



*Rachel Harrison. More News: A Situation. 2016.  
Installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, April 2016.  
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.  
Photograph by Jason Mandella.*

# Fake News, Art, and Cognitive Justice

DAVID JOSELIT

*The CIA, the FBI, and the White House may all agree that Russia was behind the hacking that interfered with the election. But that was of no import to the website Breitbart News, which dismissed reports on the intelligence assessment as “left-wing fake news.”*

—*New York Times*, December 25, 2016<sup>1</sup>

Echoing George Orwell’s *1984*, the so-called alt-right redirects the criticisms leveled at its own practices back onto established media (not to mention the CIA and FBI). Anything can now be called fake news, as long as the accuser possesses the power (i.e., the platform) to publicize his or her claims.<sup>1</sup> In other words, all news is fake news from someone’s point of view, and as a corollary, any conceptual category—such as *fake news* itself—may be unmoored from its anchoring significance and begin “trending” as a polysemous slogan.<sup>2</sup> This is the power of Twitter—to propel a packet of text through diverse conceptual contexts, disrupting them rather than aiming, let alone arriving, at any particular truth. Such politicization of information is hardly new: Facts have always been ratified by power, and standards of evidence are historically specific. The control of information once lay in censorship by a sovereign and his agents, but since the eighteenth century, with the rise of the modern media world, it has depended more and more upon the capacity for information to capture a public, and for open debates within publics to lead to assessments of truth. Indeed, what eventually became a free press never afforded equal access: In the television age, for instance, information was centralized through the concentration of broadcasting technology in the hands of govern-

1. As this text goes to press, another term of art has been introduced by the Trump team, “alternative facts.” See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/us/politics/president-trump-inauguration-crowd-white-house.html>.

2. For a brilliant account of this effect, see Michael Silverstein, *Talking Politics: The Substance of Style from Abe to “W”* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

ments or corporations. Now we have pretenders to informational sovereignty everywhere, mad tweeters in their Trump towers speculating on attention. Since power lies in the capacity to compete for audiences, it accrues to purveyors of the most spectacular information—which is why a reality star can be elected president, and why the last two US presidents, coming from completely different political universes, both ran and won by promising “change.” But even if news, from a certain point of view, has always been fake, the mode of its authentication is now in crisis. We are caught in a cacophony of irreconcilable truths, each of which appears to some (in good faith or not) as patently false, but we have lost, it seems, the common ground that Jürgen Habermas and others imagined for weighing the virtues of such alternatives. Among constituencies like climate-change deniers or Trump himself, who has resisted believing the extent of Russian hacks, well-accepted procedures of science and intelligence-gathering are blithely rejected or discounted. This condition is made possible in large part by the fact that my media feed is customized for *me* and yours is tailored to you: We don’t have to resolve disagreements but only consume them as spectacle, like reality TV. We now *accumulate* rather than *adjudicate* information; we function more as profiles than as citizens.

One might describe this condition as a state of cognitive conflict in which different species of knowledge battle one another for preeminence, as opposed to attempting an agonistic but productive political translation or negotiation. Boaventura de Sousa Santos has powerfully theorized such a conflict between indigenous and Western ways of cognition that make seemingly irreconcilable claims on what represents knowledge (as well as its transformation into property). Santos has called for a form of “cognitive justice” to redress the repression and exploitation of Native ways of knowing. For him, this is the necessary response to an “abyssal line” between hegemonic knowledge, whose most powerful forms are Western science and law, and other kinds of knowing, such as indigenous uses of plant medicines, which Western science tends to dismiss as mere custom or superstition (until, of course, it finds ways of copyrighting and monetizing them). As Santos asks rhetorically, “Why are all nonscientific knowledges considered local, traditional, alternative or peripheral?”<sup>3</sup>

After the austerity struggles in Europe, the Brexit vote, and Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States, questions of cognitive justice that once seemed restricted to conflicts between Western forms of knowing and those persisting and emerging from the global South must now be recognized as internal to the West as well. But what would cognitive justice mean under Trumpism? In my view, it would address the privatization and accumulation of access to those skills necessary to analyze evidence—i.e., news, fake or otherwise—and weigh its relative veracity. Education, which develops this capacity to discover and parse information, should be a public right and a common good in a democratic society, but, as

3. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), p. 200.

with the disproportionate ownership of economic wealth by the so-called one percent, there is a lopsided distribution of cognitive wealth. Elite private universities and schools, as well as public schools in affluent municipalities, garner disproportionate resources and everyone else is left with less and less. Betsy DeVos, Trump's appointee for secretary of education, is a strong advocate for the privatization of education, and it is very likely that she will try to complete a process of radical cognitive disenfranchisement that has long been under way. The privatization of access to knowledge, and its financial correlate of crippling levels of student debt, abet the fracturing and commodification of evidence that undergirds the rise of fake news.

What could art possibly have to do with any of this? First, to say the obvious, art will not save us from Trump, even as participants in the art world can—and already have—used its networks to resist his policies. But post-Conceptual art does have real purchase on questions of cognitive justice. Contemporary art occupies a spectrum whose end points are entertainment and research. I am not among those who reject spectacular forms of art out of hand, but I suspect they can't do much to address these questions. As a form of research, however, art can accommodate what Paul Starr has called "information out of place," or types of content that other formal disciplines or professions cannot absorb, and moreover it can track the *plasticity* of information (the shapes it assumes through circulation, shifts in scale and saturation, and its velocities and frictions), which is deeply enmeshed in relations of power. Art, in other words, is a resource for working out a politicized and materialized—even formal—theory of information that is pertinent to cognitive justice. It is all too easy at this moment, when fears of fascism seem plausible, to conclude that such theorizing through matter and form is irrelevant. But I think this would be a mistake. Cognitive justice means resisting the dumbing down of public speech and its attendant spectacle, as when someone with a decades-long career and a complex set of policies is falsely characterized and dismissed as "crooked Hillary." We must take a stand in favor of the complexity art represents, while seeking to understand and theorize the appeal of the extreme profiling Trump excels in, which is part of a much broader collapse of citizens into profiles. This is not a simple project with self-evident tactics. But nor is it a trivial one, and it's one that art can and should embrace.



*Harrison. More News: A Situation. 2016.  
Installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, April 2016.  
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.  
Photograph by Jason Mandella.*