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## True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News By Cindy Otis

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### Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Nolan Higdon (nolan.higdon@csueastbay.edu) is an author and university lecturer of history and media studies at California State University, East Bay. Higdon's areas of concentration include youth culture, news media history, and critical media literacy. In addition, he has been a contributor to Truthout and Counter-punch and a source of expertise for The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, and numerous television news outlets.

D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

## **Book Review**

*True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News*

By Cindy Otis

ISBN: 9781250239495, Feiwel and Friends, 2020.

Cindy Otis' 2020 *True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News* utilizes an historical lens of communication technologies to introduce various types of fake news. The chronological text discusses the ways in which the structure and influence of fake news has diversified with the advent of each new technology from print to digital. Otis' thesis is that news users are awash in a sea of fake news, and unable to delineate fact from fiction. Otis recalls that as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst, she faced a similar dilemma when it came to properly analyzing a seemingly endless flow of data. Otis claims that the CIA trained her on how to demarcate fact from fiction. Otis promises that after completing the book, readers "will be able to spot fake news like a CIA analyst."<sup>i</sup>

*True or False* is written for a young audience. It provides a mixture of international and domestic examples of media that help youth understand the long and pervasive history of fake news. Many of the examples are stories regarding violence, war, and famous figures such as Jack the Ripper. The sensational nature of these examples is sure to engage younger readers. In addition to accessible examples, the text provides readers with tips and strategies for identifying fake news. In fact, Otis provides some well-developed news literacy tips regarding fact versus opinion, problems with polling, clickbait, various types of bias, social media, and newer fake news practices such as deep fakes.

However, the text suffers from a familiar problem regarding news literacy discourses in America: it does not encourage critical inquiry of traditional news outlets and the U.S. Government. These are glaring blind spots in Otis' analysis. Otis admits that during the Cold War, the CIA conducted "secret operations to influence political, economic, or military conditions in other countries."<sup>ii</sup> However, Otis stops short of discussing, let alone providing examples of, CIA propaganda in the text. The reason, Otis explains, is that when it comes to the stories of CIA propaganda that she is aware of, "most of the good ones are classified."<sup>iii</sup> Disturbingly, the next sentence of the text explains that "instead, let's talk about the Soviet Union."<sup>iv</sup> In essence, she admits that the book will focus on fake news from sources beyond the CIA. The subtext is: just trust Otis, we should focus on the Soviet Union.

Given that there are numerous well documented and classified cases of the CIA disseminating fake news; Otis' statement reveals that she is either lying or simply unaware of the accessible research regarding the CIA's production and dissemination of fake news.<sup>v</sup> Case in point, Otis' coveted *New York Times* among others has reported on the CIA, U.S. military, and other intelligence agencies distributing fake news to domestic and international audiences well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>vi</sup> More recently, it was revealed that the CIA worked with Silicon Valley players such as Peter Thiel's Palantir to data mine the internet, which has been associated with the targeted use of false content.<sup>vii</sup> However, Otis' fleeting statement about the CIA's propaganda is limited to the Cold War. Even then, she does not explain the size and scope of those CIA operations to readers. Readers may be interested to know that in the 1970s, it was revealed that the CIA's Operation Mockingbird saw the agency provide *Time*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, CBS, and other outlets with false content that was published as legitimate journalism.<sup>viii</sup> Otis' dismissal of these public facts demonstrates poor research skills at best, and at worst, concerted efforts to cherry pick the examples that serve the interest of someone other than the reader. Indeed, the lack of discourse about the U.S. Government's dissemination of

propaganda and fake news leaves readers with a warped sense of the reality that depicts other nations as being solely responsible for the fake news problem.

Similarly, Otis does not encourage the application of news literacy skills to traditional news media. In fact, Otis lauds corporate funded news media as an unquestionable bastion of journalism, despite their well-documented history of producing and disseminating fake news.<sup>ix</sup> For example, Otis emphasizes that readers should rely on “trusted sources” which among others she insinuates are *Buzzfeed* and NBC. Although there are journalists at these and other traditional news outlets who have performed exemplary journalism, it is problematic to trust the entire outlet given the history of the industry in general and these outlets in particular. After all, *Buzzfeed's* decision to publish the Christopher Steele Dossier<sup>x</sup> even though its author admitted the content was ranged from speculative to baseless.<sup>xi</sup> *Buzzfeed's* reckless decision did more to obscure rather than clarify the facts of Russia's behavior during the 2016 election. Similarly, NBC has had a long history of promoting pro-war fake news to U.S. audiences, such their reporting on the eve of the first and second U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>xii</sup> Again, it is not to say that these outlets should be totally discounted, but to insinuate that readers should have a blind trust in them ignores their long-standing involvement in the production and dissemination of fake news. Worse, it discourages critical thinking.

Young readers will find Cindy Otis' 2020 *True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News* accessible and interesting. However, there's a certain, subtle patronizing tone that Otis, as a former CIA agent, espouses by lecturing young readers on which outlets are reputable and which are not. This McCarthyite approach of making lists of unacceptable institutions does not encourage the deeper analysis that defines critical thinking. Furthermore, it diverts from Otis' own narrative, which credits her fake news detection skills to critical inquiry skills she developed at the CIA. Otis leaves readers with a false sense about the role of the U.S. Government and traditional news media outlets in the production and dissemination of fake news. Thus, when readers apply the skills Otis introduces, they are only being led to do so against a limited set of fake new producers. Due to these omissions, young readers should approach the text with caution, recognizing that it delivers on its promise to make you a CIA analyst: Your concerns about fake news will be limited to everyone, but the U.S.

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<sup>i</sup> Cindy Otis, *True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News*, (New York, New York: Feiwei and Friends, 2020), xv.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Nancy Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Wilson P. Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004); Carl Bernstein, "The CIA and the Media: How America's Most Powerful News Media Worked Hand in Glove with the Central Intelligence Agency and Why the Church Committee Covered It Up," *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 1977, [www.carlberstein.com/magazine\\_cia\\_and\\_media.php](http://www.carlberstein.com/magazine_cia_and_media.php).

<sup>vi</sup> David Barstow, "Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand," *New York Times*, April 20, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/us/20generals.html>; David Barstow & Robin Stein, "The Message Machine: How the Government Makes News; Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged News," *New York Times*, March 13, 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50914FC3E580C708DDDA0894DD404482>.

<sup>vii</sup> Palantir, "How A 'Deviant' Philosopher Built Palantir, A Cia-Funded Data-Mining Juggernaut," *Palantir*, 2020, [https://www.palantir.com/pt\\_media/how-a-deviant-philosopher-built-palantir-a-cia-funded-data-mining-juggernaut/](https://www.palantir.com/pt_media/how-a-deviant-philosopher-built-palantir-a-cia-funded-data-mining-juggernaut/); Sam Biddle, "How Peter Thiel's Palantir Helped The Nsa Spy On The Whole World," *Documents, The Intercept*, February 22 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/02/22/how-peter-thiels-palantir-helped-the-nsa-spy-on-the-whole-world/>; Higdon.

<sup>viii</sup> Nolan Higdon, *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Education*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020).

<sup>ix</sup> Higdon.

<sup>x</sup> David A. Graham, "The Steele Dossier Set the Stage for a Mueller Letdown," *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/03/buzzfeed-publishing-steele-dossier-distorted-debate/586096/>

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Higdon.