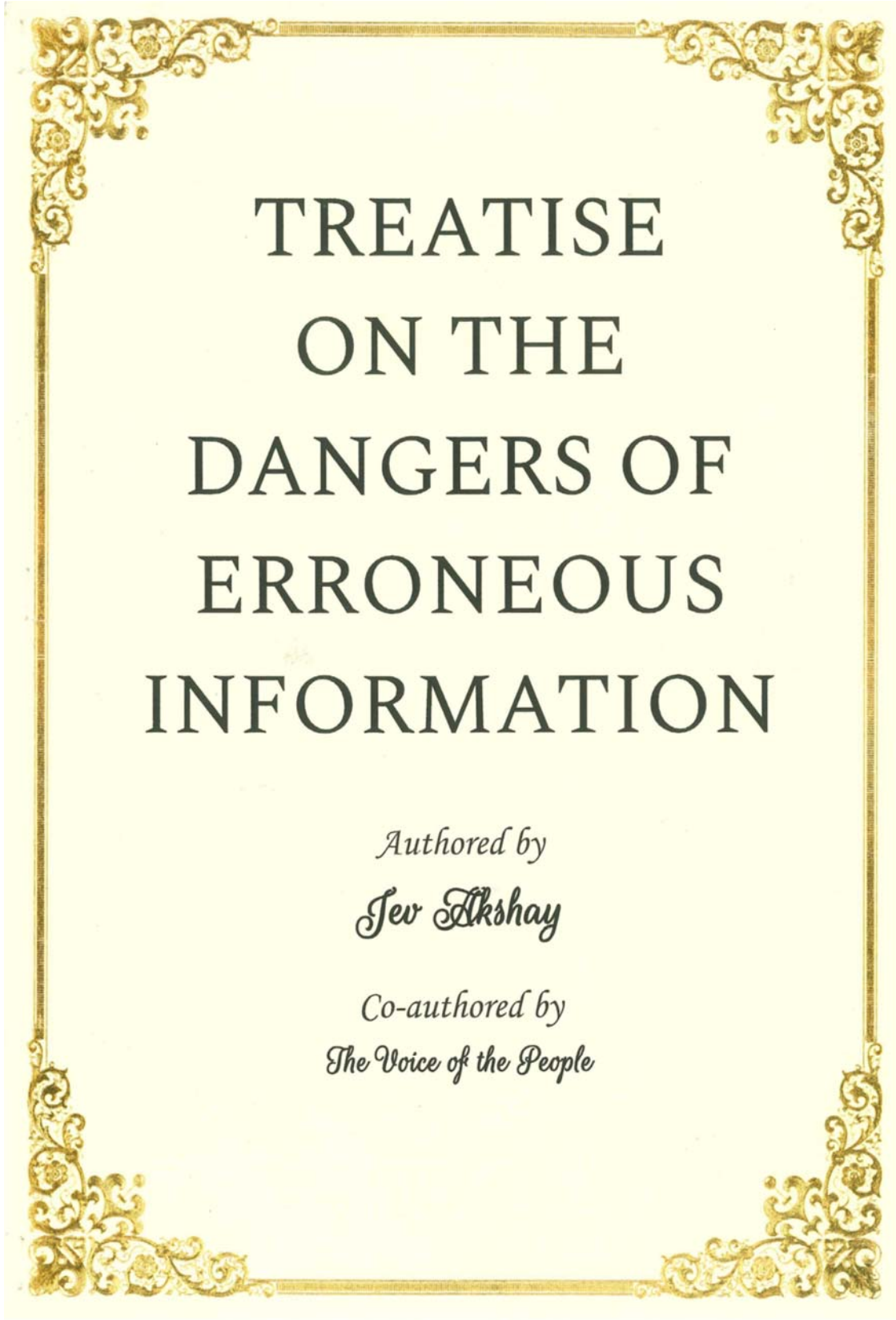


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TREATISE  
ON THE  
DANGERS OF  
ERRONEOUS  
INFORMATION

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## Treatise On The Dangers Of Erroneous Information

I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. It has become common knowledge that this is the famous rallying cry advocating for tolerance and diversity of opinion uttered by the celebrated 18th century Enlightenment philosopher and essayist, Voltaire. Fake news. This phrase was actually concocted by the British author Evelyn Beatrice Hall in 1906, well over a century after Voltaire's passing, and was falsely attributed to the philosopher. This just goes to show how significantly false information can spread quickly, across the world and even throughout the centuries, exploiting our gullibility and misleading us into accepting incorrect facts. Yet, this quote still expresses a gospel truth which is still fundamentally important to the progression of our society.

News is often defined as information about current events that is objective in nature. The information in a news article is often expected to be neutral and unbiased, conveying only the hard facts which can be backed up with empirical evidence, so that news fulfills its purpose of providing education regarding state and world affairs to the public. I beg to differ with this mainstreamed definition. Stating the facts is of course important but that does not mean that news articles should not hold opinions. In fact, news articles which take standpoints and present different sentiments on a particular issue can better serve the purpose of educating the public as this will expose the public to various schools of thought on the matter and therefore result in discourse, paving the way for an effective ventilation of ideas in a society. This helps to combat ignorance, encouraging greater tolerance of other beliefs and acceptance of differences, especially beneficial since our nation is one that embraces diversity. It prevents the formation of echochambers, where one is ignorant of the viewpoints of others and is therefore the root cause of bigotry. Allowing for the expression of personal opinion in news articles introduces more diverse perspectives to the public and as a result allows for them to become more exposed to ideologies that are different from their own beliefs.

Freedom of expression in the press is essentially beneficial to the society at large but complete freedom of any kind is dangerous and therefore, this freedom of expression must be regulated. News articles must be allowed to voice opinion but it is imperative that this opinion is built on rational judgement and is ultimately supported by facts. These opinions should never have malicious intentions or be allowed to offend a large percentage of the populace, such as a particular ethnic group or political denomination. This sedition threatens the peace of the societal fabric and could potentially result in conflict. Such articles of news are axiomatically considered to violate the law under the Internal Security Act of 1963 and the Sedition Act of 1948 as vulgar articles have the potential to incite public disorder. Since it is the prime duty of the government to maintain order in the nation, there is no real ethical harm in restricting the freedom of expression especially in a medium which is as ubiquitous as the press. When news articles have extreme sentiments, it is still not considered to be fake news, although it is still dangerous. However, such opinionated articles can easily manifest into fake news when crucial details of the issue are deliberately excluded or manipulated.

Public opinion rules the world and the press has both the power as well as the responsibility to shape that opinion. The public often formulate their world views based on the news that they read. They turn to news outlets for information about the society and world around them. When malicious lies are allowed to circulate around, masquerading as authenticated information, public opinion then becomes built on falsehood and irrationality. Since the actions of a society are influenced by its opinions and views, the direction in which society progressed then becomes established on a notion that is invented and arbitrary.

There are two different types of fake news: News that is completely fictional or factually inaccurate, and news where the facts are corrupted so as to fit a particular narrative which is contrasting to the actual occurrence. Now, to first address the latter. It is entirely possible for the truth to be distorted which can and has been done in a multitude of ways. Even the simple act of excluding a single vital detail, can disfigure a piece of news and turn it into falsified information. That one piece of intelligence is often essential in providing readers with the context of the situation and therefore the omission or the perversion of the information has the potential to skew the context entirely. This changes the way that the news story is being told as the narrative is dependent on the context. When news sources alter the milieu, the whole situation then gets broadcasted as an account which is vastly distinct from the truth.

This type of fraudulent information is the most dangerous as it is built on the pretext of the truth but this truth is manipulated so that the news story is told in such a way that it fits the agenda of the news source. This has harms to the consumer of the news as they lack prior knowledge on the subject matter and therefore rely on the news sources for their information. Most of the way information is understood, is through knowledge of the context. When the proper context is absent, the result is often ambiguity and the facts then become subjected more than one plausible interpretation. The emergence of these multiple interpretations can cause the public understanding of the subject matter to stray further away from the truth of the confirmed, authentic occurrences.

The omission or distortion of verified information that is fundamental in understanding the account of the news article, can also have grave third-party harms. In skewing the context, the agencies involved in the news story then become portrayed in a different light from how they actually should be portrayed. A single person can either be deified or vilified overnight just depending on how this person is being portrayed by the news media. The reputation of the actors involved in the news story is on the line and the wrong type of publicity, especially if this infamy is built on a lie, can have serious repercussions in the long-run on an individual's social standing, financial security and mental wellbeing. Such severe consequences can be evident from the case of the Saigon Execution during the Vietnam War. The picture of the South Vietnamese police chief, General Nguyen, executing a prisoner with his pistol was used by several news media outlets in the USA, as well as other parts of the world, to exhibit the atrocities committed during the horrific war. It must be unequivocally be stated that numerous heinous injustices were indeed committed during the Vietnam War and the articles

were factually accurate in stating so. However, the picture which they had used as evidence to support their claim, was not an act of transgression but rather an act of justice. The man executed by General Nguyen was not a blameless civilian, but rather a dangerous Viet Cong assassin who went by the name of Bay Lop. This terrorist was the leader of a highly wanted death squad that targeted innocents and murdered top-ranking officials. Bay Lop himself had killed several innocent people, including General Nguyen's family members. The criminal had been rightfully court-martialled and given his due punishment according to the law. The general was bound by his duty and moral responsibility to execute this man who had taken the lives of many.

Yet, the misrepresentation of the facts and the omission of the proper context by the media, painted an inaccurate and untrue perspective in the minds of the public. The righteous saviour became the ruthless murderer and the ruthless murderer became the venerated martyr. Due to this incident, General Nguyen faced severe backlash and was ostracised by society. He was branded as a criminal and received eventually even forced to resign from his job due to the many threats he faced. Even though the article was published for a good cause, the miscontriment of the facts in the article had caused severe harms that could not be compensated for.

In fact, the severity and devastation of the Vietnam War was exacerbated all because of a piece of news built on misrepresented facts. It was reported that on the 2nd and 4th of August 1964, communist North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked United States navy vessels near the Vietnamese coast. This became widely sensationalised as the Gulf of Tonkin incident and this led to the direct American intervention in the Vietnam War, resulting in the eventual loss of hundreds of thousands of American and Vietnamese lives over the next decade in which the war had lasted. Alas, this was all a result of misunderstanding created because of a corruption of facts by the media. It was later revealed that the American ships were the ones that fired first on the North Vietnamese vessels, because they had received false radar images which led them to believe that they were under attack. It was a mere technical mistake and false alarm that had caused the battle to break out in the first place. Instead, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was portrayed as a planned act of North Vietnamese aggression, which led the Americans to go to war, rather than what it truly was: nothing more than an unfortunate accident caused by human error.

Even statistics, the most reliable of facts, can be manipulated to create fake news. Ironically, statistics show that when claims are supported by statistics, people are far more likely to believe this claim because it is hard to refute cold, hard numbers and therefore claims backed up by collective numerical data appear to be more credible in nature. Statistics are persuasive instruments and is usually decisive in convincing one to accept a piece of information. Despite this, numbers and figures can indeed be misleading due to the use of what is known as Simpson's Paradox where the same sets of data can appear to show opposite trends depending on how the data is grouped.

This often occurs when the aggregated data conceals a conditional variable upon which the results are dependent and significantly influenced by. The paradox can be easily misused by news sources to fulfill their own agenda. The problem of the abuse of the Simpson's Paradox can be observed in a British study which appeared to show that smokers had a higher survival rate when compared to non-smokers. However, when the participants were divided under the criteria of their age group it was shown that the non-smokers were significantly older on average and therefore more likely to pass away during the twenty year duration of the study precisely because they had lived longer in general. This abuse of the Simpson's Paradox had resulted in a statistic 'proving' that the unhealthy practice of smoking was actually healthy. This could have potentially degraded the lifestyle choices of individuals, causing them to believe the credibility of statistics and ignore the health risks of smoking, if the outcome of the study was not exposed to be invalid. Data can be divided into misleading or arbitrary categories which increases the likelihood of the presence of lurking variables that are purposely omitted by news sources so that the statistics can be aligned to be in support of their own motives.

Aside from the Simpson's Paradox, there are also many ways in which graphs can be manipulated with the purpose of deceiving the public to garner their support. One of the most common ways that graphs can misrepresent data is by distorting the scales. Selecting only a certain portion of an axis or using an inconsistent scale can greatly exaggerate a miniscule difference by making it appear on the surface level as numerically significant. Another technique used to distort information is through cherry-picking whereby information is carefully curated and only information that is advantageous to claim being made is selected whilst all other data is ignored, so as to create a misleading impression on the reader. As such graphs and statistics can be easily misused in a careless or dishonest way, exploited by venal sources of news with the intention of shaping public opinion through duplicity.

The distortion of statistics is often used by business corporations in the form of false advertising and this can also be considered as fake news. These corporations only have the intention of increasing sales and maximising profit and therefore often skew information to make their products appeal greater to our consumer culture. This is harmful to the consumers and is a form of exploitation as we are lured in with false promises of satisfaction but are instead robbed of our money whilst gaining a utility value of the product that falls short of expectations. This only results in the corporate executives becoming richer at the expense of the happiness and trust of the consumer. Of course, spending drives the economy and misleading statistics about products does cause an increase in consumer spending which in turn results in economic growth. However, there needs to be an integrity to economic growth and this economic growth cannot be derived from an exploitation of trust that the citizens have in the advertising of firms. True economic growth should not sacrifice the happiness and satisfaction of the citizenry, which are important measures of non-material standards of living. Therefore, the lies in advertising must be regulated as they too have the same moral and practical implications as fake news.

News is also currently delivered in a myriad of mediums and is produced by various sources. Media has become globalised, consisting of a conglomerate of several news agencies and networks which have the resources to gather and share information directly. Wires and outlets, such as the Reuters, that aggregate or rereport stories are more common now as compared to in the past. As a result, information is able to travel across the world with extremely quick speed. These conditions have become ideal for the phenomenon of circular reporting whereby information that is disseminated by one news outlet is then republished and spread by other news networks, which then cite the news outlet that originally published the article, as the source of information. This is problematic as when multiple news agencies report on the same initial piece of erroneous information, the falsehood then appears to other authors as already being verified by multiple sources, thus encouraging the further usage and spread of this fraudulent information.

One major example of such a case would be the publication of a single pseudoscientific paper which claimed that the vaccination of children would cause autism. This lone piece of false information was enough to spark the anti-vaxxer movement which has resulted in grievous repercussions on society even till today. Despite the fact that the original paper had been discredited by scientific research, the movement still has traction simply because the false information had been reprinted by several legitimate news agencies. As a result of the anti-vaxxer movement, deliberately unvaccinated children are now succumbing to contagious diseases, such as measles, which could have potentially been virtually eradicated in the developed world.

Since we now live in a world of post-truth, where emotion is more influential in shaping public opinion compared to objective facts, the desire for the public to obtain information swiftly, overpowers the desire to be certain of the information's validity. When this bias is multiplied by the billions of people internationally, nearly instantaneously, more caution in safeguarding the truth must be ensured.

There are countless reasons as to why news outlets would produce and circulate fake news, all of which are selfish and detrimental to society. News networks have strayed far from their original purpose, which is to educate the public, and have now become highly commercialised. News agencies, especially citizen journalists, have become more concerned with ensuring guaranteed viewership so as to increase their profits, ratings and notability. This leads to the problem of sensationalism, where news agencies shift their focus towards capitalising on the pathos of the public so as to incite a reaction from them. When the facts of the news fail to achieve this, news agencies hence do not hesitate to misrepresent the facts and create an altered reality so as to make a news story more interesting, and as a result satisfy their egotistical agenda. This altered reality is often filtered by the pressures of viewerships, ratings and financial constraints. These motivations are at best, a form of entertainment and at worst, sheer desire for the twisted. This needs to be stopped!

Fake news is unethical and immoral, even when there is no direct harm caused, especially when evaluated under the Kantian categorical imperative. In the long-run there is a substantial and consequential moral harm when fake news is allowed to spread. By believing that it is morally acceptable to produce and spread false information as well as by refusing to take any action against fake news, by extension we then believe that it is morally acceptable for others to also be indifferent or perhaps even supportive to the circulation of false information. Fake news is allowed to become a universal norm and in such a paradigm the truth will cease to exist. It will be incredibly difficult to differentiate myth from fact and the lines between truth and fabrication become blurred. In such a scenario, even information that is true and supported by concrete evidence, will be subjected to intense skepticism and taken to be untrue as well. The reverse can also occur whereby all fake news is granted legitimacy and is accepted as the truth. As such, it is crucial that censorship is exercised to prevent the spread of fake news.

Freedom is good and it is important. However, security is better and is far more vital. There currently exists a notion of order through liberty, which is achieved through granting power to the people via absolute freedom. This is a very beautiful idea indeed. It is an extremely utopian method of thinking but is also extremely impractical. This idea operates on the gigantic assumption that people would all be responsible in exercising their rights. However, this is not the case as people tend to misuse their liberties as proven by the very existence of fake news. There can be no such thing as absolute freedom for all as when one exercises their 'freedom of expression' by publishing an article constructed on fabrications, this infringes on others' right to the access of knowledge. Agencies which produce fake news therefore lose their right to the freedom of expression as act with the intention of infringing on the rights of other citizens, being epistemically irresponsible and reckless in their actions. Sources of fake news no longer deserve the right to be able to express themselves as deny any responsibility that they have regarding their beliefs as they hold opinions without evidence and also encourage others to share these subversive, flawed views. It is essential that sources of fake news be punished under the code of the law, so that these sources can take responsibility for their actions, and so that the punishment can act as a deterrent against the future creation of more erroneous information.

Although censorship results in the sacrifice of certain freedoms, this sacrifice is inevitable due to the dangers posed by fake news on a society, namely potential unrest and insurrection which would arise out of miscommunication and ignorance. The primary duty of the government is to prevent society from falling back into the State of Nature, where all are free, and because of this absolute freedom, exist perpetually in the condition of *bellum omnium contra omnes*; a war of all against all as people are only concerned with preserving their own interests. The idea of the State of Nature is used to illustrate the harms of complete freedom and to convey the message that the government must intervene and restrict the non-essential circumstantial freedoms of the people as they see fit, so as to safeguard the peace and maintain the stability of the country.



The government should therefore not hesitate to enforce the social contract, via the censorship of fake news as its most basic purpose is to ensure security in the nation above all else and before any other responsibility. The government must assess the credibility of published information and censor anything that is built on a falsehood. The authors of fake news have no justifications to complain of any injury upon their freedoms by the government, as they complain of an injury of which they are an author themselves and therefore ought not to accuse any other party but themselves. As the political theorist Thomas Hobbes puts it elegantly, "humane affairs cannot be without some inconvenience". However, this censorship must never be abused to simply just stifle articles which bear a radical opinion, as is done in authoritarian regimes. As long as this opinion is supported by reliable factual evidence, it must be protected from censorship so as to still allow for a proper ventilation of ideas which are legitimate, and in the long-run foster openmindedness amongst the citizenry. True information of any kind must be allowed to exist as long as there is no major danger to the peace of society.

The policy of government censorship and regulation would also incentivise news agencies to do proper research and fact-checking before publishing a piece of news. Ratings and profit would then be gained through hard work and the amount of benefit the public receives, rather than just through sensationalisation.

The problem of fake news is not just in its inception but also in its propagation. Therefore, the government should not only act to stop the creation of fake news but also to stop the spread of fake news. A concession must be made that this problem cannot be eradicated completely but it must be managed to the best of the government's ability and therefore minimise the harm that it creates. It would be unethical to impose a legal punishment on those who spread fake news and most of these people are ignorant of the true facts and have been brainwashed by the false information that has manipulated their emotion. Rather, we must educate the populace about the dangers of fake news and teach them the skills by which they can detect it. This education must be widespread and the government should not hesitate to make use of their resources in funding this campaign as public education would have a significant impact on the war against fake news.

*Ecrasez l'Infame.* Crush the despicable. This was the campaign slogan used by Voltaire in his war against bigotry and unscrupulous manipulation. It is high time for the government to revive this salient warning, to use it to propel our own fight against the despicable fake news for the betterment and the protection of our great nation.