

It's fake news but we believe it's real, often for years

## Fake real news

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In more innocent times, there was news, pure and simple. We believed most of what we were told in newspapers and on TV. Now, in the Days of Trump, we also have fake news: blatant untruths like 'Hillary Clinton uses a body double or 'Donald's tan is natural'.

But there's a grey area between these binary possibilities: fake real news. It's fake, because some group deliberately created it, usually for a commercial reason, and yet it becomes news because it enters the zeitgeist, and eventually it's seen as an accepted fact (even though it isn't).

Fake news, on the other hand, seems to have a half-life of days before it gets found out, and plenty of people never believe it to begin with.

Over the years, there have been numerous examples of fake real news. From the world of health and medicine there's been 'smoking is good for you' (yes, really, a classic from the 1930s and 40s), 'sugar won't harm your health' (we believed that one for 30 years), and 'cholesterol causes heart disease' (oh, you still believe that one?).

Fake real news has another name when it comes to stories specifically about healthcare and pharmaceuticals, processed foods and drinks: it's healthwashing, a play on 'whitewashing', which is defined as 'a co-ordinated attempt to hide unpleasant facts'.

Healthwashing's cover was finally blown in 2015 when a *New York Times* writer discovered that Coca-Cola had spent billions of dollars funding scientists and organizations to create a public 'groupthink' that fat is responsible for the obesity epidemic, and not the sugar that its products are full of. And it worked. The food industry fell for it, and produced an enormous range of low-fat products, and the pharmaceutical industry created statins to lower cholesterol. And we all drank Coke to celebrate (and got fat).

An Australian university professor, Rob Moodie, has examined healthwashing, and

has come up with some of its tactics; you may recognize a few of them.

**Attack science:** Use terms such as 'junk science' and 'bad science'. Withhold data that may damage your product. Fund your own research that gets the answer you're looking for. Fund 'sympathetic' researchers.

**Attack scientists:** Create doubt by attacking the integrity of a scientist who may have discovered some inconvenient truths about your products or industry. Sue, or threaten to sue, scientists. Infiltrate science groups.

**Create arm's length organizations:** Create front groups. Sponsor conferences and workshops. Distribute your message through pamphlets and booklets, and actively through social media.

**Manufacture false debate:** Create the impression there's a controversy. Demand balance, especially from journalists. Divert attention from harmful products. Focus on corporate social responsibility, and set up foundations. Focus on other issues as the problem, such as physical activity instead of diet, for example.

**Frame issues in creative ways:** Insist the problem is complex, and it would be premature to suggest remedies. Insist that parents, and not governments, should

influence the behaviour of their children. Use colourful imagery, and words like 'speculative', 'oversimplified', 'premature', and 'unbalanced'. Diminish the severity of the problem.

**Fund industry disinformation campaigns:** Run disinformation campaigns, and co-opt celebrities and sympathetic 'expert' witnesses to represent your case.

**Influence the political agenda:** Donate to political parties. Invest heavily in paid lobbyists. Target former politicians or their advisers to become sympathizers to your cause.

— These tactics work a treat, and Coca-Cola used most of them. In the early 1970s, when scientists were trying to figure out just why cardiovascular disease was reaching epidemic proportions, the corporation wanted to strangle at birth any suspicions that sugar might be the culprit.

There was already a move towards fats being to blame, thanks to the fake research of Ancel Keys, but there was one problem: an English professor, John Yudkin, was certain that sugar was the real problem, and had even written a book, *Pure, White and Deadly*, to make his point.

Poor Yudkin never stood a chance. His research was discredited, 'alternative' research was carried out that proved him wrong, he was locked out of his facilities at his university, his talks were mysteriously cancelled at the last minute, and he became a laughingstock of the scientific community. Yudkin retired a broken, and very disillusioned, man.

Of course, he was right, and he is championed by brave scientists of today such as Robert Lustig, a professor of paediatric endocrinology at the University of California, San Francisco. "Everything this man [Yudkin] said in 1972 was the God's honest truth," Lustig has told journalists.

Of course it was, but it was up against fake real news, and there's only one winner in a scrap like that.



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