Responding to "Fake News" in an Era of Hashtag Leftism

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It's a weird time for leftism: a lot of the old verities have in some form been adopted or co-opted by political opponents. Bruno Latour is out and about defending science and expert knowledge production, while Trump attacks domestic intelligence agencies and international free trade. And all of a sudden, progressives find corporate media crucial to a democracy. In a moment of odd political inversions, one of the most troubling has been leftist stances regarding "the media," an ever-expanding category that means, here, the intersection of information technologies and the imperatives of capital. It is impossible to overstate the change wrought on our social, cultural, and political lives by this collision.

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In a post-fact landscape (or, perhaps, one where poststructuralist arguments about the created-ness of facts are now weaponized common sense), Trump's highly effective swipes at "fake news" have repurposed a venerable leftist critical tradition into a political bludgeon to which progressives have no real answer, other than to defend a handful of corporate entities as torchbearers of democracy and consensual factual reality. What is needed is an approach that speaks to the real problem, which is that the relentless expansion of capitalized digital media (including but not limited to "the news") is deeply anti-social, and thus anti-democratic. This is a position that spans our political and class spectrum in unexpected ways, as I examine in this article. Ironically, rather than a vigorous defense, a renewed leftist *skepticism* of "the media" is thus both necessary to our moment, and potentially an interesting point of political convergence.

Facebook is a graven image

I turn to a brief moment from my ethnographic work in rural Appalachian North Carolina to illustrate some of the ways that concerns about mediation transcend class and political divides.

Jake and I had finished playing a set of classic country, in a smoke-filled Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in a small town in western North Carolina when he called me from his flip phone as we drove in opposite directions. He was uncharacteristically distraught, and his hard-edged and piercing voice came through my phone loud enough to make me hold it away from my ear: "I just don't know what to think about all this!" he said, referring broadly to Trump and the Russia investigation. "I've got my son in one ear, and he's a conspiracy theorist with all this Facebook information. The news says something else, and Trump has a different story every day! I don't really trust any of them, but I know for sure that Russia ain't our friend." He trailed off, losing a little steam, but ended with this final point: "The main thing is, I think everyone needs to get off Facebook and get back to knowing each other, and knowing Jesus, the way we were meant to: face to face. I don't hold with social media." He closed our conversation with a prayer for me and my family, and we said goodbye.

In six years of fieldwork playing music with Jake off and on, I had rarely heard him mention politics unprompted. A gentle and polite 70-year-old retiree from a rural county north of Asheville, North Carolina, he had been a water and sewer maintenance worker in a small town for his whole life. Now, however, he put his powerful voice to good use as an amateur country musician, and we played shows, with me on guitar backing him, whenever we could. Jake had been an Obama supporter, particularly after the Affordable Care Act. But, like many of his friends in a primarily white working-class county, he was disgusted with a democratic party that he perceived as condescending to or dismissive of working-class and rural people. Although he despised Trump as a person, he was not unhappy to see the political disruption that accompanied Trump's ascent. Increasingly, however, he had been troubled by what he saw as an accompanying shift: the increasing mediation of sociality and relationships through digital technologies. He found it alienating, distasteful, and fundamentally bad.

Jake's stance is hardly groundbreaking: proscriptions of mediation (particularly representations of the divine) remain an ideological stance common to strains of evangelical Protestantism, among other religions, and Jake's faith informed at least part of his feelings on the particular kinds of mediation that Facebook represents. Facebook from a certain angle is a kind of idolatry of a graven image of sociality, after all—a fetishization of the digital representation of human fellowship in place of the "real" (face-to-face) thing. This is a particularly acute problem for strains of evangelical Protestantism, which puts a premium on highly socialized experiences of the divine (or, alternately,

sacralized experiences of the social): Jake and others in his community regularly used "fellowship" as a verb, meaning roughly "to socialize in or with the presence of the divine": "Last Sunday afternoon, we fellowshipped over at Allen's house and then played some music." Although emerging from a very different ethos, Jake's concerns resonate with a distinctly leftist intellectual tradition.

Mediation across political divides

Because the left currently lacks (or cannot afford to articulate) a critique of mediation and capitalism, the response to the idea of 'fake news' that we see in public discourse over and over is to defend the veracity of corporate media and particular kinds of elite knowledge.

Of course, it bears saying that there is no such thing as unmediated communication or sociality: the transmission of any information is structured by the medium of transmission—whether graven images, gestural rhetoric, Facebook posts, or actual faces. But not all forms or regimes of mediation are equal. There was a time when the activist left in the United States harbored a deep mistrust of the intersection of media and capital. This attitude probably reached its domestic peak in the decade or so following the publication of the seminal *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Chomsky and Herman 1988), and began to taper away with the founding of Fox News as a conservative mouthpiece. The rise of social media, which was until recently uncritically celebrated as democratizing the information economy (see, for instance, Twitter in the heady years of the Arab Spring) was another nail in the coffin of this critical tradition. After all, when public discourse is mediated (and monetized) through this terrain, and to be "an activist" is often fundamentally to engage in mediated spectacle, how else do you join the conversation? When social connections, or even sociality itself, are premised on digital connectivity, how else can you be a friend? When political campaigns or movements play out on Twitter, how else do you participate?

Because the left currently lacks (or cannot afford to articulate) a critique of mediation and capitalism, the response to the idea of fake news that we see in public discourse over and over is to defend the veracity of both corporate media and particular kinds of elite knowledge; to proclaim their necessity in a democracy; and even, at times, to frame corporate capital as an explicit ally in the struggle for a just world. The missing critical tradition that would allow a viable progressive response is at heart a critique not of the media per se, but of capitalized mediation. Versions of this critical tradition come from many sources, including the Frankfurt School, French situationist thinkers of the mid-twentieth century like Guy Debord (1995), and various iterations of anarchist thought.

Jake is not a situationist by any stretch of the imagination. But in an era of digitally-mediated sociality, perhaps his deeply moving face-to-face musical performances and the dense web of social ties they depend on could be a contemporary kind of detournement. If his suspicions of mediation stem from an ethical attitude toward what constitutes generative and good social relationships between people, rather than a critique of capitalism or passive consumerism, the resulting attitude bears interesting similarities to an erstwhile leftism.

Re-engaging this critical tradition would mean a radical refashioning of how we relate to one another, and to what we now consider the public sphere. But it would save leftists from the ridiculous position of conflating robust corporate media with social justice or democracy, and might even offer the possibility of political outreach. The problem, after all, is not at heart about the perils of mediation per se (or even any particular mediating technology), but rather about the troubling intersection of mediation and capitalism. The solution is not to defend "good corporations" selling enlightened information or woke entertainment but rather to enact a deep skepticism of the compatibility of actual democracy with our media environment.

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