



UNRELIABLE NARRATIVES

Watch Me Lie!

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The problem with our media isn't "fake news." It's the absence of meaningful contexts for interpretation.

Remember “Baghdad Bob,” also known as “Comical Ali”? These were the nicknames given to Mohammed Saeed Al-Sahhaf, Minister of Information under Saddam Hussein during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite the fact that he was serving a murderous dictator, Al-Sahhaf became a wartime celebrity—not because he told lies but because he told them so gleefully.

Perhaps most famously, Al-Sahhaf did a number of stand-ups where he claimed—against a live TV backdrop showing the Iraqi capital under attack—that the invasion had been stopped in the desert by Saddam’s Republican Guard, and that U.S. troops were committing mass suicide. The bigger the whopper, the wider Al-Sahhaf’s grin. In his final interview on April 8, 2003, the words said, “The Americans are going to surrender or be burned in their tanks.” But the grin said, “Don’t tell me I’m lying! I *know* I’m lying! That’s what I *do*!”

At the time, it was funny. The Coalition forces were in charge, and Al-Sahhaf was so outrageous, no one even bothered to arrest him. In response to a rumor that he had been questioned and released by U.S. troops, the public affairs officer for Central Command told the BBC, “We don’t have him, and there is no information from our people on the ground to back up these reports.” She then added, no doubt with a grin of her own, “He is an interesting storyteller, and we look forward to hearing what he has got to say.”

That sentiment was shared across America. The launch of a [new Al-Sahhaf fansite](#) attracted so many users, the system temporarily crashed. President George W. Bush told NBC News that he thought Al-Sahhaf was “great.”

The rest is history. Radio Sawa, the U.S. government-supported radio channel

set up in 2002 to reach young Arabs by playing a mix of Arab and American pop music, hired Al-Sahhaf as a deejay. This decision was made by Norman Pattiz, CEO of the U.S. radio network Westwood One. At the time, Pattiz was the most forceful member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the oversight body for U.S.-supported international media: Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty (RFE-RL), Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), and Radio Free Asia (RFA).

None of these are commercial channels, but on this occasion Pattiz's commercial instincts were on target. Al-Sahhaf was an immediate hit. In all 24 Arab countries, young listeners clamored for him to be given his own talk show. And in 2004, when the BBG started Al-Hurra, its new 24-hour TV news channel, Al-Sahhaf was made host of its prime-time talk show. By 2005 he was the biggest name in the Arab media, and there can be no doubt that his witty commentary and outspoken support of the U.S. war effort in Iraq helped to turn the tide of that conflict. Today, most Arabs will tell you that, more than any U.S. President, policymaker, diplomat, or general, this beloved Iraqi humorist is responsible for the spreading of peace, prosperity, and liberal democracy throughout the entire MENA region.

Yes, I'm fabricating. For the past two paragraphs, to be exact. If you're still reading, it's probably because you find my fabrications amusing and entertaining. If you've stopped, it's probably because you find them snarky and annoying. Best-case scenario is that you are powering through them in the hope of arriving at some insight about "the Year of the Lie," as *Time* magazine is calling 2016. The insight I have to offer is not earthshaking but perhaps worth considering: Our reaction to a given falsehood depends heavily on the context in which it appears.

Back in 2003, Al-Sahhaf was funny because 1) his horrible boss was about to be toppled from power; and 2) his outlandish shtick was absurdly incongruous with the studied sobriety of the reporters questioning him. That same shtick caught on in America because it blended seamlessly with the Internet's swift devolution into a global masked ball where every frustration, resentment, lust, conspiracy, and intrigue could be expressed as flamboyantly, aggressively, and shockingly as possible—and in perfect anonymity. In the early 2000s the sheer thrill of this masquerade was enough to keep the revelers happy.

At the time, this masked ball was not part of the mainstream media. Its status was similar to that of the tabloids, reality TV, and other bottom-feeding media. The *National Enquirer* could publish a story about a British princess giving birth to a three-headed monster after a secret liaison with an extraterrestrial; reality TV could focus on "Housewives Who Have Sex With Their Family Dogs"; and the rest of us could laugh, because we knew that no reputable journalist, broadcaster, or politician would ever deal in such dreck.

That was then, this is now. What is most striking about 2016 is that nothing—not fake news, not truth, not gossip, not porn, not even the weather forecast—appears in a context. The membrane separating the reputable from the disreputable has been ruptured, and we are just beginning to see the consequences: serious news-seekers being force-fed headlines about *pizza* being code for children sex-trafficked by liberal Washington elites; honest journalists being click-baited to the margins by fanatics working themselves into a lather of paranoia and hate; political discourse being sabotaged by starving trolls competing frantically for chump change.

And no one remembers Baghdad Bob, because "interesting storytellers" are proliferating everywhere, like the enchanted brooms in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. If we are still laughing while these gleeful liars dump bucketful after bucketful of dreck on our heads, it is because we don't realize we're drowning.

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