

The State of Facts

Reclaiming The Fact-Creation Function In Society

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We have lost control of the function by which facts are created in society. This is not all bad news. One consequence of this loss of control is breaking the oligopolies, such as that of governments and academia, traditionally controlling the production of facts. Other consequences are more problematic, which if remaining unaddressed, risk becoming catastrophic. We need to reclaim the «fact creation function» in society. This reclaiming has taken on new urgency ever since the domain of the digital became the fifth domain for war, a new battlespace. In the coming years we will see a dramatic securitisation of digital space. This securitisation will result in a sharp demarcation between «white» and «black» spaces. White spaces will be spaces of maximum regulation and minimum freedom, policed by the old oligarchs. Black spaces will be spaces of minimum regulation and maximum freedom. Into this polarisation a third type of space is needed, blue space. Blue spaces are negotiated spaces characterised by peer review and intersectionality. Without blue spaces the gains we have seen in the democratisation of the fact-creation function in society over the last three decades will likely be lost to the forces of authoritarianism.

I. Introduction: The Fact-Creation Function in Society

There was a time when facts were facts, when black was black, white was white, men were men and women were women. No more. Facts are in dispute, black lives matter, white privilege visible, men are painfully learning #MeToo and women, well, as a man its not my place to comment on the state of women but then it never was.

Sometime during soon after Donald Trump had been nominated as the Republican nominee for President I noticed a very odd tweet. The tweet was claiming, «ISIS Is In Michigan,» with a blurry photograph of a crowd waving black flags with indecipherable Arabic script. It seemed a pretty improbable that a pro-ISIS rally took place openly in Michigan.

Curious, I messaged the tweeter, feigning ignorance as a foreigner, asking him how he knew. In the first of several tweets we subsequently exchanged, he told me that «everyone knew» and I should read the news. So I dutifully googled «ISIS in Michigan.» The photograph turned out to be an ANTI-ISIS protest held in Michigan. Several media sources confirmed this story. He claimed this was a liberal media conspiracy and was I really that naive. As I continued to engage the tweeter, pressing him how he knew, he cited all sorts of unrelated facts, such as the 2014 Fort Hood shooter in Texas claiming an affiliation with ISIS.

The tweeter, an Italian-American, assured me he wasn't a racist, telling me stories about Muslims he had helped out. The bottom line about how he «knew» was that he just «knew.» During the Trump campaign I had several such conversations with people making various claims. All them stood by their claims despite widespread evidence to the contrary.

In the UK the Vote Leave Campaign famously paraded a campaign bus on which it said in big letters that we «send the EU £350M a week» and that if we leave we could use this money to fund the National Health Service.

How, in 2018, does one create a fact? It's very simple: you make it up, much in the way a fiction writer invents an incident. If this «fact» serves a political ideology, then it will be amplified and repeated, regardless of veracity.

What my engagements online taught me, was that there are a whole class of voters, citizens and tweeters who held beliefs about situations and events that were entirely untethered to reality. This is perhaps unsurprising and maybe it's not even new. I'm sure radical atheists would claim that anyone with a religious belief believes in things that are untethered to reality.

What's the difference then? What's the difference between a religious belief in something invisible and the belief that «ISIS Is In Michigan»?

Unfortunately to the non-religions most religions are caricatures of what they really are. Imagine a caricature of an Ame-

rican or an Indian. Imagine dismissing the North American pragmatic philosophical tradition or India's civilizational contributions because of we believe stereotypes are literal. Our stereotypes of religion mean that we believe that religions offer their adherents certainty. In fact what religions offer their adherents is a route to accepting uncertainty.

Czeslaw Milosz in the *The Captive Mind*, a study of Stalinism and its intellectual appeal quotes «an old Jew of Galicia.» saying: «When someone is honestly 55 % right, that's very good and there's no use wrangling. And if someone is 60 % right, it's wonderful, it's great luck, and let him thank God. But what's to be said about 77 % right? Wise people say this is suspicious. Well, and what about 100 % right? Whoever says he's 100%right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal.»

Absolute certainty in any domain, religion, science, or politics, is a sign of fanaticism. The practitioners of fantacism are indeed bullies and thugs, «the worst kind of rascal.»

«What religions offer their adherents is a route to accepting uncertainty.»

Science lost its battle to arrive at certainty sometime in the 1930s with the publication of Kurt Godel's mathematical proof on incompleteness. The realisation that science would not be able to explain the world like a clock continued to sink in over the decades. Quantum theory taught us that reality was probable, elusive, slippery and in fact very hard to know. The classical dream of science being able to explain away everything died in these three or four decades.

In the social sciences, essentialist theories of reality gave way to social constructivism, where ontologies were seen as the product or outcome of very specific historical processes. This is the spirit in which Bruno Latour published, «*Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts.*» (1979) Latour went into Salk Laboratories in order to observe the scientists as an anthropologist would an unknown culture.

He made the following case, «Indeed, our observer incurred the considerable anger of members of the laboratory, who resented their representation as participants in some literary activity. In the first place, this failed to distinguish them from any other writers. Secondly, they felt that the important point was that they were writing about something, and that this something was «neuroendocrinology.» They claimed merely to be scientists discovering facts; [I] doggedly argued that they were writers and readers in the business of being convinced and convincing others.»

Latour's unsentimental take of the scientific fact creation process illustrates that we live in a society dominated by a touching faith in rationality. We believe that decisions get made

on the basis of rational decisions, as opposed to decisions being made on the basis of power the basis of power.

Scientists and more broadly academics, work hard at being seen as a trust-worthy priesthood of fact-creators. Governments come a close second, at least in terms of sheer volume of «facts» that they churn out, and then non-profits, including think tanks, are a close third. But this cosy hierarchy has been dramatically upended.

II. The New Battlespace: «The whiff of 1945»

In antiquity there were two classic domains for war; land and sea. During the course of the 20th century we added air and space. Then, in the early years of the 21st century, we added a fifth domain, cyber.

Over time warfare in these domains gave rise to an uneasy détente in distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, between war and peace. The Western liberal order attempted to build on these distinctions, with differing rights set out for both classes of actors and situations. While civilian casualties have always been a part of warfare, it has been considered morally dubious to deliberately target civilians, and targeting civilians in peacetime the ultimate *casus belli*.

This détente took serious hits with the rise of so called non-state actors as in the case of Al Qaeda and ISIS. We have now witnessed the unlawful rendition and detention of civilians. Places like Guantanamo represent a «state of exception,» (See Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*) a «paradigm of government» where the law has been suspended and the rules of the Western liberal order are suspended. We have witnessed drone strikes authorized at Presidential level killing thousands of people unlawfully in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen.

For non-state actors on the receiving end of such state incursions such as the US invasion of Iraq and the establishment of states of exception, asymmetrical warfare in the domains of land, sea, air and cyber are now well-established strategic responses. Suicide-martyrdom operations are now a stochastic reality, as are drone strikes and even the occasional full-scale invasion.

Telling lies about your opponents is, of course, nothing new. This process of dehumanisation is as old as war itself. It is one of the principle instruments in the process of turning a people into an enemy. While techniques may have changed the basic approach of spreading the most pernicious lies about people remains the same.

What has changed dramatically of course is that the channels that such stories can travel down have proliferated dramatically. Suddenly the story-telling function in society was taken from the hands of a few industries. The technical costs for storytelling plummeted and distribution channels multiplied.

Seizing the state television station doesn't prevent a President from making a FaceTime broadcast during a coup. While the Pentagon can influence film-makers to tell the stories they want told, an AQ has mastered the art of reaching many millions of people.

The loss of control represented by a democratisation of the story-telling function of society is profound. It is profound because it also represents a loss of the fact-creation function.

This wider loss of control has created a new «Cold War» online. Governments, the Chinese, the Russians, the British, the Americans and not to mention the North Koreans, have all been busy attacking each other with increasing frequency both covertly and not to covertly.

In the old Cold War days incursions in the air and sea would often be used to test defensive capacities. Many early digital attacks can be seen as crude early salvos, test shots across the bow, to gauge reaction and response, both political and military. The watershed moment in warfare in the cyber domain occurred probably in 2010. All recent developments, from Russian attacks on US elections to Cambridge Analytica are arguably a result of this one action, which set the rules of the game we are currently trapped in.

When the history of warfare in the cyber domain is written, it will be noted AQ, ISIS or even Putin did not fire the first shots. One ironic commentary came from General Michael Vincent Hayden, retired United States Air Force four-star general and former Director of the National Security Agency, Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence, and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, when he unwittingly scored an own goal, saying, «As This has the whiff of August 1945, someone, probably a nation-state, just used a cyber weapon in a time of peace... to destroy what another nation could only describe as their critical infrastructure. That's a big deal. That's never happened before.» The trigger involved pushing a thumb-drive into a computer somewhere in the Nantaz Fuel Enrichment Plant by an unknown Iranian.

This action was part of a joint US-Israeli offensive against a sovereign state in peacetime, a digital worm named Stuxnet targeting the Iranian nuclear programme. Unfortunately, in the long tradition of Dr. Frankenstein, Stuxnet's creators lost control of their own creation. Stuxnet escaped Nantaz «into the wild» where it started infecting computers all over the world. (See «Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World's First Digital Weapon»)

The full-implications of the precedent set by Stuxnet are only becoming clear, as the scale of foreign manipulation in events such as the US Presidential Elections and potentially the Brexit vote in the UK are only now surfacing. Elections in particular represent largely irreversible processes, like eggs once cracked, they cannot be put back together. The discovery that the Russians gamed the US electoral process will not be

grounds to delegitimize the Trump Presidency because that would be the undoing of the whole system.

We have moved from an era where state actors fielded vast armies to fight other armies, to civilians becoming legitimate targets. These civilian targets were once subject to morally dubious practices such as area bombing. Now civilian targets are subject to targeted information campaigns aimed at everything from attacks on critical infrastructure (see the Russian Black Energy attack in the Ukraine) to influencing the very heart of democratic power, electoral processes.

In this new world though, Western liberal distinctions of combatants and non-combatants, peacetime and wartime have become meaningless categories. The battlespace has shifted inside our heads. The battlespace is now internal, not external. This shift marks a watershed from which there is no returning.

In the decades to come the nature of this battlespace will see the coming of radical new offensive capabilities. Every new device or service brought to market will eventually be weaponised or will serve as a weapons platform for payloads as yet to be created. As these new offensive capabilities come online, what defensive capabilities will be developed to protect us?

«Every new device or service brought to market will eventually be weaponised.»

III. The Colour Of Space

«All forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion.» – Chantal Mouffe

«Sovereignty is exercised within the borders of a territory, discipline is exercised on the bodies of individuals, and security is exercised over a whole population.»

Michel Foucault, Michel and Graham Burchell (Translator). Security, Territory, Population. 1977–78.

Western liberal democracies are designed to be open societies. This means that they are also more vulnerable to digital attacks than closed societies. Stuxnet launched us into an era for which there has been very little strategic thought. The strategic inadequacy of our response to this state of affairs cannot be underestimated. No body really knows what to do and that is really not an exaggeration See The Perfect Weapon by David Sanger for details).

In order to arrive at some strategic intent for how to respond we have to understand the domain of cyber in traditional spatial terms.

In the mid-90s the Internet started seeing an influx of newcomers christened, derogatively, newbies. Akin to a gold rush, spaces that were once free and wild were suddenly getting swarmed by newbies who did not really grasp the nuances and social norms of this frontier. A worse threat than clueless AOL

users loomed. This was the threat of government and more specifically the threat of regulation. In response one stalwart denizen of this new frontier-land, John Perry Barlow, penned «The Declaration Of Independence Of Cyberspace.» The iconic first paragraph read:

«Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.»

Barlows message concerned the idea of «sovereignty.» Towards the end Barlow elaborated, «We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies.»

The space that Barlow was declaring as off-limits was the frontier, the Internet. However as tends to happen to all frontiers, they change over time. The Internet evolved from a largely ungoverned «black» space into two spaces, a «white» space and a «black space.»

White Space

White spaces are officially sanctioned spaces, places where it was acceptable to play, trade, and speak. These «white» spaces were underpinned by «dark» or «black» spaces where a whole different set of rules applied. Operating in the «dark web» are hackers, drug dealers and groups like AQ and ISIS but also the intelligence agencies. As the Snowden leaks showed, there is an entire domain of activity taking place in the so-called «dark web» that actively targets civilians.

The last few years, all the way from Snowden to Cambridge Analytica, have revealed the extent of vulnerabilities in this seeming safe «white» space. The inevitable reaction to the awareness of vulnerabilities will be a securitisation of this white space. This securitisation taken to the extreme will result in a China-like social credit score. In the immortal words of the Party, the purpose of this social credit score is explained as follows, «It will allow the trustworthy to roam freely under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step.» (Source: ABC News) Civilians will be socially and biometrically credit-scored to an inch of their lives, with a point-system determining everything from our ability to buy insurance, access to health care, the right to vote, the right to free movement and perhaps most critically the right to tell stories.

This securitisation will represent a reversal of control. Losing control of the fact-creation and story-telling processes in society will be addressed with a vengeance. Whereas these functions have been naturally been democratized over time, and then wildly democratized with the Internet, they will be ruthlessly reversed in the name of securing the cyber domain. Critical infrastructure will sit in this white space.

The old guard of academic institutions, governments, and non-profits will police white spaces voluntarily. Each of these actors will trade back their right to control the fact-creation function for a role as police-men and women in this newly securitized white space. Corporations, it goes without saying, will declare themselves as non-political actors simply conforming to regulatory requirements as demanded of them. We cannot expect Facebook, Google and Twitter to resist the secu-

Illustration 1
Examples of white, black, and blue spaces

Space/characteristic	Regulation	Freedom	Sovereign	User requirement	Examples
White	Maximum	Minimum – biometric	Single authority	Minimum attention + low technical & interpersonal skills required	Facebook
Blue	negotiated	intersectional	Peer	Maximum attention + high interpersonal skills required	Wikipedia
Black	Minimum	Maximum – insurgent	Code as law	Variable attention + high technical skills	«Silk road»

ritization of spaces online. A logical evolution of this «white» space will mean that we are given the choice of either acquiescing to living in an increasingly securitized digital life, or decamping to the «black» spaces of the Internet.

Black Space

The achievement of securing white space will push people out into black spaces. The current demarcation between white and black is fuzzy, the borders are not entirely clear, as the global platforms are painfully discovering.

As I write Twitter is attempting to scrub itself of millions of accounts that are in fact bots or automated scripts of some sort. This scrubbing represents a beginning of drawing much sharper borders.

In time, it's possible to imagine that setting up a Twitter account will require not simply a «real» identity but also links to credit scoring agencies, a physical address and official government IDs. The purpose of requiring such information will be control and in particular extending the monopoly of violence the state has squarely into the domain of cyber. While it's perhaps hard to imagine a Londoner going to jail for what they tweet, that day has come and gone, unnoticed by most people.

For those unwilling to subject themselves to such control will arise a class of services that will attempt to provide anonymity. Secure messaging services like Open Whisper Systems' Signal, as well as web browsers like DuckDuckGo will proliferate, as well encryption services in general. Obfuscation services will be in demand. The battle lines between white and black will be drawn up.

The nature of blackness is however critical to grasp. Philosopher Alain Badiou in «Black: The Brilliance of A Non-Color» observes, «As usual, we black out whatever we don't know. We hypothesize that an astronomical (so to speak) quantity of «dark matter» exists. The details are far from being finalized, and theories as complex as they are contradictory compete with one another...But the fact remains that «dark» in this way designates what is lacking in perception so that nothing should be lacking in thought...» We insist on seeing blackness as opposition to whiteness.

Black in the dominant culture of white becomes the space of pure opposition. Anything that opposes white must be black. The securitization of white space represents the necessary criminalization of black space. However the securitization of white space also means the death of creativity in white spaces. All unsanctioned ideas, experiments, stories, processes, will attempt to find their home in black space because there will be no-where else to go.

The question that sits in front of us is what our proper response to this situation should be? It's not simply what side will we chose, but what our strategic responses to this situation should be?

Blue Space

Imagine signing up for an account on Twitter or Facebook. The first part of your sign-up process will ask you what colour of account you want, a white, blue or black account. A black account is an anonymous account, where you don't have to reveal any aspect of your identity. A white account will demand everything, full biometrics – name, address, credit card, government ID number, retina scans, and a DNA sample.

The principle question a blue account will ask you is who has invited you to sign-up, which might be a fellow blue account, who your peers are in other words. Signing up with a blue account will mean that you are not subject to the securitization of white and nor are you totally free to do as you wish, which is what a black account entitles you to. A blue account means that you are subject to peer review.

«For a user a colour of an account will tell you something about who you're engaging with.»

For a user on Twitter or even a Facebook, a colour of an account will tell you something about who you're engaging with. If you're particularly cautious then you might elect to only see content or engage with white users. Or for that matter you might decide that you absolutely don't want to interact with white users, who will all be securitized, that is, logged, vetted and sanctioned by institutional oversight.

The nature of a blue space online would be different to white or black spaces. The political scientist Chantal Mouffe argues for an «agonistic politics» where we engage directly with views that are dramatically different from our own. Her argument is that part of the reason we have seen a rise of the extreme right is because we do not permit these positions even the space to make their case, so they take to the margins. Blue space would be a space for a politics of difference. Go blue if you want to debate the rights and wrongs of any position, go blue if you want to create spaces that are the result of negotiation.

Conceptually blue is intersectional, negotiated and peer-reviewed. It is a space not simply for arguments, but for peer-reviewed fact creation processes further more, for science to be done where the Latourian processes of being a scientist means telling a story transparently with evidence for the purposes of persuasion.

Blue platforms are platforms where individuals must be awake to a degree then do not need to be on white platforms. Ultimately original ideas will likely continue to come from black spaces, with blue mediated between locked down white

spaces and free black spaces. Blue then is a strategic response to the securitization of the cyber-realm.

IV. Conclusion: Reclaiming The Fact-Creation Function

The power to tell our own stories has always mattered. When that power is taken away from us then we are colonized. An external narrative is imposed on us, artificial borders are imposed on the cartographies of our thought. We are no longer free to dream our own dreams.

The power to tell your own stories does not imply abandoning the fact-creation processes in our society to those who choose ungrounded fantasy over scientific integrity. Neither does it mean that we must out of necessity turn over the fact-creation processes in society over to the authorities, who in turn will claim to exercise choice on our behalf.

Reclaiming the fact-creation function in society means the creation of platforms characterised by plurality and debate, where difference is not simple tolerated, but a hospitality to difference is hardwired. These are spaces that require us to have courage in extending ourselves to those who we really do not agree with. These are not spaces of ostracisation and scorn, or worse, to borrow a phrase from Doris Lessing, spaces that are prisons we choose to live within.

We once lived in a world demarcated by white and black. The colour of your skin was a determinant of the life you would more likely than not live. We are now once again confronted a world where colour will become a determinant. The difference now will be that we will be asked if we want to be outlawed, if we want to fly a black pirate flag. To those of us who loathe giving up the power of telling our own stories, the power to dream our own dreams, this is not really a choice. It's a pirates life for me.

As we approach this new-old world, we have a choice. Even though the spaces we live within are increasingly characterized by colour, like the old imperial maps, Alain Badiou puts it clearly, «Humanity, as such, is colourless.»



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