

Professor Jacob Soll: "I think that this fake news crisis is the symptom of a huge societal crisis and it is both a symptom and a part of its process"

"We are in a sense having a perfect storm. We are having these massive changes in our society, like increased wealth inequality, global warming, a decrease in traditional in reading, and financial illiteracy, and this is mixed with many new forms of media and the anonymous web that can spread misinformation on a massive, industrial scale with trolls and computerized robot trolls. That is what is new and dangerous."

Interview with Jacob Soll, Ph.D. University Professor and professor of history, philosophy, and accounting at the University of Southern California.

Interview by Mark Sinclair Fleeton

RÆSON: How would you define fake news?

SOLL: It is somewhere in between propaganda and a rumor. They are often purposeful rumors that aim to mislead. I think the general definition is this: "a purposeful piece of misinformation" and that descends quickly into propaganda. False news is something that is an error. Fake news has been intentionally faked.

RÆSON: In the article ["The long and brutal history of fake news"](#) you describe a lot of colorful examples of fake news from history. What would be the earliest piece of fake news, that you have come across?

SOLL: I am sure that ancient societies across the world were filled with it. In ancient Rome, Marc Antony was always spewing fake news. A vast rumor mill constantly misled and confused people. You go to the market place and plant a piece of fake news about the emperor or the emperor places fake news about someone in the court, that he wants to kill. That is just typical stuff from the ancient world. There is nothing original about fake news. If you study Suetonius and Tacitus (Roman historians, ed.) you will find that the first Roman emperors constantly used certain misinformation campaigns, rumors and fake news.

In the more modern tradition I have seen two elements. The first element seems to be a splintering or breakdown of authority within the state or an authoritative institution. One of the big explosions was the Reformation where the church was struggling with reformers over its religious authority. That we see from the Middle Ages all the way up through the 18th century. Another real moment of fake news is in the 18th century when Louis XV loses his authority. He is seen being with courtesans and prostitutes. French kings were supposed to have mistresses but not prostitutes. He falls into a fight over authority with the parliament and he loses the information war. Suddenly all these rumors and personal attacks come out. This is very typical of when the state is splintering, or its authority has been effectively questioned. We periodically see huge amounts of fake news and misinformation - especially in civil wars or in moments of uprising. War does the same thing. The other element I see is the constant resistance to the scientific revolution. One of the ways it is resisted is with fake news and this is something we are seeing now. People struggle with science because it is often revolutionary, counters "folk wisdom" and habits, or scary facts, like global warming, and therefore it becomes a focal point of fake news.

RÆSON: Do you also see a splintering of power right now?

SOLL: Forty pct. of the American population doesn't mind if the president lies about everything. What they seem to care about - and studies show this - is a loss of white male dominance. There is a crisis going on for white males that have been in a position of dominance for a very long time. If you come to California there are still plenty of white, bald guys (like me) but there are also women, immigrants, and people of color running things, which is a massive shift. That's why voters from Ohio and elsewhere don't feel that they got the change they wanted when they voted for Obama, and now they see their position in society decline. At this point there is a crisis in society and in their beliefs. Trump can spew all the fake news he wants, it seems, as long as he continues his racist messages.

RÆSON: What are the motivations behind the production and proliferation of fake news?

SOLL: Sometimes fake news is used to undermine power. It depends where the fake news is coming from. Trump was not an authority and he put out fake news about Obama and it definitely sparked this racist, nativist thing that was in society. He tapped this very dangerous, sinister vein and did so very successfully. This is embedded deep in the long, racially charged history of the US. It's one way of doing fake news. Trump is a master at tapping these imagined fears and afterwards he goes to the other side and claims that all the news coming from the state is fake. That is a creepy tradition that goes back to the modern state, Bolshevism and Nazi Germany, where you have a revolutionary, violent power, that wants to undermine liberal stable institutions in order to maintain power.

The motivations are sinister. In the American War of Independence, there was a need to get citizens to participate. People like Benjamin Franklin spread fake news to rally the population. Usually fake news is coming from the state or those who has taken control of the state apparatus. When you have a really anti-truth state, like it is now, it is a scary thing, because it is obviously only working for power in a violent way. There are those examples of Benjamin Franklin and - in World War II - Churchill and FDR (Franklin D. Roosevelt, ed.) trying to whip up fear to get their populations to oppose the Nazis. Usually it is a very sinister inspiration. One of the things, that we have seen since the Middle Ages is that it often has to do with race. In Europe we see a continuation of a medieval tradition of using fake news about Jews to spark fear, and America, the population was always sensitive to fears about African Americans rising up. In Europe, nationalists spread fake news of "Muslim invasions." The same goes for other societies and radicalization over the globe on a much grander scale. And we still have totalitarian states like Iran using the old methods. Obviously, it is usually used as a sinister way of maintaining power by playing on the fears of some people about minorities, foreigners and "the other." It is an ancient human weakness.

RÆSON: Is it a new phenomenon, that private citizens are producing and distributing fake news?

SOLL: No, it is an old phenomenon. 16th century people were passing around notes called "news spread by hand". In the 17th century they were spreading rumors that were essentially undermining the state. The notes were for example saying that cabinet ministers were stealing money, when they actually weren't. The question is when people start to accept this nonsense. What I have seen historically is that it happens when there is a period of fear or instability and that is what we are seeing now. We have all these new forms of media. We are in a sense having a perfect storm and the scale of many new forms of media and the anonymous web that can spread misinformation on a massive, industrial scale with trolls and computerized robot trolls is new and disquieting. That is what is new and dangerous. It's the scope and speed and the way that social media can insert it into people's lives.

I fear that social media is changing a relationship with information, that has existed since the rise of paper. Until 20 years ago people got their information essentially in the same way they got it in the late Middle Ages. With a pamphlet or a piece of paper. Then television and radio came, but they were very regulated. Freedom of the press and the internet made it much more difficult to put an end to a rumor. The question is whether free social media is as dangerous as having a very limited state-controlled press. However, it is a double-edged sword because the state can also produce its own fake news. Trump is using all of these vile methods.

I remember when the Yugoslav war started, and Slobodan Milosevic was building power. These Serbian nationalist stations were barraging citizens with information, saying "your Muslim neighbors have done all these terrible things to you" and finally people just freaked out and started killing their neighbors. Harping on ancient fears and it is getting people to become upset about the people they had lived next to for generations is dangerous and can easily lead to blood baths. The atrocity and facility of the Yugoslav war reminds us it can happen anywhere and become very dangerous very quickly, like a wildfire.

In America, we have these traditions embedded in our traditions of White supremacy and there are some traditions of antisemitism and anti-immigrant sentiment and McCarthyism, so yes, there is the long reaching culture, which has definitely promoted fake news. This is dangerous stuff. One of the things you see in the Renaissance - the late Middle Ages - is that when someone starts harping on the fear, for example against Jews, a prince or a bishop may actually come with an army, find the person that is spreading the fake news and kill them; and then put their troops into the streets and make sure that if there is any more fake news people will actually be thrown in jail or executed. Authorities saw how terrifying fake news was and tried to control it. In the 18th century with the rise of cheap paper and underground printing it became much harder for states to control - although some did. One needed an early police state in order to do that.

RÆSON: How do we fight fake news in the present media environment?

SOLL: In France they haven't deregulated television. Then if you look at France compared to America, there is really three or four channels that people watch in France. They are heavily regulated, and people get mostly the same news there. It is like America was twenty years ago. When the French had their presidential election, Russia tried to get involved and the state was already aware of that and controlled the media outlets. The French democratic state was able to maintain a more traditional level of discourse where there was a central authority, there was a main debate and the fascist candidate, Marine Le pen, did a terrible job in the debate and the fake news sources didn't work. No one in France believed them. First you have the regulation and an agreement around several news sources, which you still have in a country like France. When you get to a country like America, you see Fox News, which has been blasting propoganda for a couple of decades now. Fox News has never been anything but warped fake news or propoganda- a consciously worked misinformation station. That leads to a bigger problem. In America, you have a multiplicity of news sources and huge misinformation sources. To mix vaguely truthful reporting with misinformational editorial cable news ranting stuff is very effective. That is something out of the Goebbels playbook.

I think the spread of fake news also has to do with wealth inequality. Britain and America have the worst wealth inequality in the industrialized world with poor general education and poor services. Mix that with a feeling of helplessness. Society breaks down. Then you get this sort of mess.

The other problem is when your population becomes less and less educated. America is a country where many people don't believe in global warming and a large part of the population supports gun laws, that no other industrialized nations in the world support. Huge swaths of the population embrace anti-scientific, even racist brands of evangelist Christianity—which, seem, of course, not very Christian. I think America has a problem with an undereducated population bathed in religious traditions born from a slave society. When you go to wealthy advanced countries in Europe it's harder to do these kinds of information campaigns. But it worked in England with Brexit and that was really terrifying.

RÆSON: Are some countries - in Northern Europe for example - better equipped to handle fake news?

SOLL: You see very far right-wing and left-wing parties rise in Scandinavian countries, where we didn't think we would see extreme politics. The world is changing drastically, and there is the fear of mass migration, economic instability and change, mixed with deregulation and wealth inequality and this can destabilize countries.

I am partly from the state of Iowa and I go back there every or every second year. I talk to the locals and it is really amazing to see how they are changing from rational Democrats to rabid, racist people, who are listening to conspiracy theories because they are scared. Something has definitely changed. Their communities have broken down and their level of education has declined. You can see the crisis when you go there—even now, as progressive voices are pushing back. The problem is, that it is not just one element. It is a kind of perfect storm and the question is, do we ride it out? If there is not a basic, national consensus in this country about racism, global warming, guns or wealth inequality we are not going to get anywhere. I'm not sure there will be, and I am not sure how we will move forward in the United States. The place feels broken. Young people seem to less racist, but also less literate. But I still put my hope in them.

People know that Trump is lying and they don't care so something else is driving them. There is some sort of deep crisis, that sets this off. It is not just economic decline that causes this crisis. It is also driven by racial concerns, because white people see that their place in society is changing.

RÆSON: We talk about a lack of trust or a diminished credibility of the media or at least the major news outlets. From a historic viewpoint, people have always known not to trust everything they read in the paper. Why do we still talk about diminished trust?

SOLL: xxok? This crisis has been engineered by misinformation sources. If you read Breitbart News it harps on fears and misinformation. It is the same old story, it goes back to the old Jews eating children propaganda story. There is really no evidence that illegal immigrants are the ones killing people. It is usually Americans killing Americans. But it also has to do with illiteracy. We have constant financial crises and national and individual financial struggles. But who understands the basics of finance? It all seems too big to understand and buying into conspiracy is one way to simplify things and to manage terrifying ignorance in the face of overwhelming forces, such as the new economic realities. Complex and serious literacy can be a bulwark against fake news, but crisis can wash away rational discourse, as we see in highly literate countries like Holland and Austria.

RÆSON: What is the end goal of this engineering of a crisis beyond getting Trump elected?

SOLL: Aside from a Russian desire to destabilize the US, I'm not sure there is any engineered conspiracy. Though amongst wealthy conservatives in the US, there seems to be a desire to put Trump, an authoritarian, white supremacist leader into power. Even those opposed to him, like the Koch brothers, seem to like him now that they got their tax cut. Breitbart News is trying to undermine scientific, legitimate legal authority and replace it with an irrational, authoritarian, fear-based authority. I don't know what drives people like the Mercer family (One of the mayor right wing contributors behind Breitbart News and the Trump presidential campaign, ed.) specifically, but it seems to be racism. These guys made their money in tech and they are fighting science—but then modern science has a long relationship with racism. I have spoken to friends, who are not even Trump-supporters, old friends, that I would say were followers of the far right and they really believe that there is a conspiracy by Jews, blacks and Mexicans to undermine white power. They are nuts because whites seem to be undermining themselves on their own pretty effectively—look at the mortality rates among poor whites in the US. But then again, they sense a real crisis, because 20-30 years ago they would have had entrance to jobs and positions that they don't have access to anymore. This also coincides with, what I call, the end of colonialism. After World War II Europe had been bombed; the colonial world was underdeveloped, and Americans dominated the world because they had won, and they had an industrial sector that had not been bombed out. Europe rebuild its industrial sector quickly and had another several decades of dominance, but after the year 2000, these former colonies or underdeveloped areas, such as India and China, suddenly emerged as real powers. There is a real fear in the population about this shift in world power. Even 20 years ago, China was a poor country. Now it is, by some measures, the number one economy in the world; and it's a world military power and the new leader in science. These newly modernized, rising nations - nations whose people had been seen in the West as inferior and backwards - are terrifying to many Westerners, and this is not simply due to China's authoritarian regime, but simply due to their success. Asian culture is staggeringly dynamic. When white people in America look at who is running their banks, and who is dominating their elite schools there are many Asians and women. This is a huge shift away from an age of European, male world-dominance and that is really frightening people. The endgame is not realistic. It is a return to a white-dominated world, and that is not in the cards. Most Americans and Europeans do not understand the force that is China and Asia in general. We are going to have to wake up a face a world where the energy, power and wealth are, for the moment, are shifting to Asia. This rise might be more fragile than people think, but it is real and it's not going to stop.

This is part of a massive shift. We have had these perfect storms before. They have led to massive world wars and the deaths of tens of millions of people in the twentieth century. I fear, that now the stakes are much higher. With nuclear weapons and global warming, I think the risks are greater, than they were at the beginning of the twentieth century. If you talk to people that study these things closely, they say that we are getting closer to major collapses. If you study climate collapse, Geoffrey Parker has shown several times that the crisis in the 17th century (in Europe, ed.) was caused by a 3 degree drop in temperature. It led to mass famines, wars, and interreligious strife.

What we are seeing right now with immigration, for example, is the beginning of this. If we get a twenty-foot water rise in the next forty-five years, it is hard to imagine where people will go and what they will be willing to do. And what if we run out of breathable air or clean water? It's happening now. Also, many societies are on the edge of bankruptcy and population crisis—think Italy. We need a consensus that we don't have. Do you think we can handle these crises? As my research shows, we need better management on a vast scale as we devour our ever-dwindling resources. Perhaps a new generation will take over and fix these problems. Some people are

optimists. To put it simply, I think that this fake news crisis is the symptom of a huge crisis and it is both a symptom and a part of the process of a shift and crisis that is sweeping our planet. We must work tirelessly to get on a better track before the crisis spirals out of control. Fake news is a wake-up call that the storm is here for Western democracy and this is not the time for complacency.

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