



Truth Lies Here

HOW CAN AMERICANS TALK TO ONE ANOTHER—LET ALONE ENGAGE IN POLITICAL DEBATE—WHEN THE WEB ALLOWS EVERY SIDE TO INVENT ITS OWN FACTS?

By Michael Hirschorn



IMAGE CREDIT: OLIVER MUNDAY

THIS PAST AUGUST, the left-leaning San Francisco-based Web site AlterNet posted a remarkable scoop: members of a group calling itself the Digg Patriots were banding together to promote conservative-leaning online stories and to drive down the rankings of stories that the group felt showed a liberal bias. Digg, founded in 2004, was one of the first social-media sites, and it remains the largest one devoted to disseminating news stories; its primary function allows the “collective community” (to employ the optimistic phrase Digg uses to describe its participants) to promote stories it likes and/or deems important and, until recently, to bury stories it dislikes.

Further, the AlterNet story alleged, Digg Patriots were creating ghost accounts whereby they could muster “bury brigades” with far more influence than their actual numbers permitted. “One bury brigade in particular,” the article said, became “so organized and influential that they are able to bury over 90% of the articles by certain users and websites submitted within 1-3 hours.” The effect of this burying was to prevent other Digg users from finding those articles and rendering their own opinions on them, effectively coming as close to censorship as is possible in the social-media sphere. After the AlterNet article was posted, the Digg Patriots user group was taken down, and Digg eliminated the “bury” option on its site; Digg also began an internal investigation into AlterNet’s claims.

The article received little attention outside a few tech-oriented blogs—in part, one suspects, because Digg is no longer the agenda-setting monster it was a few years ago, when many establishmentarians saw it as a threat to the editorial functions of major news organizations. That issue has long since been argued and decided, and Digg itself has been

superseded by far more popular services such as Twitter and Facebook, which cannot be gamed in the same way.

But the episode raises an intriguing, and disturbing, question, especially coming on the heels of a number of similar incidents. Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said (or is famously reputed to have said) that we may each be entitled to our own set of opinions, but we are not entitled to our own set of facts. In a time when mainstream news organizations have already ceded a substantial chunk of their opinion-shaping influence to Web-based partisans on the left and right, does each side now feel entitled to its own facts as well? And thanks to the emergence of social media as the increasingly dominant mode of information dissemination, are we nearing a time when truth itself will become just another commodity to be bought and sold on the social-media markets? Or, to cast it in Twitter-speak: *@glennbeck fact = or > @nytimes fact*? More far-reachingly, how does society function (as it has since the Enlightenment gave primacy to the link between reason and provable fact) when there is no commonly accepted set of facts and assumptions to drive discourse?

Take an early example of this truth warfare: in September 2009, an estimated 60,000 to 75,000 people showed up on the Mall in Washington, D.C., to protest President Obama's "socialist" agenda. Unhappy with that reported turnout figure, conservative blogs disseminated a photo showing that there had been, in fact, 2 million attendees. But it was soon pointed out that the photo in question was of another march years earlier, since the National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in 2004, was conspicuous by its absence. Most of the conservative blogs subsequently removed the photo and/or published a correction, though the irrepressible Power Line couldn't avoid a final shot: "Washington Democrats are well aware of how many people turned out, even as their media outlets try to downplay the event."

Other recent events have forced comparably awkward gymnastics around what is and isn't true. (I am grateful to the Web site The Awl for cataloging several of them.) Many, but not all, of these incidents involve movement conservatives, who continue to prove savvier than their liberal counterparts about deploying new media (see Matt Drudge, aggregation; Rush Limbaugh, talk radio; Sarah Palin, Twitter).

Last spring, the community-organizing group ACORN disbanded, having been subjected to withering and quasi-racist attacks by Glenn Beck and Andrew Breitbart since 2008. It did this even though numerous investigations had determined that the main piece of evidence conservatives had used against it—notorious "sting footage" purportedly showing ACORN representatives advising a "pimp" and a "prostitute" (both in fact conservative activists) how to defraud the government—had been heavily doctored. "The evidence illustrates," California Attorney General Jerry Brown said in a statement, "that things are not always as partisan zealots portray them through highly selective editing of reality. Sometimes a fuller truth is found on the cutting-room floor." Just before the group was shut down, ACORN Chief Executive Officer Bertha Lewis explained, "Our vindication on the facts doesn't necessarily pay the bills."

Inevitably, the finding that the ACORN takedown was based on a forgery got perhaps a thousandth of the attention the fraudulent video had (in part because it lacked awesomely offensive pimp outfits). Nor would this prove the only occasion on which a selectively edited tape disseminated by Breitbart would claim a scalp. In July, the conservative Web activist helped cost African American USDA official Shirley Sherrod her job—and, in the process, contributed to humiliating the NAACP and President Obama—when he posted a two-and-a-half-minute portion of a speech she had given in March about the importance of racial understanding, edited to imply that she was a racist. When later asked about the doctoring of the tape, Breitbart refused to back down or apologize: "I think the video speaks for itself," he said. And when the white farmer and his wife who were discussed in Sherrod's speech—and whose farm Sherrod had been instrumental in saving—came forward to defend Sherrod, Breitbart responded by contesting their (otherwise undisputed) authenticity: "You're going off her word that the farmer's wife is the farmer's wife!"

The conventional wisdom of the early social-media era held that the end of mainstream-media dominance would create a democratization of truth: Arthur Sulzberger and Rupert Murdoch, with their inbred biases and buried agendas, would no longer own a monopoly on the facts. We, the people, would. The metaphor of the Internet as a truth engine was crystallized by Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page in the 1998 paper that served as a founding document of Google's PageRank algorithm, "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine": "PageRank capitalizes on the uniquely democratic characteristic of the web by using its vast link structure as an organizational tool." In other words, the most important and useful information would rise to the top through a

process of natural selection.

Of course, as James Surowiecki notes in his carefully argued 2004 case for distributed systems, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, for Google's search results "to be smart at the top, the system has to be smart all the way through." Surowiecki's book, published the same year that Digg and Facebook were launched, shares much of the utopian sentiment of the early social-media era. "[It's] now possible to solicit and aggregate information from people all over the world," he writes in the afterword to the paperback edition, "and arrive at a collective decision with a few clicks of a mouse." Certainly, sites like Wikipedia have served as glorious manifestations of the hive mind in action: solving the encyclopedia's two main problems, fact-checking and timeliness, while creating something as close to a Borgesian universal library as we're likely ever to see. But Wikipedia works through endless iteration and a Talmudic dedication to fact, shading, and nuance.

Central to Wikipedia's philosophy is the idea of a community with shared aims in "problem solving," to borrow a phrase used in Surowiecki's book. Ultimately, though, it brings to mind Tonto's old riposte to the Lone Ranger: "What do you mean 'we,' white man?" When you enter the realm of politics and ideology, the distinction between opinion and fact starts to cloud, and the stakes become dauntingly high; there is no system of communal "we" to rely on to hash out issues of truth. Hilariously, conservatives even have their own alternative to Wikipedia, called Conservapedia. Its founder, Andrew Schlafly (Phyllis's son) has compared Wikipedia to a "lynch mob."

The communal void allows the emergences of an Andrew Breitbart on the right and, occupying far less morally compromised space on the left, a figure like Julian Assange, the mastermind behind WikiLeaks (no affiliation with Wikipedia): two men who would be unable to agree that they constitute any kind of "we," except insofar as they are both adept at using the Internet in new and powerful ways.

While Breitbart unapologetically conducts his information warfare à la Sartre via Malcolm X—by any means necessary, including blatant falsehoods—Assange uses "truth" as a weapon while assuming that context will be provided by the commons (or, in the case of his massive July leak of classified documents relating to Afghanistan, three international publications). "We believe prima facie that true information does good," Assange told *The Economist* in July. But even in his world of unmediated information, truth can be murky, as Assange noted in a CNN interview in which he defended the Afghanistan release as "legitimate reports," but conceded: "It doesn't mean the contents are true." Assange was on surer ground last spring with his blockbuster leak of video footage that showed an American helicopter strike killing civilians in Iraq. The footage was grotesque, compelling, and a helpful reminder that war is far from the antiseptic experience usually portrayed in the U.S. media, and morally complex even in the most clear-cut of cases.

To some degree, Wikileaks is filling a vacuum left by newspapers, which have been gutting their investigative capacities for decades. But in the current environment, in which there is no widely accepted, credible entity to mediate Assange's data dumps, he is winning ideological points without offering much of a solution. At best, Assange is jabbing a sharp stick in the belly of the public: start paying attention! But then what? The war in Afghanistan exists not in black and white, but in many shades of gray. And a universe in which the United States is unable to operate with meaningful levels of secrecy is one I'd be scared to inhabit.

None of this is to argue that we should—or even could—return to the old order, wherein *The Times* or Walter Cronkite issued proclamations on the credibility and import of news from around the world. That time is past, and it's probably for the best. Nor am I suggesting that these questions of truth and credibility are unique to 2010; commercial and political speech have always occupied a murky space between fact and fabrication. But the Internet creates new and enticing ways to play with truth. The Bush White House credentialed and, at press conferences, repeatedly called on blogger Jeff Gannon—whose online "news" outlet turned out to be essentially a front for the conservative activist group GOPUSA. Indeed, it's a paradox of the Internet that despite all the new tools available to fabricators, the digital media seem to engender credulity. As the editors of ChristWire—an open parody of a conservative religious site, which alleges, for example, that gay marriage promotes pet-on-pet rape—found out, no amount of self-disclosure and blatant ridiculousness is going to convince certain segments of the public that a site is not genuine. One of the founders told *New York* magazine: "People believe anything they read on the Internet."

What is unique, and uniquely concerning, about digital media is the speed with which properly packaged

(dis)information can spread and how hard it is for fact and reason to catch up. Sarah Palin quickly adopted Twitter perhaps because it enabled her to blast forth dramatic proclamations that, given the 140-character limit, she couldn't be expected to explain or defend. Henceforth, election-changing controversies will be ginned up with simple, misleading phrases such as *death panels* or *Ground Zero mosque*. The fact that the Islamic cultural center in question is being built two blocks away from Ground Zero is immaterial, because laborious explanations of the truth—or even relentless mockery by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert—cannot stop the meme from propagating like a contagious disease. Palin's handlers like to refer to "the message" ("As the message continues to succeed, the messenger will continue to be attacked," etc.), which is prima facie incontestable because it is not an argument. Once the meme is out there, it's very hard to quash. No amount of evidence will stop a certain segment of the public from believing that Obama is a Muslim or foreign-born, in part because GOP leaders continue to stoke such ideas, as Newt Gingrich did with his grotesque references on September 11 to the president's "Kenyan, anticolonial behavior."

Few forces exist to counterbalance this slippage. The *St. Petersburg Times*, owned by the nonprofit Poynter Institute, started the excellent PolitiFact in 2007. The site takes a bipartisan and hyper-timely approach to separating political fact from fiction, though its winning of the Pulitzer Prize last year—that ultimate badge of the liberal illuminati—will no doubt be used in some quarters to discredit its findings. PolitiFact has since spread to several other newspapers and to the ABC News program *This Week*, and should serve as a strong model of journalism in a time when meta-reportage—the policing of disinformation—may become as important as the old-fashioned, straightforward kind.

But factual counterterrorism is a tricky enterprise in this era of asymmetric information warfare. The urge to shape the data to suit the message, to outfit one's argument with a set of misappropriated, cynically edited, or simply fabricated facts that can be fed into a self-sustaining partisan feedback loop, will no doubt prove irresistible to many. WikiLeaks's Assange is playing an old game (see the Pentagon Papers; whistle-blowers in general) with powerful new tools. But the Breitbarts, Gingriches, and bury brigades are engaged in an enterprise uniquely enabled by the collapse of the center and the ubiquitous means by which information can spread instantly. It's easy to welcome a time in which technology unleashes an ongoing town hall on any and all issues of the day, in which the wisdom of crowds holds sway. But the dislodging of fact from the pedestal it had safely occupied for centuries makes the recent disturbances in politics and the media feel like symptoms of a larger epistemological, even civilizational, rot. The next presidential election will, no doubt, be something to watch.

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