

BUZZFEED NOW LOOKING TO INSTITUTIONAL DEMS TO POLICE A PHANTOM SURGE OF LEFTY FAKE NEWS

One of my many concerns about the fake fake news scare is that it provides a way to discredit alternative voices, as the PropOrNot effort tried to discredit a number of superb outlets that don't happen to share PropOrNot's Neocon approach to Syria. BuzzFeed, in its seemingly unquenchable desire to generate buzz by inflating the threat of fake news, takes that a step further by turning to institutional Democratic outlets – outlets whose credibility got damaged by Hillary's catastrophic loss – to police an alleged surge of fake news on the left.

First, consider its evidence for a surge in Democrats embracing fake news.

There are new cases daily. Suspicions about his 2020 reelection filing. Theories about the “regime’s” plan for a “coup d’état against the United States” (complete with *Day After Tomorrow* imagery of New York City buried in snow). Stories based on an unverified Twitter account offering supposed “secrets” from “rogue” White House staffers (followed by more than 650,000 people). Even theories about the Twitter account (“Russian disinformation”).

Since the election, the debunking website Snopes has monitored a growing list of fake news articles aimed at liberals, shooting down stories about a new law to charge protesters with terrorism, a plan to turn the USS

Enterprise into a floating casino, and a claim that Vice President Mike Pence put himself through gay conversion therapy.

[snip]

Panicky liberal memes have cascaded across the internet in recent weeks, like an Instagram post regarding Steve Bannon's powers on the National Security Council shared by a celebrity stylist and actress. Some trolls have even found success making fake news specifically aimed at tricking conservatives.

Let's take the purported "fake news" story BuzzFeed bases its argument on, one by one:

- A debunking of a Twitter thread (not a finished news piece) of the *conclusions* about a discovery that Trump, very unusually for a President, filed for reelection immediately after inauguration. There's no debunking *that* Trump filed his candidacy, nor that it is unusual, nor, even, that Trump is fundraising off it. That's not fake news. It's an attempt to figure out why Trump is doing something unusual, with a fact-checking process happening in the Twitter discussion.
- An admittedly overblown Medium post about some of the shady things Trump has done, as well as the much

rumored claim that the reported sale of 19% of Rosneft confirms the Trump dossier claim that Carter Page would get part of Rosneft if he could arrange the lifting of US sanctions on Russia. The story's treatment – and especially its use of the word “coup” – is silly, but the underlying question of whether Trump will instruct agencies to ignore the law, as already happened in limited form at Dulles over the first weekend of the Muslim ban, as well as the question of how Trump intends to target people of color, is a real one.

- A story basically talking about the formation of the RoguePotusStaff Twitter account that notes prominently that “there’s no way to verify the authenticity of the newly minted Twitter channel.” BuzzFeed provided no evidence this was being preferentially shared by people on the left.
- A Twitter thread speculating, based off linguistic analysis, that the RoguePotusStaff account

might be Russian disinformation. Again, BuzzFeed made no claims about who was responding to this thread.

- A debunking of a claim posted in November on a conservative fake news site claiming that protestors would get charged with terrorism.
- A “debunking” of a satirical story from November posted in the Duffel Blog claiming Trump was going to repurpose an aircraft carrier.
- A debunking of a fake news story from November claim that Mike Pence had put himself through gay conversion therapy that notes Pence did, indeed, push gay conversation therapy.
- A liberal trolling effort *aimed at conservatives*, which started in December, claimed that Trump had removed symbols of Islam from the White House.
- An instagram post that (BuzzFeed snottily notes) got shared by an actress and a stylist reporting the true fact that Bannon had been added to the National Security Council and noting

the arguably true fact that the NSC reviews the kill list including the possibility of targeting Americans (technically, the targeted killing review team installed by Obama is not coincident with the NSC, but it does overlap significantly, and Anwar al-Awlaki was targeted by that process).

Most of these things are not news! Most are not pretending to be news! The only single thing included among BuzzFeed's "proof" that lefties are resorting to fake news that would support that claim is the Mike Pence story. And to get there, BuzzFeed has to pretend that the Duffel Blog is not explicitly satire, that multiple cases of conservative fake news are lefty fake news, that well-considered discussions on Twitter are fake news, and that we all have to stop following RoguePotusStaff because we don't know whether its writers are really Rogue POTUS staffers or not.

It's a shoddy series of claims that BuzzFeed should be embarrassed about making. Effectively, it is calling discussion and satire – including correction – fake news.

To BuzzFeed's credit, after months of misstating what a poll it did revealed – BuzzFeed had been claiming that 75% of people believe fake news, but in reality the poll showed that 75% of those who recall fake news believe it – BuzzFeed finally got that, at least, correct. Bravo BuzzFeed!

But other than that, they've got almost nothing here.

Believe it or not, that's not the most offensive part of this story. Having invented a lefty fake

news problem out of satire and Twitter discussions, BuzzFeed then decided it's important what official Democratic sources thing about it. While one Bernie source said it was best to ignore these things (another said it was a real problem), BuzzFeed framed other responses in terms of left protests of elected officials.

Democratic operatives and staffers at left-leaning media outlets predict that viral anti-Trump conspiracy theories will ultimately distract from real reporting about the administration, undermining legitimate causes for outrage on the left over what the administration is actually doing.

Still, for now, it's a conversation that exists almost entirely outside the political class itself. Elected officials are not hawking phony stories as true, like Trump's calls to investigate widespread voter fraud during the election. But that remove poses its own problems for leaders with no obvious way to dismantle widely shared false stories.

"It exists on the left and that's a problem because it misinforms people," said Judd Legum, editor in chief of progressive news site ThinkProgress. "That's harmful in other ways because the time you're spending talking about that, you could spend talking about other stuff."

"It contributes to a broader environment of distrust, and it sort of accelerates the post-factual nature of our times," said Teddy Goff, co-founder of Precision Strategies and a former senior aide to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. "Fake news is pretty damaging no matter who it benefits politically. No one on the left should think we ought to be replicating the fake news tactics on the right."

[snip]

The online energy also raises questions about the party's relationship with its base. In recent weeks, progressives have **pressured** lawmakers to adopt a tougher stance toward Trump and join ranks with the millions of protesters who marched over inauguration weekend.

The two top-ranking Democrats in Washington, Chuck Schumer in the Senate and Nancy Pelosi in the House, have both signaled an openness to working on legislation with Trump. Last week, protests **formed** outside Schumer's home in Brooklyn. And among progressive activists online, Pelosi was met with vehement push-back after **saying** the party has a "responsibility to the American people to find our common ground."

"Elected Democrats are stuck struggling to keep ahead of the anger that the base is feeling right now," said [Jim] Manley, the former Reid adviser. "It's very palpable."

First, BuzzFeed is wrong in saying elected officials are not hawking phony stories as true. One reason the claim that Wikileaks doctored Democratic emails got so much traction is because Dems repeatedly made that claim (and as I've noted, Hillary quickly escalated the Alfa News story that most media outlets rejected as problematic).

Worse, BuzzFeed deems Democratic operatives and staffers as somehow chosen to decide what are "legitimate causes for outrage on the left over what the administration is actually doing." It further suggests there's a connection between people protesting elected leaders and fake news.

Finally, BuzzFeed shows absolutely no self-awareness about the people it seeks about and the stories they've pitched. Consider: Manley is

in the very immediate vicinity of the people who got the WaPo to push the claim that CIA had decided Russia hacked the DNC in order to get Trump elected, a conclusion that – we’ve subsequently learned – is the single one any agency in the IC (in this case, the NSA) expressed less confidence in. Moreover, we know that Harry Reid spent months trying to get the FBI to reveal details included in the Trump dossier that no one has been able to confirm. And when the dossier was released, Judd Legum magnified it himself, in much the same way the Medium post did the Rosneft claim.

Oh, and as a reminder: BuzzFeed was the entity that decided it was a good idea to publish an unverified intelligence dossier in the first place!

I mean, if the institutional Dems that BuzzFeed has deemed the arbiters of what is “legitimate” to talk about think the unproven Russian dossier counts, then BuzzFeed has even less in its claim about fake news.

Nevertheless, it thought it was a good idea to assign two journalists to make thinly substantiated claims about a lefty news problem that it then used to police whether lefty protestors are doing the right thing.