

SESSION FOUR—READINGS

Read these to think about the writing of information and disinformation:

<https://www.wired.com/story/future-of-work-farm-charlie-jane-anders/>

<https://granta.com/scavengers/>

(four-page excerpt)

<https://granta.com/propagandalands/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/cognitive-bias/565775/>

INTRO:

There is an element of propaganda in all creative nonfiction. We want the reader to come away from our piece with a certain viewpoint, and we carefully select the facts (whatever *those* are) that will support this viewpoint, then shape them into a narrative. There is nothing inherently dishonest or unethical about this process, and it may even be unconscious, especially in the early stages of your development as a writer. However, the way information is shared can easily become ethically fraught. Who decides what is true? And if something *is* true but sharing it would be harmful, is it better to stay silent?

We're all familiar with the old adage "The pen is mightier than the sword," but in *Propagandalands* by Peter Pomerantsev, information—and more often, misinformation—has literal power over life and death. The essay begins with a woman named Tetyana—described as a "soldier" in the Ukrainian revolution, really a journalist by trade and the moderator of a pro-Ukrainian Facebook group—being asked to write a Facebook post encouraging protesters to go to a location where she knows they will be in danger. She ultimately decides not to, but other activists do write posts encouraging protesters to join them at Maidan square, neglecting to mention that there are snipers shooting into the crowd.

The Facebook posts work.

Protesters show up, and the revolution is successful.

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One hundred and three protesters are killed in the process.

Is this a success story about the power of social media, or a cautionary tale?

Purposeful misinformation comes from all sides during the Ukrainian revolution—the greatest information blitzkrieg in history, according to the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. Pomerantsev shifts between the viewpoints of key individuals in the various factions, and each of these sides go by several names and encompass several factions. On one side we have the pro-Ukrainians, also referred to as the revolutionaries, the Hromadske Sektor (the Civic Sector), the ‘Maidan’, and the Pravy Sektor (the Right Sector). On the other side, the pro-Russians, which encompasses the riot police, the Kremlin, Russian TV, Putin, Orthodox priests, the Communist party, Yanukovich’s party, the separatists, and the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Pomerantsev doesn’t seem interested in helping the reader keep all these players straight, or clearly outlining the conflict itself, but rather in the way that information is weaponized, putting the reader in a state of confusion perhaps similar to that of the Ukrainians at ground zero of the conflict. The author himself is implicated in this information war. “You’ll re-edit what we say anyway,” a woman tells him. “Why should we trust you?”

Why should we trust *any* nonfiction author—especially when we can’t even trust our own judgement or perceptions, as is painstakingly outlined in *The Cognitive Biases Tricking Your Brain* by Ben Yagoda? Social scientists have identified myriad cognitive biases, which Yagoda defines as “faulty ways of thinking...apparently hardwired into the human brain,” and he aims to explore whether or not it’s possible for us to train ourselves out of these cognitive biases. The answer is a resounding ‘eh, maybe—but probably not’.

True objectivity is perhaps impossible, but it is often considered an admirable goal in nonfiction writing all the same. In “The Farm”, Charlie Jane Anders calls this goal into question. This story depicts a fictional imagined future of journalism, where news reports are written and rewritten to try to please an audience of opinionated bots who mimic the irate comment section you can find attached to any online publication. When the main character, a seasoned news reporter, “plunges into a third rewrite, this time staying as close as possible to the bare facts. What, where, when, how, and a minimum of why,” in an attempt to please the “farm” of opinionated bots who must approve each piece he writes, this is a terrifying loss of artistic license. The author seems to imply that the recitation of “bare facts” will bring us further from the truth, not closer to it.

Where does that leave us as writers? Misinformation can be deadly. Propaganda is distasteful at best, and immoral at worst. Our own cognitive biases impair our access to the truth, and “facts” stripped of any context, analysis, or editorializing are better fodder for bots than human readers and writers. Of course, this all seems bleaker than it is. While we have an ethical obligation to not misrepresent the truth as nonfiction writers, our own unique perspective—cognitive biases and all—is an asset, and all a reader can realistically expect is that we interrogate the truth as we see it, through our own unique lens.

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