

Is the war on 'misinformation' a battle for truth, or for the turf?



To judge by the greatly intensified scrutiny of Facebook's protocols that allow people to "like" (and, by "liking," to further disseminate) the posts that the mainstream media thinks should not be part of the public discourse, we are in the midst of a media war. Ostensibly, it is a war against "misinformation" in which the likes of *The New York Times* or *NPR* proudly champion fairness and truth in reporting, while the fringe lunatics of the internet foist on the public conspiracy theories and deceive it with facts that aren't facts. In other words, one is lead to believe that we are witnessing a battle for truth between the good guys of the legacy media, and the villains of the internet.

And yet, a quick glance at history, both distant and recent, paints a very different picture: history puts a huge question mark over media's allegiance to factual truth of what it reports. In fact, *The New York Times* is a textbook example of brazen disregard for the truth. More than once, it misrepresented it, both by omission, and by commission. The Holocaust, not covered because the papers' Jewish owner did not wish to appear provincially parochial by focusing on what he saw as a mere tribal issue, is of course one glaring example. Another one was the absence of coverage (and in fact, the paper's actual denial) of the massive post-collectivization starvation accompanied by instances of cannibalism in the Soviet Union of 1930s, in which millions perished. And just recently, I contacted the paper asking it to report the deceptive judicial practice of adjudicating judges' own argument instead of that of the parties (for which the parties pay their lawyers lots of money) so as to decide the case the way judges want to, not the way they have to, in clear-cut violation of "due process of the law" which forbids a judge to act as a party to the case. Even pointing out that when sued for fraud, judges defend themselves with a self-given, in *Pierson v Ray*, right to act from the bench "maliciously and corruptly" does not move the legacy media to report as sensationally bizarre the fact that one of three branches of US government thinks it is fine for it to be malicious and corrupt (though when it comes to the executive branch, i.e. Trump, the gloves are off, journalists salivating at the prospect of catching him "obstructing justice." As to the federal judges doing it routinely, right from the bench – who cares?). And of course, *The New York Times* violates truth by commission, too. We have, as the great legal monument to that fact, the landmark case of *New York Times v Sullivan*, brought by someone who caught the "paper of record" in an out-and-out lie, but the Supreme Court sided with the presumably truth-seeking *The New York Times'* argument that a lie by the press should not be punishable, but should be treated as protected speech instead.

So clearly, when the likes of the *The New York Times* bemoan the “misinformation,” it is not the false reporting that they deplore, since they practice it themselves. One rather suspects that they are aggrieved by intrusion into what used to be their own turf by the competing forces and organizations, drastically altering the long-established ways of monetizing it.

Clearly, the contents with which, per the legacy media, the internet’s intruders contaminate public discourse, was not generated by *The New York Times* and their ilk, and its advertising revenue flow into someone else’s pocket. What to do? How to get rid of the competition? Well, one way of accomplishing it is to declare competitors illegitimate. Spread the word that the internet sites feed “misinformation” – a nasty word that implies dishonesty and lies, and while smearing the internet companies, ignore the legacy media’s own dishonesty, and you are all set. Dipped in the pitch of accusations of lying, the intruders will not look well to the public, and it will return into the fold of the legacy media, bringing its money back. Mission accomplished.

This strategy is as old as competition itself. A friend of mine insisted recently that I read the works of an emigre writer, Sergei Dovlatov who came to the US in 1970es, and described in his writings both his Soviet experiences as a dissident writer, and the life in America for the new arrivals from the Soviet Union like himself. He is indeed pretty good; one of his autobiographical novellas titled “*The [Writer’s] Craft*” features a story of several emigre literati who, finding no venue for expressing their literary talents (and for making a living, for that matter), decided to start their own weekly, adding one other voice to the Russian emigre community dominated by a single daily paper. They quickly discover that the long-established mastodon, built on stilted, pre-revolutionary thinking, style, and vocabulary, does not like the pesky newcomer that features brisk, slang-sprayed

stories of modern life. And it is not just about the purity of style, either; it is about being a competing business. The established paper presses the advertisers to not advertise in the new weekly, causing the newcomers to lose revenue; it even refuses to place the advertisements for the newly-established weekly in its own pages. In brief, it pretends they do not exist. Yet somehow, the new weekly manages to stay afloat, buoyed by the public that appreciates the fresh talent of its authors. Then finally, the mastodon addresses the newcomer head-on, publishing on its pages an abusive and dismissive screed that accuses the new weekly of beaching all Russian traditions, cultural, political, and literary and – in essence – of being the organ of “misinformation.” Dovlatov then quotes the rebuttal he published, which boils down to “your real issue is, that we exist.”

That sums up, in a nutshell, the problem of competition. The only way to deal with it, is to suppress it. Fling all the dirt you have at the competitor, and see what sticks. History repeats itself: whether it is a Russian daily discovering a newly-appeared weekly that would draw away readership and advertising revenue, or *The New York Times* and others of its ilk who were kings of the media mountain, but are now discovering that the internet allows people who were silenced before, to tell their own stories which find an audience – they all need to find a way to wrest their influence back. And here, the charge of “misinformation” comes handy. It seems both high-minded, and is deadly – and so, it is used liberally to squash the competitor, under the guise of championing the truth – though in truth, those legacy companies are not really concerned for it.

What they are really concerned about, is the loss of the turf to the newcomers. This is what scares them. And it is this, that the whole “misinformation” brouhaha is all about. It is not about the factual accuracy of information the reader gets. It is about who feeds the reader the information – and who

will get the resulting advertising revenue in return.

And how about the truth? Well, the history of *The New York Times* speaks for itself: the truth does not really matter in reporting; what matters is that the competitors' reports not be noticed. Control of the media turf is everything. This attained, what else matters? And if the hypocritical charges of "misinformation" can help, why not fling them around?