Research report

Jonathan Tjahjoko
1651303
5/6/2017
Word count: 3.770

Rob van den Idsert/Annemieke Pesch
E-CON Seminar
JDE-SCON.3V-13

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Abstract

Fake news first got my intention during the election campaign of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Trump attacked the media who are not in favour with him. Every article or news outlet who can damage Trump or his campaign is called fake or not true. Only he knows the truth and his followers believed him. We all know what happened next, Trump became president of the most powerful country in the world. Trump still uses the term "fake" or "fake news" when the media accuse him of doing something that he doesn't like, even if it's true and the media is backing it up with actual facts. With this research I want to see the effect of fake news and how it can stir not only individuals, but also the whole world.

Relevant to CMD
Fake news is not necessarily relevant to CMD, but there is a lesson that we need to know from fake news. The lesson is to not underestimate a single source. You need to be sceptical about the information that you find on the internet. The information that you have found could be made up or false. To make sure that the information that you found is true, you need to find more evidence on the information. Back the information with another or two other facts. Information that you found from renowned news paper or data centre are trustworthy. it is because those organisations are checked by multiple eyes and/or by other companies.

Research

Research question
How does our thoughts and opinions being influenced by fake news?

Sub-questions
Where does our thoughts and opinions get influenced by?
What is fake news?
Why does the media use fake news?
What makes fake news popular?

Research methods
In order to answer the research and subquestions, I have to do a research about the subjects of how our behaviour works and what fakes news are. For the psychological part of this subject, I will have an interview with a doctor of psychology and I will also do a desk research. For the second part of the subject, which is fake news, I will do desk research to find out what fake news is and what fake news is all about.

Where does our thoughts and opinions get influenced by?

We are all unique. We have our own personalities, perceptions and motivations. All of these things have a reflection on our every day's behaviour. If we all have the same behaviour the world and our society would be different than as we know it. In order to understand how our behaviour works, we need to understand what moved our behaviour. Our behaviour can be moved through our believes, our personalities, our perception. All of these things combined, is what makes us do what we do, and what makes us thinks as we think.

Personality
Personality is our unique way of how we behave and it separates us from the other people. Personality is something consistent, but personality can change overtime. For example, your personality can change when you lose your close one or if you had a traumatic event. Your personality will reflect on your behaviour and it goes the other way as well. Your behaviour can reflect your personality.

Erik Erikson, a psychologist who believed in a Neo-Freudian's theory. A Neo-Freudian's theory is a theory that believed in that cultural factors can be an influence on developing someone's personality. According to Erikson there are four stages in how we develop our personality:

● In our youth and adolescent stage, we are looking for our identity.
● In our twenties, we are looking for intimacy.
● In our adulthood, we are looking for generatively/fertility.
● And when you complete all of those stages, on our last phase we will be recognise with wisdom.

Perception
Perception is the next thing that can affect your behaviour. Perception is the process of selecting, organising, and interpreting the stimulus that you perceive. Everything that you feel, see, taste and hear will trigger your stimulus. There are three ways where you can recognise a stimulus.

1. The characteristic of stimulus
The characteristic of the stimulus can be distinguished by four important aspect of the stimulus. Its intensity, the contrast of the stimulus, the repetition of the stimulus and if the stimulus is completely new for you.
● The intensity of the stimulus is how hard or how much the stimulus produce, for example a loud siren of an ambulance or a big billboard in the middle of nowhere.
● The contrast of a stimulus, for example a grey canvas on a black and white background.
● The repetition of a stimulus is how often does the stimulus appear. A stimulus that comes frequently can saturate overtime, for example an advertisement that you see everyday.
● A new stimulus can easily get your attention, for example something unusual like when a tiger roams in the city centre.

2. The characteristic of the observer
The stimulus of the observer is determined by the person's own personality, motivation, knowledge, values and attitude.

• Personality is something unique and it's different for everyone, and so is your perception. People who are extrovert are more focussed on social stimulus and introverts could better focus on catching physical signals.
• Knowledge is based on your experience. Your experiences may influence your perception.
• Motivation is based on your needs, emotions and interest. For example if you are hungry you are more likely to see more food adverts than normal.
• Your values and attitudes could also shape your perception. Your perceptions can be shape through your reference framework and believes.

3. The characteristic of the social cultural environment
The stimulus of a social culture environment could also shape your perception. A social cultural environment can be your social group, the position you hold in a company, your social class and your culture and background.

Motivation
Motivation is an important motives for people to move their behaviour. Motivation comes from within. Our motivations can be moved through our need, desire, wishes and emotion. Every person has their own motivation that gets them moving. According to Maslow motivation's theory, there are 5 layers of human need. Maslow claims that you need to fulfil one layer before you can proceed to the next layer.
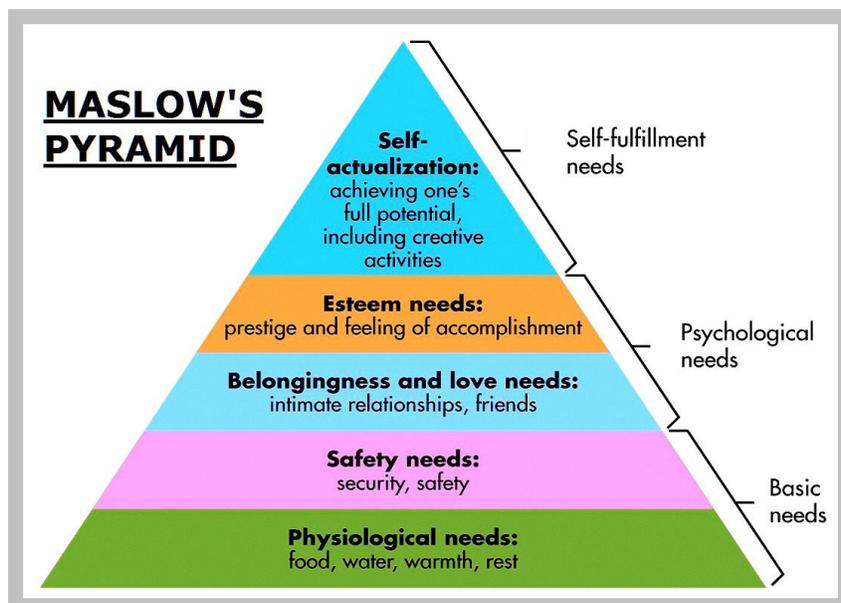
1. Physiological needs:
Physiological needs are the most crucial need. Physiological need is the need that keeps you alive. A few example of a physiological need are the need to eat and drink. But also the need of sleep, to help your recover your body.
2. Safety needs:
Safety need is the need for safety, protection and certainty. For example in order to feel safe you need a house that can protect you from intruder. You also need a house to keep you warm. You also need insurance for your medical needs.
3. Social needs:
Social need is the need for love and affected by other people. Everyone needs attentions and friendship. Everyone wants to be a part of a group.
4. The need of recognitions:
The need of recognition is the need of self respect, being recognise in your job and also being appreciated by people.
5. Self-actualisation needs:
Self-actualisation is the need to develop your personal skill. You can achieve this layer if you are satisfied with the first four layer.

Emotion
Another strong motivation that can move someone's behaviour is emotion. "Emotion is psychic and physical reaction that arise from internal and external incentives. These incentives could be beneficial or harmful to your interest" - (Psychologie & Sociologie, E. Wijsman, P.94).

In the book " The political brain by Drew Westen" the author set a perfect example when and where to use emotion and what effect emotion has on a group of people. In his book, Drew Westen used the example of Bill Clinton's campaign ad for his presidency in 1992. Westen was convinced that the emotion that was used in Clinton's campaign, that lead to his victory. The theme of Clinton's campaign at that time was "hope". Clinton came from a town called hope and he hoped that he can bring the American dream back to Americans. In his ad, Clinton told his life story. He told that every American can accomplish the American dream if they just given the chance. He also presents himself not as man of privilege and he wants to help the less fortunate. The ad also showed the people what kind of president Clinton would be if he got elected. Clinton's ad team did an outstanding job with this ad. They've used emotion throughout the campaign, and that was the reason why Clinton won the election and became the 42th president of America.

Robert Cialdini
As mentioned before, our behaviour is shaped by our personalities, our perceptions and our motivations. Those three elements together formed our behaviour and our behaviour leads to our thoughts and our opinions. But, our thoughts and opinions can also be influenced from other people as well. According to Dr. Robert Cialdini, people can also be influenced by everything around them. From a small innocent talk with your neighbour to something that you casually see on the streets. Throughout his professional career, Dr. Robert Cialdini has done research on the matter of persuasion and he discovered that people can be influenced in six different ways. He called it, the six principles of persuasion. Dr. Robert Cialdini believes that any people can be persuaded through: Reciprocation, social proof, commitment of consistency, liking, authority and scarcity.

Reciprocation
Reciprocation is about giving back or repaying. People often feel indebted to those who gives them something, most often something free. For example you'll get free sample in return for a like on the brand's social page.

Social proof
Social proof is about persuasive from a group of people. For example if you want to buy something on the internet, and the ad says that the product is tested and bought by 10 other people, you will feel good and safe about the product and you decided to buy the product. In that case your product has been approved by others.

Commitment of consistency
This method is about committing on what you've said and/of have done, you will stick true to yourself. For example, if you have said good things about product "a" then you gonna commit and buy product "a".

Liking
Liking is about seeing things in positive way People are tend to say yes. People tend more to say yes to those who are physically attractive, similar to themselves or who give them compliments.

Authority
People respect authority. People trust the real experts, leaders and people with a higher status. For example, people will believe the message that their favourite artist is saying or you trust your boss for giving you advice.

Scarcity
Scarcity is about supply and demands. The less there is of something, the more its valued. For example, if there's only one left a product that you want to buy. You're tend to buy the product before it runs out.

What is fake news?

Fake news is an article or video content that are based on partly truth or totally made up information. Fake news is disguised as a credible news, but its main purpose is to mislead and deceive people. Fake news stories are being created by small organisation who either push their stories to fulfil their own political agenda's or to create more awareness to the article so they can sell it to advertisers.

In order to achieve the goal, these organisation uses fake news articles with shocking terms and emotion to connect with their audience. People who are vulnerable will most likely feel attracted to fake news and they will share their findings with their surroundings. They mainly share it through social media. At this point, the friend who's also vulnerable to fake news will pick up the story and they will share the same article with their own surroundings. So the cycle continues and this is one of the reason why fake news is misleading and people can see as facts.

But, fake news is nothing new. Back in 1826 fake news has been used to cause problem at the inaugural ceremony of former U.S. President, John Quincy Adams. During the inaugural ceremony a group of people has stormed into the white house. They fought and caused thousands of dollars in damage because Andrew Jackson's people started a rumour about John Quincy Adams. Jacksons told his followers that Adams has procured an American girl to satisfied the Tsar. A Tsar is a title that's been used to designate certain Slavic monarch.

Nowadays, journalist and big and well known media companies are categorising fake news as propaganda. The British newspaper the Telegraph even claimed that fake news is the propaganda of the 20th century. In today's society, fake news is being use to mainly fulfil their political agenda's and these news stories could cause political problems. See the U.S. presidential campaign of 2016 for example.

In 2016 fake news is more popular than ever. Donald Trump uses fake news to feed onto his followers. During the presidential campaign, he used fake news stories to get the upper hand against his opponents. A few examples of what Donald Trump have said during his presidential campaign in 2016. Donald Trump doesn't believe in global warming. He thinks that climate change is something that the Chinese government has made up in order to make the U.S. market non-competitive. Another example of Donald Trump using fake news story. Donald Trump has once said that Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of former U.S. president, John F Kennedy. Ted Cruz was at that time his biggest rival for the candidacy of republican president's elect. Trump spread fake news stories to his followers and used the media to mislead and deceived not only his followers, but other people in America and outside. Trump holds an authority position which mean he's believable and credible. His words has major in impact to the people. Now, he's the president of the United States, will his fake news story reach people outside the U.S. Only time will tell.

What makes fake news so popular?

There are many reasons why fake news is popular. We know that psychology has a part why fake news is popular. We all know that we have our own opinion and thoughts on all kind of things. Our social environment has also an effect on how we perceive things.

In an interview with professor Smit of Hogeschool Utrecht, who has a Ph.D in psychology, she has said the following thing on why fake news is popular : "people want the world as they imagine it. People has their own perception and opinions on all kind of things. And they want the world exactly as how they imagine it. They want their perception and opinion in sync with how the perceived the world. Even if it says differently, these people will look for an argument to make their perception right". In that case, we are talking about cognitive dissonance reduction. These people uses fake news as a tool to acknowledge their believes and they also use fake news to persuade the non-believers. So the non-believers will believe their imagination of how the world should be. For example, many of Donald Trump's follower believed that he is the right man for the job. He can be a good president for America. Even though Donald Trumps hasn't had any experience in politics at all. His followers doesn't want him to fail and see negative comments about him. All they want to see and hear is all of his successes and what's he's going to do. There is also this headline about the pope giving his approval towards Trump race for presidency. These are just a few example of fake news that are in favour of Donald Trump. For his followers these headline could be used as a confirmation to choose Trump and to see him in a more better and positive way.

Another reasons why fake news is popular is that these kind of news is very profitable for the fake news companies due to their accessibility through social media. It helps when the article is spread around massively. Fake news article who has a high exposure rate is wanted by advertisers and the companies can sell it for a lot of money. And that is what they exactly did in Eastern Europe. Small news organisation in Eastern Europe made on average 10k dollars per day by publishing and spreading fake news.

Why does the media use fake news?

In order to understand why the media uses fake news, we need to understand where people get their news from. According to a research of journalism & media from PEW research center, people in America get most of their news from online platforms such as a news website and from social media. Nearly 40% of the young adults get their news feed online in comparison to 60% of TV.

To be more specific, this research shows that 50% precent of the people between the age of 18-29 and 49% of the people between the age of 30-49 years old, getting their news online. The same age group, 18-29 only 27% get their news from TV and the group 30-49 years old 45%. The older generation is still old fashioned. Almost 80% of the group age 50+ get their news from TV and only 29% getting their news from the web.

For the younger generation, the young adults, there is a shift in platform where they get their newsfeed from. They find their news much more via online platforms. And as mentioned, renowned news website and social media is where they get their news from. Facebook and Twitter is their main source of information. Social platform is making sharing information easier and also accessible for everyone. Renowned news website such as CNN, The New York Times, Huffington Post, VICE and Fox news are popular amongst the young adults.

In order to maintain the "damage" that fake news has caused on social media, Google and Facebook are working to solve this problem. Both companies know that they have major responsibilities in nowadays journalism. Google uses their Adsense advertising network to check on publisher and Facebook is changing their algorithm on trending topic. Both media companies alerted their user on fake news and how to spot fake news. At the end, both companies want to promote reliable news article. In other hand, renowned news organisations are obliged to use fact checker on every article they published. It is necessary for today's society. BBC claims that fake news is a "threat to democracy".

The companies behind fake news knows that social media is where a large group of people get their news from, so they publish most of their content there. The companies are making fake news accessible for their group of people because they know the group will most likely read and share their content. Using social media to spread fake news has lots of advantage for the them. It is not only accessible, it is easier for the user to share, and the more they share, the more exposure the content will get. And more exposure equals more valuable content equals higher advertising price. Last year during the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump, fake news companies who published fake news articles in favour of Donald Trump made between 3k to 10k dollars each day.

Conclusion

To understand the question whether are thoughts and opinions are being influenced by fake news, we needed to understand how our thoughts and opinions are being shaped. We know that our thoughts and opinions is a reflection on our behaviour. Our day-to-day behaviour is shaped by our personality, perceptions and motivations. Our personality is something consistent, but it also can change overtime. Erikson believed that a cultural factors can be an influence of your personality. Not only personality can affect our behaviour, but also our perception. A perception is the process of selecting, organising and interpreting the stimulus that we perceive. A stimulus can be everything thing that you feel, see, taste and hear. There are three ways to recognise a stimulus: the characteristic of a stimulus, the characteristics of the observer and the characteristics of socio-environment. Our motivation can also move our behaviour. Our motivation can move us through our need, desire, wishes and emotion.

Fake news is being spread on social platform such as Facebook and Twitter. Fake news is being spread through these channel because the channel is accessible for everyone and because young adult between the age of 18-49 get their news from social platform. Fake news is being created by fake news companies to push their own political agenda or to create awareness. Their goal is for mislead and deceive people, and also to spread as much as possible through these social platforms. In order to do that, fake news articles uses shocking terms and emotion to connect with the audience. In 2016 fake news got their fame because of Donald Trump. He uses the word fake news quite often during his campaign. But fake news is nothing new. In 1826 fake news has been used to cause problem between the president John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson.

The reason why fake news is popular is not only because of their accessibility through the social platform, but also that fake news companies can make good money out of it. Organisation in Eastern Europe made almost 10k US dollar per day publishing fake news stories. On a psychological level, Fake news is being use as a tool for confirming their believes towards the world. People uses fake news to persuade other on their thoughts and opinions.

And on the question if fake news does influence our thoughts and opinions, it depends per person. Some individuals are vulnerable for fake articles and some aren't. We can agree that fake news is something popular and it will stay for a long time. It will be there in the future because you can make money and maybe, you can make a career out of it, as fake news reporter. Fake news will also be in the future also because the accessibility of social media. Fake news organisation will keep posting their articles there and people will keep clicking them. And you only need one person to affect the mind of a group and maybe a population, see Donald Trump as example.

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Appendix

Interview with Aletta Smit.
Professor and teacher in psychology at Hogeschool Utrecht
8/5/2017

Hi Aletta, thanks for meeting me for this short interview. I have a few question about the matter of psychology. I have known you for a while. You had been giving me psychology lecture for the past two year, but I want to ask you one more time about influencing other people.

Me: I know in fact that the behaviour of people is influenced by 5 factors: physical, geographical, psychological, social and cultural environment. All of this things combined formed your personality, perception, attitude and motivation, correct?

A.Smit: Correct.

Me: but really, how vulnerable are we to absorbing information. Can you measure that in some way?

A.Smit: Vulnerable, well, everyone is different. You cannot measure that. But here is what I can give you. Everyone has their own perception. People love the thought that they have of the world, that their thought are the true ones. People doesn't like to be wrong. For example, during the campaign of Hillary Clinton, Clinton has some problems with the republicans. The republicans were throwing shades about Clinton's e-mail gate. In my mind, I thought: "damn, you republicans. Her e-mails has nothing to do with this campaign.". But the email gate didn't stop. It went on for a few weeks. I thought by myself, could she be this stupid politician who do not handle private information more carefully. That was the first time I encounter with cognitive dissonance. My thoughts of her, could be totally wrong. She might not be suitable for the presidency. But I was sure that she was suitable for being a president. I was trying to reduce the my cognitive dissonance. Reducing your cognitive dissonance is called cognitive reduction. That means I was looking for argument to right the wrongs. And I'm doing this because people doesn't want to be wrong.

Me: Oh, so in short, people want to be right all the time. They doesn't want to be wrong. Even if they are wrong, they are always looking to make their argument the truth. Is that what you trying to say?

A.Smith: Yes. So dissonance information is not correct and consonance information is correct information. Cognitive reduction is making up arguments to back your initial argument, even tough it could be the wrong one.

A.Smit: If you want to know more about how politics works and how a group of people can be influenced, you should look for this book. first, The game change and second, The political brain. The second book is about persuasion through arguments. I think it could help you by your research.

Me: Thank you for the recommendation, I will check them up.

Me: So last question. I know in The Netherlands we have this conservative party lead by G.Wilders and he's quite popular in The Netherlands as you know. Renowned news outlet always says that the person, his followers who voted for him are not educated people and hillbillies. Does that has something to do with his popularity?

A.Smit: No, Not really. People believe in what they believed. It has nothing to do with your education or where you come from. It has something to do with the people itself. You've already said it. It has something to do with their personality, perception and motivation. And back this up with everything what I've just said. Try to find a connection.

Me: Oh, right. I will try to do that. That was all of my question for you. If I have more question I will setup another meeting, if that's ok?

A.Smit: alright, yes that's fine.

Me: Thank you for your time :)