



## Tech Talk

### Fake News and Technology ©

by John McCarthy

Hi and welcome once again to Tech Talk. So-called ‘fake news’ has been featuring regularly in the press for a few months now and has been accused of influencing election results and fomenting populist movements. Of course, this isn’t a new phenomenon: Goebbels and his propaganda machine played a prominent role in distorting truth to get Hitler into power (now **there’s** a bit of euphemistic fake news for you), and more recently we had what turned out to be Weapons of Mass Disappearance, which were cynically exploited to justify the invasion of Iraq, and the supposedly democratic uprising against an elected government in the Ukraine by individuals of shall we say dubious repute, encouraged by Washington.

The bad news is that technology may well exacerbate the situation in the coming years by removing the sometimes fine blurred line between truth and mendacity – not to say outright deception. Technological advances in audio and video have reached unprecedented levels of sophistication, to the point where replicating real news – TV broadcasts or radio interviews – has become child’s play. It’s been demonstrated how technology enables the recording of someone talking and then changing their facial expressions in real time. One can take a news clip of any well-known world leader or politician and alter their facial expression in practically undetectable ways in order to influence or manipulate the viewer.

There have also been jaw-dropping advances in the digital creation of people – technologies that have been used with great success by Hollywood and the video-games industry. With Virtual Reality now added to the mix, it’s simple to imagine how a foreign political group could create fake videos of some of the candidates in the French Presidential elections in embarrassingly compromising situations, in order to discredit them and influence which sheet the voter puts into the envelope at the ballot box.

Advancements in audio could be just as worrying. Last November, Adobe demonstrated a new concept called Project Voco, nicknamed ‘Photoshop for Audio’, which will enable sound engineers and enthusiasts alike literally to put words in people’s mouths. It works by recording someone’s voice for twenty minutes into the application, and once it’s learnt the characteristics of that person’s voice, by typing in extra words they will be uttered in an uncannily accurate replication of the speaker. The result doesn’t sound

computer-generated at all. It sounds real, and obviously the implications of this could be extremely worrying.

On the plus side, organisations have sprung up to combat fake news. Tech giants Google and Facebook have joined forces with the First Draft News project CrossCheck. One of their current initiatives is to help us here in France make informed choices ahead of the elections next month. The objective is to help journalists from organisations across the country collaborate in order to find and check online content. This includes photographs, videos, comment threads and news sites, and by bringing all this expertise together to ensure that hoaxes, rumours and false claims are quickly unmasked and discredited. We, the public, are also encouraged to participate by submitting what we believe could be a spurious link or content for CrossCheck to investigate further.

Similar schemes are taking place in the Czech Republic, a centre being set up after 40 Czech language websites were purportedly disseminating false stories, predominantly about migrants. The German government is also hoping social media sites and their users will assist in the battle against fake news, and in Taiwan a government initiative is currently under way employing a range of digital tools to involve citizens.

Naturally, there's only so much technology can do. Societies are shaped by technology and this has been true for thousands of years, and plainly developments have not always been inherently good or desirable. Governments and press organisations throughout the world are also disseminating fake news in order to protect their own interests or to persuade a suspicious public to allow them to embark on unpopular ventures. Ultimately, it's up to us. We all make value judgments which are based on past experiences and the information we receive. When politicians utter non-truths, we eventually learn not to trust them. When the media/government and banks casually inform us that we are experiencing *X*, but our intelligence and direct senses inform us that we're undergoing *Y*, we naturally assume the former have an agenda that is in their interest and not ours. This is one of the factors that led to Brexit and Trump and could serve as a serious warning to all the Ministries of Truth: stop telling porkies before the situation really gets out of hand.