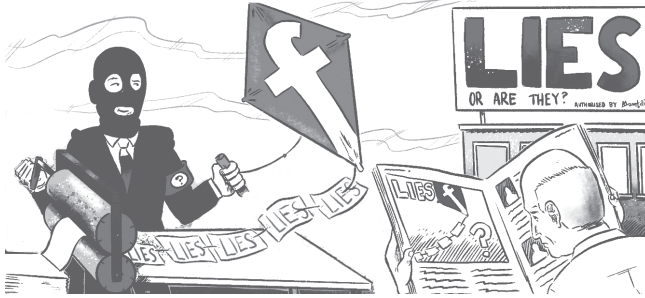


OPINION

DEMOCRACY AT WORK

Wes Mountain



The cartoon above is from Australia, the latest country to see a national election narrowly won by a right-wing party after polls predicting the opposite result. It shows untruths being launched anonymously into the public domain by ‘kite-flying’ them on social media, legitimising their subsequent entry into more conventional media.

Every day vast bulk carrier ships steam out of Australian ports laden with unimaginable quantities of coal, iron ore and countless other minerals. The land they are leaving is one of extreme droughts and floods, greatly exacerbated by climate change. It’s no surprise that environmental issues were prominent in the campaign. But not for the first time in Australia, the idea of moving even slowly away from an economy built on extreme resource exploitation proved too radical. The country’s extractive industries remain comfortably in charge of the government.

Re-elected prime minister Scott Morrison, not noted for his wit, famously waved a lump of coal at the opposition during an acrimonious climate change debate, laughing as he urged them not to be afraid of it. Key approvals for Queensland’s huge Adani coal project were rushed through just before the recent election, further threatening the beleaguered Great Barrier Reef.

Describing Morrison’s blatant misrepresentation of the previous administration’s record on bank regulation as “a lie of Trumpesque proportions”, one local pundit observed: “it takes real effort to stand out as a liar in Australian politics, but Scott Morrison yesterday lied so egregiously and offensively it was a triumph of political bullshittery.” Australians are also complaining that the election has left the nation far more polarised than ever before. The losing candidate was apparently consoled by half-cut colleagues at what would have been his victory celebration with the words “it’s not you Bill, it’s the country”.

With Morrison, Trump and potentially PM Boris, are we witnessing the emergence of an English-speaking axis of evil? Or are there wider forces at work?

Muddying the Water

Representative democracy relies on the idea that voters make an informed choice that reflects their considered beliefs, values and preferences. It also requires that people at least consider interests other than their own. No-one has to be a saint, but if everyone casts their vote for purely selfish reasons then no election can magically produce a good result.

However, making an informed choice can be impossible if reliable information is buried under distracting falsehoods, and going beyond selfishness can be hard when drowning under a tide of messages encouraging individualism and self-obsession. These are the conditions under which elections are now fought — not by accident, but by design.

Sometimes, as with Morrison, candidates muddy the waters themselves. Sometimes it’s done by party workers. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro’s campaign delivered daily misinformation to voters’ phones via WhatsApp, including bogus ‘fact-checks’ discrediting authentic news stories and a fake photo of former president Dilma Rousseff with Fidel Castro. Narendra Modi’s winning campaign in India used similar tactics to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment, benefitting his Hindu nationalist BJP party.

Truth For Hire

But any client with sufficient cash can now commission a highly targeted disinformation campaign built by specialists, using bespoke messages delivered direct to voters’ private social media bubbles, bypassing niceties of electoral or media regulation. There are many players in this shadowy global industry, which exists precisely to ensure voters make poorly informed choices.

Some are private companies, some are purely military programmes, and some (such as SCL Elections and Palantir) inhabit grey zones between private consultancy and state-sponsored psy-ops. Some serve host governments (not least Russia and China), but it seems clear that most are plying their trade for hire.

Occasionally one is exposed. Cambridge Analytica shut down after some of its shady exploits in the US and UK became public — such outfits wither once exposed to daylight — but has already been reborn under a new name (Emerdata).

The Archimedes Group, based in Israel, boasts of its ability to “change reality” and uses the slogan “Winning Elections Worldwide”. Using fake Facebook pages followed by over two million people, it was found to have spread numerous false stories about local issues and candidates in order to “win elections” in Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Angola, Niger and Tunisia. It is not known who commissioned them to do so. Clearly this is happening everywhere.

Such tactics are used by those who can afford them. It is no coincidence that these tend to be pro-corporate and anti-ecological forces, seeking to ensure that people vote to preserve the *status quo* their lucrative business models rely on.

There is nothing new about telling lies to win elections, stoking hatred to win votes, or abusing process to consolidate power once elected. Perhaps ironically, it seems that the internet has made all these things easier, rather than harder. Buying politicians is still effective, and is still a widespread practice. But some have realised that if you can corrupt the minds of the electorate, a corrupt government will soon follow.

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