake news (Prier, 2017: 58). This is alarming in that their seeming identification makes it even harder for the public to unravel the truth. *Fake news is made up of more than simply lousy headlines, hidden leads, and pieces with weak sources. Fake news is a type of propaganda in which a fabricated tale is presented as news. This is especially dangerous given the prevalence of sensationalized fake news on social media (Prier, 2017: 60).* One can only imagine the dangers of allowing fake news to flourish unchecked. The challenge to address the same is on the shoulders of responsible journalism.

RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM AND LEVINAS' CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE AS "BORN IN RESPONSIBILITY"

Fake news is like a plague that troubles the world today is something noteworthy to consider. It presents a threat not only to individuals but to the world at large. The dangerous and malevolent character of fake news can cause the destruction of an individual or that of a group and compromise personal and social values. Hence, it becomes imperative to investigate the matter in the name of the truth.

Donovan *et al.* (2006:322) would argue that in journalism, the concept of truth-telling takes precedence over the promotion of civic ideals, such as limited patriotism. There are indeed, sometimes, compelling reasons why journalists would resort to half-baked truths, if only to promote civic values. Donovan *et al.* write:

The list of civic values that may influence journalism truth telling is diverse. It includes the desire to serve

one's country, to support one's soldiers in combat, to serve the overall public good, to foster social solidarity, to create active self-governing citizens, and to advance the interests of minority groups that have suffered from discrimination. (323-324)

Deliberate actions are taken to evade some truths in news making and are sometimes necessary, like evading the possible collapse of the government if everything is exposed. Take, for example, news that says that food security is stable to prevent panic from the public that would only worsen the situation of food instability in a country. However, this is no reason to justify fake news for reasons of protection of civic values. Donovan *et al.*'s discussion bifurcates into two: the philosophical issue of the truth-telling principle vis-à-vis other ethical principles and the tension between patriotism and truth-telling journalism. The fundamental focus of this study is that the concept of truth-telling takes precedence over principles and ideals derived from civic obligation.

Indeed, truth is the first casualty in the language of mass deception (Donovan: 322). Fake news is as destructive as weapons of mass destruction. The influencing effect of fake news can continue to multiply as it passes from one tongue to another. This is aggravated by the fast pace of the spread of fake news on social media. Worst of all, not all users of social media are equally mature enough to digest and critically analyze the news presented before them. Thus, it serves as a fair warning that:

Journalism today faces a two-part indictment in the wake of numerous scandals revealing fabrication and bias in reporting, scandals that have contributed to a serious decline in the public credibility of news media. First, journalists are accused of failing, if not undermining, our democracy, and second, they are charged with betraying the truth. (Donovan et al.:323)

The value of truth-telling is central to responsible journalism. Levinas' concept of language hopes to shed light on the same.

The encounter with alterity occupies a great part and is the focal point of Levinas' philosophy. In the encounter between the ego and the other, the other is always radically in excess of the ego's cognitive powers, consciousness, or intuitions. This is the very theme on which Levinas would advance ethics as a first philosophy, i.e., that the first philosophy is an

ethical inquiry occupying the justification of being rather than as an ontological question of being. Levinas writes:

This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question 'par excellence' or the question of philosophy. Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself. (1989: 86)

As the ego would fail to capture or possess the other, any mechanism by which this act of possessing is sought is also bound to fail. Such is the case with language. Language has a tendency to define and limit, and thus seeks to enclose or box the other. But the other always and definitively overflows any comprehension of it by the ego.

The failure of language to capture the other does not, however, mean the end of the encounter. This fact instead serves as an occasion to truly understand the encounter. The other is not a comprehensible entity. The other holds the ego captive. The relationship with the other puts me in question, empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever fresh resources, Levinas (1987b: 94) writes in "Meaning and Sense." The ego is bound to offer itself to the other. At the same time, the ego becomes responsive to and responsible for the other. In Levinas' Ethics as First Philosophy, he writes:

This is the hidden human face behind perseverance in being! Hidden behind the affirmation of being persisting analytically – or animally – in its being, and in which the ideal vigour of identity identifying and affirming and strengthening itself in the life of human individuals and in their struggle for vital existence, whether conscious or unconscious or rational, the miracle of the ego (moi) which has got rid of self (soi) and instead fears for the Other – is thus like the suspension, or epochè, of the eternal and irreversible return of the identical to itself and of the intangible nature of its logical and ontological privilege. What is suspended is its ideal priority, which wipes out all otherness by murder or by all-encompassing and totalizing thought; or war and politics which pass themselves off as the relation of the Same to the Other (l'Autre). It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty (in its 'hateful' modality), that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for

justification. [...] The ego is the very crisis of the being of a being (de l'être de l'étant) in the human domain. A crisis of being, not because the sense of this verb might still need to be understood in its semantic secret and might call on the powers of ontology, but because I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place. (1989: 84-85)

For Levinas, subjectivity rests on allowing the other to enter into one's ego. The truth of being is revealed in its situatedness in the field of exteriority. As the ego is broken down by trying to understand the other person cognitively and enclosing the other person in language, there is a chance for an ethical relationship to be formed. The ego opens itself to social connection with the other – a dialogue no less.

For Levinas, dialogue comes about because of the encounter. The ego being held hostage by the face is prior to dialogue. One needs to react to one's right to be, not by pointing to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial authority, but by responding to one's dread of the other (Levinas, 1989: 82).

The ethical relation happens in an immediate realm where the relation or encounter with the other is prior to knowledge. The burden of responsibility to and for the other is a result of the ego's being held hostage by the face. In "Transcendence and Evil," Levinas (1987c: 185) writes that "the face calls into doubt the adequacy of my ego's identity; it links me to an endless obligation with reference to the other." As such, ethical relations precede language. The responsibility that emerges from the encounter is prior to language. As Levinas himself clearly puts it, *language is born of responsibility.* (1989: 82).

As language is founded on responsibility, this necessitates the centrality of responsibility in human discourse. Communication is founded on responsibility. Journalism necessitates responsibility. Fake news is contrary to the same.

CONCLUSION

The Violence of Fake News vis-à-vis Levinas Philosophy

Fake news is a form of irresponsible journalism. This is so because it seeks to mislead, deceive, and manipulate the audience. It is a form of violence in that it seeks to lead people away from the truth. Moreover, it also has the tendency to attack, or destroy, an individual (s) with malicious lies. As such, it runs contrary to the philosophy of Levinas.

The philosophy of Levinas that grounds itself on ethics as the first philosophy sees the "hostageness" of the ego on the face of the other as leading to the truth of being. Fake news, on the other hand, thrives on manipulating others by leading them away from the truth. Fake news thrives on the objective of mass deception. While Levinas uses the face of the other to build the truth of being, fake news is used as a weapon to destroy individuals.

The act of attacking or destroying another person is a form of violence. Fake news is guilty of the same. Fake news is often utilized to destroy the credibility of an individual or group of individuals in favor of another. This is evident in how fake news is used in election processes. It is used to make people think bad things about their rivals, which can change the outcome of an election. Gaining public sentiment on one's side becomes the very objective in this sense.

The violence of fake news extends even to the very patrons of the same. Being led away from the truth is a violent act that diminishes one's being. Patrons of fake news are led to believe that what is presented is true, oblivious to the fact that they have already been swayed to the wrong side of a falsehood. Worse, the same sometimes influences the innocent victims of sentiments that, if uncontrolled, can lead to greater violence. Young idealists are the usual victims of such malicious lies. The lure of youth into imminent danger is inevitable because of fake news.

While it may be argued that fake news is also sometimes utilized to avoid panic about a possible dangerous scenario, the end cannot justify the means. There may be better ways of doing the same than proliferating fake news. Violence cannot justify violence. Fake news is a form of violence.

Violence has two forms. Direct violence, which purposely attacks and harms an individual, is a form of physical abuse that many forms of physical abuse. And indirect violence, which may not be done on purpose to attack and harm a person(s), but is the result of unintended actions, such as many forms of structural violence. Fake news is guilty of both. Fake news can lead to verbal abuse directed at an individual or individuals, which is a direct form of violence. Fake news may also result in the proliferation of misinformation that is passed on from one person to another, which in the end results in a system of lies, which is a form of indirect violence. On both grounds, fake news is morally wrong.

Moral obligations are of priority for Levinas. There is no room for violence in the same. The primacy of one's relationship with another must

be the basis of responsible journalism. The phenomenon of fake news is in contrast with Levinas' phenomenology of the ethical subject.

AUTHORS BIO NOTE

Assoc. Prof. Jerome D. Requidan is a faculty of the Department of Language and Literature at the Far Eastern University, Manila. He has been with the said institution for 20 years, teaching various Philosophy courses in the undergraduate programs. He underwent the seminary formation at the Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary, where he completed Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, and pursued Bachelor in Sacred Theology at the Immaculate Conception School of Theology. He received a Certificate on Sacred Liturgy at the Paul VI Institute of Liturgy. He finished his Master of Arts in Philosophy at the University of Santo Tomas and is currently writing his dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy or Ph.D. Major in Philosophy at De La Salle University.

REFERENCES

- Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. 2017. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2: 211-35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44235006>.
- Agence France-Presse, Rappler. April 02, 2017. "Britain attempts to burst the fake news bubble." <https://www.rappler.com/technology/news/165916-britain-fake-news-bubble>
- Cerese, Andrea, and Claudia Santoro. 2018. "From Racial Hoaxes to Media Hypes: Fake News' Real Consequences." In *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*, edited by Vasterman Peter, 333-54. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt21215m0.20>.
- Donovan, Aine, James B. Murphy, and Stephen J. A. Ward. 2006. "Ethical Ideals in Journalism: Civic Uplift or Telling the Truth?" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 21(4), 322-337, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Prier, Jarred. 2017. "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4: 50-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26271634>.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1989. "Ethics as First Philosophy." In *The Levinas Reader*, ed. By Sean Hand, pp. 75-87. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

_____. 1987a. "Language and Proximity." In *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, pp. 109-126. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

_____. 1987b. "Meaning and Sense." In *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, pp. 75-107. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

_____. 1987c. "Transcendence and Evil." In *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, pp. 175-186. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.