

HIDDEN TRUTHS

FAKE VERSIONS OF YOURSELF ONLINE? ANNA FUNDER DOESN'T MIND THE IDEA, BUT MASS DISINFORMATION HAS ITS DRAWBACKS.



RECENTLY WE TOOK THE CHILDREN TO THE Spy Museum in Washington DC. All the expected natty James Bond devices were there: a camera in a shoe brush, a .22 calibre pistol in a cigarette, a cyanide pill in the arm of some 1970s spectacles. And more.

I was relieved when the children walked past the “Rectal Tool Kit” (CIA issue, 1960s), which looked like a fat cigar case and opened to reveal a set of nasty looking knives, picks, and thin razors. The sign read: “Filled with escape tools, this kit could be stashed inside the body where it would not be found during a search.”

But then the kids stopped short before what looked like a blob of dried mud. We read the sign: “Dog Doo Transmitter. Issued by CIA, 1970. Effectively camouflaged, this homing beacon transmitted a radio signal that directed aircraft to locations for strikes or reconnaissance.”

As so often in parenting, having to explain the adult world makes it seem not very adult. We walk a fine line between raising the children's expectations of themselves above constant, low-grade sibling warfare, and giving them a realistic view of the world they are growing up in (constant, low-grade international warfare).

Every so often the look of sincere, bewildered disbelief in the face of the Dog Doo of reality reminds me of the inherent nobility of human beings, a nobility we all battle to maintain faced with the shenanigans of the adult realm.

One of the most powerful spy tools – disinformation – is harder to display in a museum. The most sophisticated Stasi spy I ever met spent

his life spreading rumours – some false, some true – about politicians and public figures in Western countries to bring them down. In the internet age, Herr Bohnsack's work would have been immeasurably easier.

With just a few clicks of a mouse he would have been able to create rumours or alternative “truths” online and watch them spread around the planet before cementing themselves in Google search results as if they were fact.

I recently spoke with a man who deals with hiding, finding and spreading information in cyberspace – not for governments, necessarily, but for private clients for a fee.

Michael Fertik is a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and chief executive of Reputation.com, a leading reputation management company. His business offers to “suppress negative material online with positive content that you control”.

The company works with clients who want either true (but damaging) – or vindictively false – information about themselves covered up.

Fertik is a charming, articulate Harvard law graduate who started his company in 2006. It now has 1.6 million clients in 100 countries. He says, “The classic Reputation.com paradigm is that we will rearrange your search results on Google. So algorithmically, we will push this or that piece of content up or down.” This is known as search engine optimisation.

Law professor Ann Bartow has a different view. She calls it “gaming” Google's algorithm and “an effort to manipulate search engine results for profit”. Along with “astroturfing” (the creation of

fake “grassroots” feedback) she says it is “killing some of the more democratic and appealing aspects of the internet”. We need to realise that what we see on the first page of a search may have been manipulated by people with deep pockets and something to hide.

As Bartow puts it, “[Fertik's] whole business model is to hide stuff that you really would like to know. If somebody is an abusive spouse or a bad person generally, you'd like to Google them before a first date to find out.”

Or, if the company is defending an innocent who has been harassed, defamed, subjected to revenge porn or fictitious negative customer reviews online, Bartow's view is that “Substantial widespread online personal misery equals success for these companies.”

Fertik's company doesn't do astroturfing, although he doesn't see anything unethical about it. Nor, he tells me, would he create a lot of fake identities, “2000 Anna Funders and deep profiles for two [of them]”.

Personally, I wouldn't mind being able to pass off my sins as some other Anna Funder's. But if everyone did it, we'd end up with what Fertik calls “disinformation at scale”.

It's not happening yet. “There are no apparatuses – except possibly a couple of government apparatuses – that are capable of setting up to create massively scaled disinformation.”

Somehow, this is not very comforting.

SO, WHO WANTS WHAT ABOUT THEM BANISHED OR burnished? Fertik says a lot of the work stems from disgruntled ex-lovers, or wannabe lovers deriding the former object of their affections. The company has been accused of a secret agenda to help “corporations, or the Chinese, Iranian or Israeli governments”, which he finds outlandish.

“People ask us periodically to help them – people who would potentially be very lucrative customers – and I just say no.”

“Who asks you?”

“Governments of certain stripes, or effectively government-owned enterprises of certain stripes. Also we've elected not to help some people with some very extremist politics.”

Fertik mentions something about the Greek fascist party Golden Dawn.

“Have they come to you?” I ask.

“Ah – I don't know,” he says. “I mean it's possible, but with 1.6 million customers, [it's] too many for me to know the details.”

Fertik has a sense of himself as a good guy, and he sounds like one. But the online world he's operating in is clearly ripe for scamming, for both the destruction of reputations and the concealment of misdeeds. And it's a privatised world. Bartow says, “[Fertik] takes a real problem and then he just wants to monetise the solution instead of having a real legal or social solution.”

The law is yet to catch up. While we wait, there might be a technological way forward. Bartow wonders “if there's room for someone to compete with Google on an algorithm that's less scamable. Or if there's a way to run a search engine where you get more honest results. We need Google or another company to develop a sidebar which says: ‘Warning: there's a high probability that there's optimising going on.’ That would put pressure on everyone to have a more organic search result.”

Then Bartow adds, ruefully, as if it weren't perfectly clear already, “We are all so vulnerable to Google.” Among other shenanigans of the adult realm. **GW**

NUMBER CRUNCH

BY ASHLEIGH BONNER

\$US
3.8
million

Average cost for a 30-second ad during the Super Bowl in 2013; cost in 1967: \$US40,000

1949

Year of the first Australian citizenship ceremony; number of people since then who have chosen to become Australian citizens: over 4 million

4

Number of fatal shark attacks in Australia in 2011, the highest year on record; number of Australians killed in car accidents in the same year: 1292

22.3%

Proportion of Australians who identified as non-religious in the 2011 census; proportion who claimed irreligion in 1933: 0.3%



DICTIONARY

FOR THE MODERN WORLD

BY JACQUELINE MALEY

TEXT-KILLER

A text-killer is the right line or phrase that will end a text conversation you feel has passed its use-by date. A good text-killer is short and leaves no opening for further discussion. As ever, “LOL” is a suitably brainless way to terminate a discussion, as are electronic kisses or random emoticons of baby pandas.

TLDR

This acronym means “Too Long, Didn't Read”. In the two-second attention span of the internet age, anything longer than a tweet is viewed with disdain. TLDR can be used as a contemptuous put-down when someone posts a wordy digital tract that you can't be bothered reading, but can still find time to criticise.