Our Graduates Are Rubes

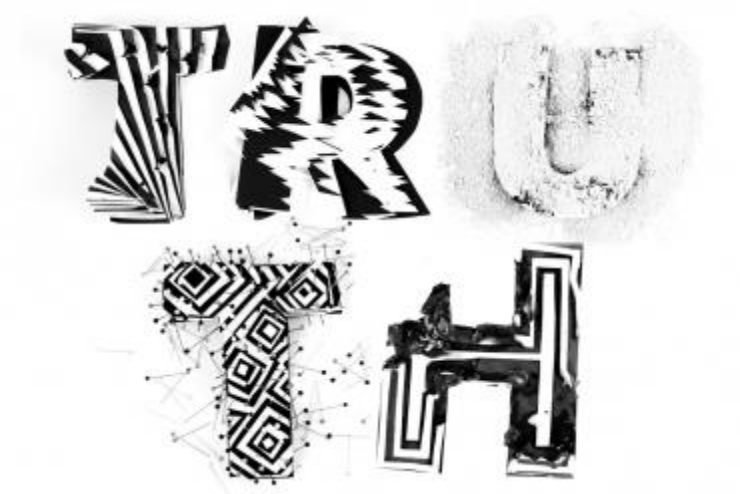
By Tom Nichols JANUARY 15, 2017 PREMIUM

"You know," then-candidate Donald Trump said during the 2016 campaign, "I've always wanted to say this: … The experts are terrible." Trump has often been caught at a loss over basic issues of public policy and has repeatedly bashed intellectuals who criticized his lack of substance. He famously exulted, "I love the poorly educated," demanded that President Obama prove his American citizenship, and cited the *National Enquirer* approvingly as a source in charging that the father of one of his opponents, Ted Cruz, was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Higher education is supposed to be a bulwark against these kinds of frontal assaults on established knowledge, empowering voters with the ability to know fact from fiction, and to fight fantasy with critical reasoning.

How's that going? Not well. In the wake of the 2016 election, half of Republicans believe that Donald Trump won the popular vote (he didn't), while half of Democrats believe that Russia hacked America's voting machines (it didn't).

Colleges are failing not only in their mission to educate young men and women but also to provide the foundations of civilizational knowledge on which informed voting and civic participation are built. These failures are threatening the stability and future of American democracy.



The Post-Truth Issue

"Post-truth—adjective; relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." So says Oxford Dictionaries, announcing their 2016 word of the year. If we really have entered a post-truth era, as so many have written, what does that mean for the scholar and the student? For the citizen and the state? In our special issue, we wrestle with these and other urgent questions.

The pampering of students as customers, the proliferation of faux "universities," grade inflation, and the power reversal between instructor and student are well-documented, much-lamented academic phenomena. These parts, however, make up a far more dangerous whole: a citizenry unprepared for its duties in the public sphere and mired in the confusion that comes from the indifferent and lazy grazing of cable, talk radio, and the web. Worse, citizens are no longer approaching political participation as a civic duty, but instead are engaging in relentless conflict on social media, taking offense at everything while believing anything.

College, in an earlier time, was supposed to be an uncomfortable experience because growth is always a challenge. It was where a student left behind the rote learning of childhood and accepted the anxiety, discomfort, and challenge of complexity that leads to deeper knowledge — hopefully, for a lifetime.

That, sadly, is no longer how higher education is viewed, either by colleges or by students. College today is a client-centered experience. Rather than disabuse students of their intellectual solipsism, the modern university reinforces it. Students can leave the campus without fully accepting that they've met anyone more intelligent than they are, either among their peers or their professors (insofar as they even bother to make that distinction).

This client model arose from a competition for students that has led to institutions' marketing a "college experience" rather than an education. Competition for tuition dollars — too often drawn thoughtlessly from an inexhaustible well of loans — means that students now shop for colleges the way adults shop for cars. Young people then sign up for college without a lot of thought given to how to graduate or what to do afterward. Four years turns into five and, increasingly, six or more. (A graduate of a well-known party school in California described his education as "those magical seven years between high school and your first warehouse job.")

A limited diet of study has turned into an expensive educational buffet, laden mostly with intellectual junk food, but little adult supervision to ensure that the students choose nutrition over nonsense. Faculty members often act as retailers for their courses rather than educators. As a professor at an elite college once said to me, "Some days I feel less like a teacher and more like a clerk in an expensive boutique."

These changes weren't sudden. They have happened over decades. When I arrived at Dartmouth, at the end of the 1980s, my colleagues told me a story about a well-known scientist there who gave a lecture to a group of undergrads on international-security affairs. During the question-and-answer, a student waved away the professor's views, saying, "Well, your guess is as good as mine." "No, no, no," the professor said emphatically. "My guesses are much, much better than yours."

Students can leave the campus without accepting that they've met anyone more intelligent than they are.

But the problem is more common than some Ivy League smart aleck cracking wise. To take a less rarefied example, a young woman in 2013 took to social media for help with a class assignment. She apparently had been tasked with researching the deadly chemical substance sarin. "I can't find the chemical and physical properties of sarin gas someone please help me," the student tweeted.

Her request was quickly answered by the director of a security-consulting firm in London, an expert in the field of chemical weapons. He offered his help and corrected

her by noting that sarin isn't a gas. The student responded in a storm of outraged ego: "yes the [expletive] it is a gas you ignorant [expletive]. sarin is a liquid & can evaporate … shut the [expletive] up." The security professional, clearly stunned, tried one more time: "Google me. I'm an expert on sarin. Sorry for offering to help." Things did not improve before the exchange finally ended.

Faculty members both in the classroom and on social media report that incidents like that, in which students see themselves as faculty peers or take correction as an insult, are occurring more frequently. Unearned praise and hollow successes build a fragile arrogance in students that can lead them to lash out at the first teacher or employer who dispels that illusion, a habit that carries over into a resistance to believe anything inconvenient or challenging in adulthood.

Even as colleges cater to student tastes and living standards, they burnish their own brands and convince students that they are better educated than they actually are. This is why, for example, colleges since the 1990s have been elevating themselves to "universities." They try to appeal to students who want to believe they're paying for something in a higher tier — a regional or national "university" rather than a local college. These new "universities" then enter a degree-granting arms race against both established and arriviste competitors, bloating their offerings with extra courses to create make-believe graduate degrees as a means of attracting new funding streams.

All of this borders on academic malpractice. The creation of graduate programs in colleges that can barely provide a reasonable undergraduate education cheats both graduates and undergrads. Small colleges do not have the resources of large universities, and repainting the signs at the front gates and changing "College" to "University" on the stationery cannot magically create that kind of academic infrastructure.

More to the point, this rebranding dilutes the worth of all postsecondary degrees. When everyone has attended a "university," it gets that much more difficult to sort out actual achievement and expertise among graduates. People, especially on social media, will misinform their fellow citizens while boasting that they have completed graduate education and that they are therefore to be taken seriously. The only thing more disheartening than finding out that internet know-it-alls are lying about having multiple degrees is to find out that they are telling the truth.

I am not calling here for slimming colleges down to a bunch of STEM departments with a smattering of English or history majors. I deplore those kinds of arguments, and I have long objected to what I see as an assault on the liberal arts. I don't want to live in a civilization where there are no art-history, film-studies, philosophy, or sociology majors. The question remains, however, whether students in those majors

are actually learning anything, or whether there need to be so many students taking these subjects. There is no way around the reality that students are too often wasting their money and obtaining the illusion of an education by gravitating toward courses or majors that either shouldn't exist or whose enrollments should be restricted to the small number of students who intend to pursue them with rigor.

When rebranded universities offer courses and degree programs as though they are roughly equivalent to better-known counterparts, they are not only misleading students but are also undermining later learning by laying the foundation for social resentment. If I studied film at a local state college and you went to the film program at the University of Southern California, who are you to think you know more than I do?

There's plenty of bad faith in these arguments, which are often little more than social one-upmanship. A lousy student who attended a good school is still a lousy student; a diligent student from a small institution is no less intelligent for the lack of an elite pedigree. Still, the faux egalitarianism that assumes all degrees are alike regardless of the quality of the school or the program that produced them not only contributes to an inability to recognize expertise but also undermines further learning by breeding the smug and false faith among citizens that a degree has taught them all they need to know.

The problem of inflated degrees is compounded by the problem of inflated grades. Academic standards have been lowered in an effort to ensure that coursework does not interfere with the enjoyable nature of the college experience. As a University of Chicago study found in 2011, "it does not take a great deal of effort to demonstrate satisfactory academic performance in today's colleges and universities." Forty-five percent of students reported that in the prior semester they had not had a single course that required more than 20 pages of writing over the entire semester; 32 percent had not had even one class that assigned more than 40 pages of reading per week.

"I was a straight-A student at a university" no longer means what it did in 1960 or even 1980. A study of 200 colleges and universities through 2009 found that A was the most commonly given grade, an increase of nearly 30 percent since 1960 and more than 10 percent just since 1988.

The impact of lighter workloads and easier grades on civic competence should be obvious. Students graduate with a high GPA that produces illusory confidence but doesn't reflect a corresponding level of education or intellectual achievement.

Colleges further diminish expertise in the minds of students by encouraging them to evaluate the educators standing in front of them as though they were peers. I am a

supporter of some limited use of student evaluations. I will immodestly say that mine have been pretty good since I began teaching, some 30 years ago, and I have no personal ax to grind here. But the whole idea has gone out of control, with students rating professional men and women as though reviewing a movie or commenting on a pair of shoes.

The cumulative effect of this service-oriented, consumer-tested approach to education is to empower cynicism and uninformed judgment over critical thinking, enabling the kind of glib attacks on established knowledge that defeat the very purpose of college. This, in turn, endangers the stability of a republican form of democracy that relies on trusting elected representatives and their advisers to make informed decisions on behalf of citizens.

Having surrendered intellectual authority within the classroom, colleges capitulate similarly outside the classroom doors. The insistence on traditions of free inquiry that took centuries to establish and that scholarly communities are sworn to defend have, in waves of attacks over the course of a half-century, been giving way to a greater imperative to make the academic community's young charges feel right at home.

At Yale in 2015, for example, a house master's wife had the temerity to tell minority-group students to ignore Halloween costumes they thought offensive. That provoked a campuswide temper tantrum that included a professor's being shouted down by screaming students. "It is your job to create a place of comfort and home!" one student howled in the professor's face. "Do you understand that?"

Quietly, the professor said: "No, I don't agree with that." The student then unloaded on him:

"Then why the [expletive] did you accept the position?! Who the [expletive] hired you?! You should step down! If that is what you think about being a master, you should step down! It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It's about creating a home here. You are not doing that!"

The house master resigned his residential position, and Yale apologized to the students. The lesson, for students and faculty members alike, was obvious: The campus of a top university is not a place for intellectual exploration. It is a luxury home, rented for four to six years, nine months at a time, by young people who may shout at professors as if berating clumsy maids in a colonial mansion.

A month after the Yale fracas, protests at the University of Missouri at Columbia flared up after a juvenile incident in which a swastika was drawn with feces on a bathroom wall. Exactly what Missouri's flagship public university was supposed to

do, other than wash the wall, was unclear, but the campus erupted anyway. "What do you think systemic oppression is?" a woman yelled at the flustered Mizzou president. "You going to Google it?" she hollered. After a few more days of such theatrics, the president and the chancellor resigned.

This is no longer an issue of the political left or right; academics of all persuasions are distraught at the fragility of 21st-century students. The British scholar Richard Dawkins, for one, was perplexed by the whole idea of "safe spaces," which American students demand as a respite from any form of political expression they might find "triggering." "A university is not a ‘safe space,’ " he said on Twitter. "If you need a safe space, leave, go home, hug your teddy & suck your thumb until ready for university."

The swaddling environment of the modern university infantilizes students and dissolves their ability to conduct a logical and informed argument. Worse, when students learn that emotion trumps everything else, they take that lesson with them as a means of empowering themselves against dissent on any subject.

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What to do? No one college can deflate its grades without putting itself and its students at a competitive disadvantage. No one college can suggest to its students that when confronted with unpleasant, inconvenient viewpoints, they should count to 10 and consider the world from another set of eyes. No one college can abolish student evaluations and remind students that classes are not always fun or interesting and to bear in mind that the professor has been studying this stuff intensely and that they should listen to her before criticizing the material or how it is delivered.
But colleges can band together to counter at least some of the trends that have eroded their mission and their legitimacy. And professors needn’t wait for any such organized action. They can — beginning today — hold students to clear standards and expect them to learn how to formulate coherent views and to argue them, calmly and logically. They can grade students on their responses to the questions asked and on the quality of their work, not on their political views. They can demand that students treat one another, as well as faculty and staff members, with respect, and that they engage the ideas and beliefs of others in the classroom without emotion or personal attacks.

I realize it's not as simple as all that. I adhere to these standards as well as I can, and, like my colleagues, I sometimes fail. When students leave my classroom, I am haunted by the realization that I cannot moderate their arguments forever. I cannot prevent them from dismissing others, from rejecting facts, from denouncing well-intentioned advice, from demanding that their feelings be accepted in place of the truth. If they've spent four years casually judging their professors, showing disrespect to their institutions, and berating their classmates, they cannot be expected to respect or listen to their fellow citizens.

The battle to maintain sense and civility is especially daunting these days, when America's new president himself has attacked learning and expertise and has profited politically from the most uncivil and vulgar presidential campaign in modern history. But if college graduates can no longer be counted on to lead reasoned debate and discussion in American life, and to know the difference between knowledge and feeling, then we're in the kind of deep trouble that no scholar or expert can fix.

Tom Nichols is a professor of national-security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College and the Harvard Extension School, and the author of The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters, *to be published by Oxford University Press in March. The views expressed are entirely his own.*

This article is part of:

The Post-Truth Issue

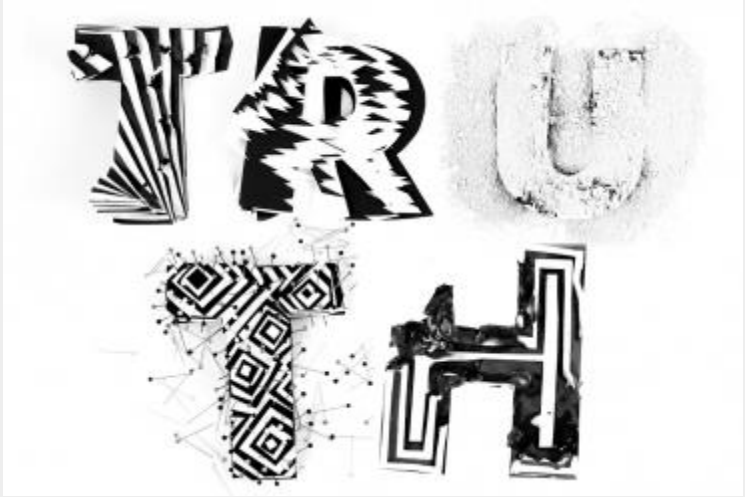
THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

When Truth Becomes a Commodity

By Daniel T. Rodgers JANUARY 15, 2017

"Post-truth" carries a catchy, advertising-agency ring. And that may be exactly what is wrong with it and with our times. We do not live in an era stripped of truths. We live, to the contrary, in a political-cultural moment saturated with competing claims on truth, each insisting on its veracity. We have contrived to construct an open marketplace of truths, and it is not a happy state.

If there can be said to be an era in recent American history when the essence of truth was under critical scrutiny, it was the generation after 1960. In both popular and academic culture, that was when the belief that truth lay in a sphere of certainty independent of truth's inquirers began to fragment. Social scientists learned to grow much more self-critical about their methods. Anthropologists realized that they could not write themselves out of their ethnographies. Historians learned that archives contained fictions as well as facts. Paradigms, in Thomas Kuhn's phrase, shaped the very worlds of assumption in which natural scientists worked. None of truth's seekers, it was increasingly realized, could wholly escape the perspectives and experiences they carried with them. What seemed "natural" was, as often as not, not natural at all but a product of culture and unspoken assumption.



The Post-Truth Issue

"Post-truth—adjective; relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." So says Oxford Dictionaries, announcing their 2016 word of the year. If we really have entered a post-truth era, as so many have written, what does that mean for the scholar and the student? For the citizen and the state? In our special issue, we wrestle with these and other urgent questions.

"Don't *truth* me and I won't *truth* you," Kurt Vonnegut wrote as that era began. But although the moment for which Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and the best-seller proclamation "I'm OK, You're OK" spoke is easy to caricature as a fit of mere relativism, that self-criticism brought enormous gains as well. The epistemological anarchists of the era never formed a very large number. For most of those who tried to think through the politics and epistemology of a world beyond certainties, truths were not dead. Truths needed to be argued out. They took shape in discourse, debate, and dialogue. They were provisional, plural, subject to amendment, to new standpoints, critiques, and re-examination. Truth-seeking demanded doubt, demanded the ability to entertain more than one hypothesis, demanded patience. Post-positivist, post-ideological truths were formed in the act of self-critical inquiry. Whether in the laboratory, social fieldwork, or the humanities seminar, teachers taught students to search for them.

That sense of truth as the product of self-critical search and dialogue does not characterize the moment we live in now. The cultural-political air is filled with competing truth claims, shouted angrily and with barely a shred of doubt. Is global warming real, whatever the preponderance of scientific opinion might be? Has globalization fatally eroded the inner core of the U.S. economy? Is racism "over"?

Some of what fills the air — more thickly and noxiously than any democracy can ultimately stand — is lying. But lying is very old in democratic politics. Public figures lie for reasons of state (think Bay of Pigs), they lie to protect their political base (think Watergate), they lie because they inhabit a world in which postures and exaggerations have instrumental value (think Joseph McCarthy). Tabloid newspapers long made their fortunes by living just over the line of truth-telling. Half-truths mobilize political crowds, whether they be through pictures of money changers swarming through the temples or Communists lurking under every bed.

Conspiracy thinking is very old in democratic politics as well. Cold War culture was saturated with conspiratorial hypotheses. Both anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism thrived on nightmares of elaborate, subversive, underground connections. The American Revolution's success hinged on the patriots' growing sense that they were threatened not merely by this or that tax or regulation but by a full-blown conspiracy (as the South Carolina Constitution's drafters put it in 1776) to "reduce them from the rank of freemen to a state of the most abject slavery."

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Part of what is different about our current moment is the speed and distance across which competing truth claims can now be broadcast. The living-room gatherings of John Birch Society locals in the 1960s, like the exaggerated facts and conspiracies hatched in a neighborhood bar, were limited in their ability to gather up a critical mass of believers. The internet and smartphones have profoundly altered that. Facts generated anywhere on the planet can be consumed virtually anywhere else and then forwarded still further, almost without limit.

This is not the benign, more tightly integrated world that many techno-visionaries of the 1970s imagined. A technology that might have extended the field of dialogue, that might have brought distant cultures and persons into closer understanding, has contributed unexpectedly to their accelerated fragmentation. Years ago, Benedict Anderson wrote of the newspaper as an important technology of nationalist solidarity. The high politics of the nation, the sports news of the day, the freakish local weather all found places in its columns. A reader's social imagination was, without any conscious intention, broadened to encompass them all.

The very overload of information in our modern environment has helped to produce the opposite effect. Because there are vastly more sources of fact than anyone can survey, one goes to the information sites one knows and trusts, the ones that cut through the general noise to get to the "truth of the matter." Audiences and the facts they share are siloed. It is the paradox of a radically more tightly interconnected world that it tends to create clumps of information users, communities of bonded certainties that are much more widely diffused geographically and yet much more tightly knitted ideationally.

But no technology is in itself determinative. What characterizes our modern techno-system is not simply the conditions of information superfluity it inhabits but that it is, still more important, a market. This is true across much of our contemporary scene. The widely reported success of a computer-science student in the distant republic of Georgia in churning forward faked and politically slanted U.S. election news for profit is a particularly vivid example of the global market in eye-catching facts that we have unwittingly created. Ads crawl through every news flash.
Still more of the modern market in truths is driven not by revenue streams but by individual desires. Clicks are its currency. They carry everyone's wants. They cut through the information overload to return just the facts one is looking for. All wants in this sense are satisfied. The reorganization of society and the social imagination along market lines, which has accelerated so rapidly, reaches a kind of culmination. But in this reconstitution of truths as market commodities, the invisible hand working to sort things out is nowhere to be found. There is no dialogue. There is no discourse. There is no weighing of competing hypotheses. Truths slide past one another without contact points, headed for their designated purchasers.

The very idea of politics as an act of deliberation, by which people with inevitably different desires and starting positions must work something out, must find their way to a destination that none may have imagined before, is devalued in the process. We click on truths. In the process we instantiate the figure who now commands so much of the imagination of the contemporary social sciences: the choosing self. But where truths are utterly free to be individually chosen, where the processes of inquiry are marginalized, the social disintegrates. So does truth.

Walking our way back from this condition will not be as easy as simply calling out lying when we find it. It will not be accomplished by fighting out the truth in the comments sections, where the exaggerated and polarized responses fired back may not even be generated by human actors at all. The economists' answer to imperfectly functioning markets is to devise means to increase their transparency.

In another clamorous moment, a century ago, public and private institution builders constructed a powerful set of means to cut through the noise of claims for shoddy and better-made goods, real and useless medical elixirs, or fraudulent and better-grounded investment possibilities. Independent rating agencies, university research laboratories, and public statistics agencies were invented to provide a common set of measures and assessments. Potentially they and their modern counterparts could still stream their

findings into every household and conversation. But when the credibility of university elites and government data are under severe challenge as just another biased set of facts in a marketplace of data, their ability to bring clarity into the open market in truths is crippled. Who will judge exaggerated and invented news when every umpire must fight for standing in the refereeing market?

Finding our way back to the notion of truth as the result of a public process of search and debate and deliberation will not be easy. It will take another round of market regulation and institution-building. It will take a rebirth of the kind of countermarket imagination that keeps an institution like Wikipedia standing amid the truth-as-preference clamor around it. It will take rededication to the goal of bringing the tools of inquiry, research, and collaborative discussion into every level of education, from elementary-school classrooms to graduate-student laboratories and seminars. It will take patient and humble experts, less eager themselves for a marketable sound bite.

Above all, it will require a renewed commitment to truth's complexity and the processes by which one searches for it. As long as we can click on the truths we want, as long as truth is imagined as a desire satisfied in a politically and commercially saturated market, we will have a superabundance of facts that people hold as true. Everyone will get what he wants, and the public — and its trust in truth — will fall apart.

Daniel T. Rodgers is an emeritus professor of history at Princeton University. His book Age of Fracture *(Harvard University Press) won the Bancroft Prize in 2012.*

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Facebook and Falsehood

By Henry Farrell JANUARY 15, 2017

After the election, many people blamed Facebook for spreading partisan — and largely pro-Trump — "fake news," like Pope Francis's endorsement of Trump, or Hillary Clinton's secret life-threatening illness. The company was assailed for prioritizing user "engagement," meaning that its algorithms probably favored juicy fake news over other kinds of stories. Those algorithms had taken on greater prominence since August, when Facebook fired its small team of human beings who curated its "trending" news section, following conservative complaints that it was biased against the right.

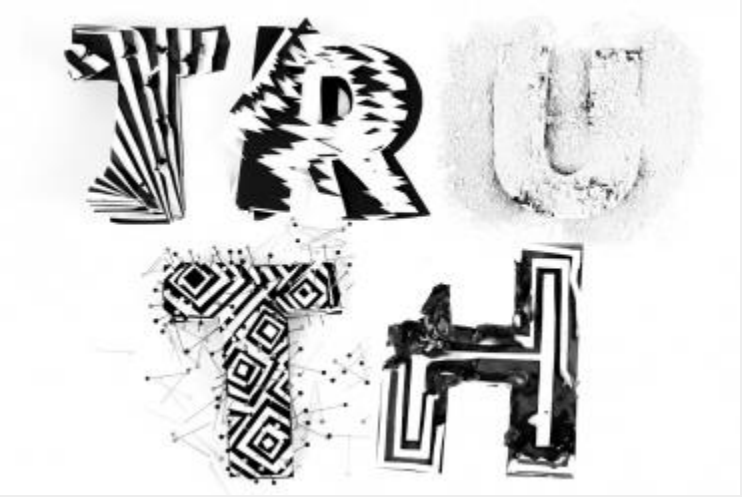
Initially, Facebook denied that fake news could have seriously affected the election. But recently it announced that it was taking action. The social-media giant said it would work with fact-checking organizations such as Snopes and Polifact to identify problematic news stories and flag them as disputed, so that people know that they are questionable. It will also penalize suspect stories so that they are less likely to appear in people's news feeds.

In each instance — the decision to remove human editors in August and the recent decision to use independent fact-checkers — Facebook has said that it cannot be an arbiter of truth. It wants to portray itself as a simple service that allows people and businesses to network and communicate, imposing only minimal controls over what they actually say to one another. This means that it has to outsource its judgments on truth — either by relying on "machine learning" or other technical approaches that might identify false information, or by turning to users and outside authorities.

Both approaches try to deal with fake news without addressing politics. Neither is likely to work.

The great strength and the great weakness of Silicon Valley is its propensity to redefine social questions as engineering problems. In a series of essays, Tim O'Reilly, the head of O'Reilly Media, argues that Facebook and similar organizations need to avoid individual judgments about the content of web pages and instead create

algorithms that will not only select engaging material but also winnow out the false information from the true. Google has created algorithms that can comb through metadata for "signals" suggesting that pages are likely to have valuable content, without ever having to understand the intrinsic content of the page. O'Reilly argues that one can do the same thing for truth. Facebook's algorithms would identify websites that repeatedly spread fake news and penalize their stories. This would define fake news as an engineering problem, in which one simply had to discover which signals were associated with true stories and give them priority.



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- Fighting Fake **PREMIUM**
- The Plots Against America **PREMIUM**
- Google and the Misinformed Public

But as Zeynep Tufekci, Cathy O'Neil, and others have pointed out, algorithms are hardly neutral. In Maciej Cegłowski's pungent description, machine-learning algorithms provide a kind of "money laundering for bias." This laundering is likely to be both detectable and controversial. Imagine, for example, if an unsupervised machine-learning process determined that conservative political orientation provided a

strong signal that the news on a particular website was untrustworthy, and started penalizing conservative sites accordingly. The purported neutrality of the algorithm wouldn't count for much in the ensuing uproar.
Even apart from the controversy, it isn't at all clear that algorithms will be very good at determining the truth in politically muddy situations. While they may spot the blatant frauds, as Gilad Lotan has pointed out, obviously fake news isn't nearly as tricky to deal with as biased news. Very often for such stories, there isn't going to be any genuinely "neutral" version of the truth that the results of the algorithm can be checked against. This means that it will be hard to train the algorithm — at best, its results can be checked against human-derived measurements that are themselves likely to be highly imperfect and politically biased in ways that are difficult to correct for.

But while the turn away from algorithms might be seen as progress, the shift toward independent fact-checkers is probably not the right answer. Trying to avoid any whiff of politics, Facebook has sought to minimize its own role, relying on third-party fact checkers. But the company's proposed strategy will work only if its outside arbiters are genuinely seen as neutral.

Social-media companies must take responsibility for preventing the spread of obvious falsehoods, while allowing users to argue for different interpretations of the truth.

That's extremely unlikely. In politics, different sides in a debate cling firmly to different truths. This doesn't mean that both sides are equally wrong when, for example, conservatives reject well-founded scientific conclusions about global warming. It does mean that the truth claims underlying many important political debates cannot be settled *a priori,* and that even when they can be, it's going to be impossible to avoid political contestation. People — especially the people most likely to be aggrieved by these arbiters' decisions — don't believe in independent referees anymore. Instead, they're likely to look at these organizations as yet another crew of media elites, telling ordinary people what they should or should not believe.
So if neither approach will work, what will?

If businesses, public intellectuals, and academics want to start addressing the problem, they are going to have to start thinking in political terms, just as climate scientists

have had to get politicized to engage in the debates over global warming. If Facebook and other companies are going to act effectively against fake news, they need to take a directly political stance, explicitly acknowledging that they have a responsibility to prevent the spread of obvious falsehoods, while continuing to allow the sites' users to express and argue for a variety of different understandings of the truth that are not obviously incompatible with empirical facts.

This would require Facebook to take the hitherto unthinkable step of taking an editorial position rather than presenting its judgments as the outcome of impersonal processes. It would involve hiring human beings as editors, supplementing their judgments with automated processes as needed, defending these judgments where appropriate, and building institutionalized processes for appeal when the outcomes are questionable.

This likely means that Facebook will become embroiled in messy political debates. However, it will become embroiled in these debates no matter what. Facebook needs to start thinking systematically about how to engage with its political responsibilities, rather than continuing to pretend that it doesn't have any.

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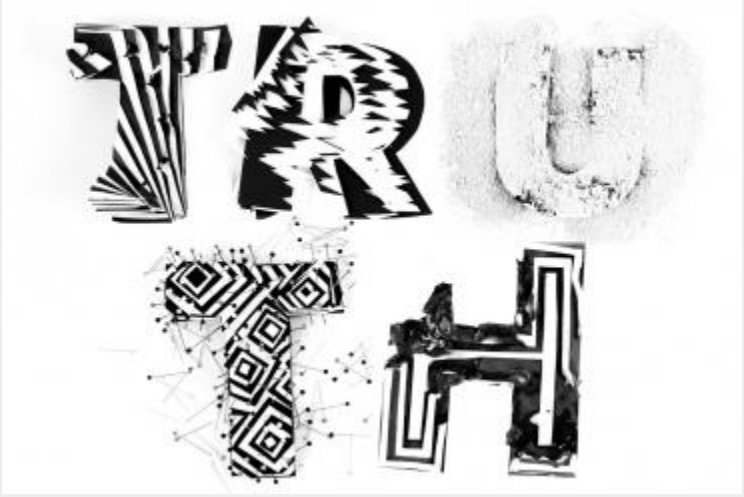
Google and the Misinformed Public

By Safiya U. Noble JANUARY 15, 2017

Digital media platforms like Google and Facebook may disavow responsibility for the results of their algorithms, but they can have tremendous — and disturbing — social effects. Racist and sexist bias, misinformation, and profiling are frequently unnoticed byproducts of those algorithms. And unlike public institutions (like the library), Google and Facebook have no transparent curation process by which the public can judge the credibility or legitimacy of the information they propagate. That misinformation can be debilitating for a democracy — and in some instances deadly for its citizens. Such was the case with the 2015 killings of nine African-American worshipers at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C., who were victims of a vicious hate crime. In a manifesto, the convicted gunman, Dylann Roof, wrote that his radicalization on race began following the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teen, and the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. Roof typed "black on White crime" in a Google search; he says the results confirmed (a patently false notion) that black violence on white Americans is a crisis. His source? The Council of Conservative Citizens, an organization that the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as "unrepentantly racist." As Roof himself writes of his race education via Google, "I have never been the same since that day."



The Post-Truth Issue

"Post-truth—adjective; relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." So says Oxford Dictionaries, announcing their 2016 word of the year. If we really have entered a post-truth era, as so many have written, what does that mean for the scholar and the student? For the citizen and the state? In our special issue, we wrestle with these and other urgent questions.

Roof's Google search results did not lead him to an authoritative source of violent-crime statistics. FBI statistics show that most violence against white Americans is committed by other white Americans, and that most violence against African-Americans is committed by other African-Americans. His search did not lead him to any experts on race from the fields of African-American studies or ethnic studies at universities, nor to libraries, books, or articles about the history of race in the United States and the invention of racist myths in the service of white supremacy. Instead it delivered him misinformation, disinformation, and outright lies that bolstered his already racist outlook and violent antiblack tendencies.

Online search can oversimplify complex phenomena. The results, ranked by algorithms treated as trade secrets by Google, are divorced from context and lack guidance on their veracity or reliability. Search results feign impartiality and objectivity, even as they fail to provide essential information and knowledge we need: knowledge traditionally acquired through teachers, professors, books, history, and experience.

It's impossible to know the specifics of what influences the design of proprietary algorithms, other than that human beings are designing them, that profit models are driving them, and that they are not up for public discussion. It's time we hold these platforms accountable and perhaps even imagine alternatives — such as regulation of search engines — that uphold the public interest.

Safiya U. Noble is an assistant professor in the department of information studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. Her forthcoming book, Algorithms of Oppression: Data Discrimination in the Digital Age, *will be published by New York University Press in the fall.*

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

The Plots Against America

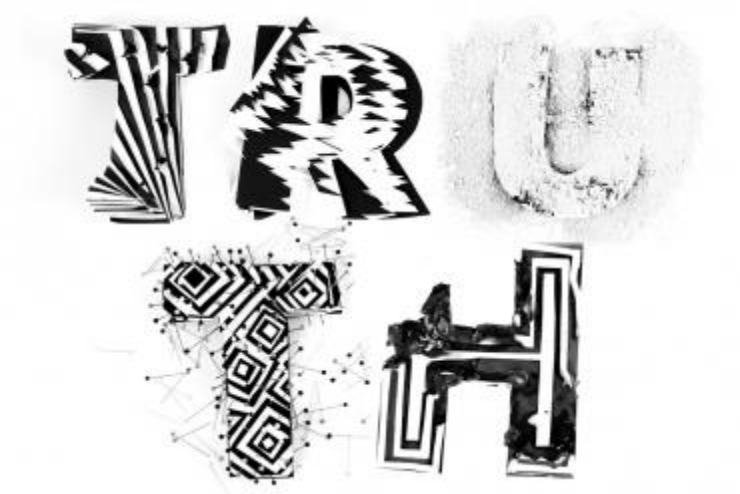
By David Runciman JANUARY 15, 2017 PREMIUM

Ever since the historian Richard Hofstadter published "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in 1964, democracies have been stalked by a nagging anxiety about the capacity of irrational suspicions and wild accusations to destabilize the basic standards of civic life. In 2016 those fears came home to roost.

Many of the tropes of conspiracy theory through the ages have made a very public comeback. The "lying press," the cosmopolitan elite, the banks, the "Establishment," and, inevitably, the Jews all found themselves fingered for hiding the truth. There have been consequences. A month after Donald Trump was elected president, a man from North Carolina shot up a pizza restaurant in Washington, believing it to be the front for a Hillary Clinton-led pedophile ring.

A persistent puzzle about conspiracy theories is what makes them so dangerous for democracy: Is it the beliefs themselves, or is it the people who hold them? Hofstadter was ambivalent on this question. His essay sought to portray the paranoid style as a profound mistake, yet he also saw it as a marginal threat. Many of the ideas he described were crazy, but so long as the people who subscribed to them remained on the fringes of American life, the damage could be contained. What Hofstadter feared was contagion, spreading to the center.

Contemporary scholars continue to be divided over whether we should focus on the content of these beliefs or their prevalence. For the legal philosopher Cass Sunstein, conspiracy theorizing represents what he calls a "crippled epistemology," which has the capacity to undermine the basic standards of democratic argument and evidence, with potentially catastrophic results for our ability to reason with one another.



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By contrast, the political scientists Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent argue in their book *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014) that the conspiracist mind-set is a function of political experience rather than mental disintegration. Conspiracy theories, in their words, are for "losers" — not because the people who believe in them have lost the plot but because their side has lost the election. When a Democrat is in the White House, a significant minority is likely to believe in foreign infiltration ("Obama is a Kenyan-born Muslim"); when a Republican is in the White House, the suspicion shifts to the other side, this time of a conspiracy of moneyed interests ("Bush is an oil-industry stooge"). On this account, conspiracy theories act as a kind of safety valve for the temporarily alienated.

The experiences of 2016 have put both these interpretations in question. The problem with focusing on the content of conspiracy theories is that it can be hard to draw the line between irrational suspicion and legitimate mistrust. In an age when many voters have ceased to believe what politicians and other "experts" are telling them,

describing a refusal to face the facts as a failure of reasoning simply fuels the problem it is meant to address. Moreover, conspiracy theorists may be right to insist that radical suspicion of public authority is not a democratic vice to be eschewed, but a democratic virtue to be encouraged when the public authorities have something they wish to hide.

Part of the problem with labeling all conspiracy theorists crazy is that there *are* real conspiracies out there, and sometimes it is only people who refuse to take official explanations at face value who can uncover them. Conspiracy theorists often start out from the same place as investigative journalists, whose own mind-set, in the words of the London *Times* foreign correspondent Louis Heren, comes down to: "Why is this lying bastard lying to me?" The difference is that conspiracy theorists don't know when to stop. What makes fake news dangerous is not that it is so different from real news, but that it is in many respects so similar. It derives its plausibility from its ability to mimic convincingly the conventions that it undermines.

Another idea that 2016 has challenged is that conspiracy theories are for losers, for the simple reason that this time around the conspiracy theorists won. Trump's assault on the citadels of public life began with his personal advocacy of the "birther" conspiracy about President Obama, which was a quick way to establish his bona fides with the Republican base. To that extent, his behavior fits the pattern described by Parent and Uscinski: He was using conspiracy theories to establish himself as a mouthpiece for the most alienated members of the American electorate. It is also true that he stepped back from "birtherism" as he got closer to the White House. But he has not stepped back from conspiracy theories — indeed, his half-hearted disavowal of the idea that Obama was not born in the United States came in the form of a claim that the Clinton campaign had been secretly behind the idea in the first place.

Trump's campaign turned the conspiratorial mind-set into something like a governing philosophy. It posited suspicion of outsiders, accusations of elite interference in his affairs, and deliberate campaigns of misinformation by his opponents as the rationale for his own candidacy. His willingness to cast doubt on the probity of the electoral process after he had won the Electoral College — but lost the popular vote — is testament to his readiness to keep going with a winning strategy. This is the hallmark of the worst kind of conspiracy theorist: He does not know when to stop. It also distinguishes his approach from the legitimate questioning of authority that is

essential to the functioning of any democracy. That sort of suspicion is essentially skeptical. Trump's is entirely cynical.

Parent and Uscinski note that there have been earlier periods in American history when conspiracy theorizing has gone beyond being the preserve of the "outs" to encompass a wider cross section of the public. One such period was the late 1940s and early 1950s, when fear of Communist infiltration spread across the political divide. Another was the 1890s, when the populist reaction against the moneyed elites of the Gilded Age found converts among large swaths of the voting population.

Our own age resembles the 1890s. That, too, was a time of rapid technological change, of financial instability, and of near-ubiquitous mistrust of Washington deal-making. The difference is that although a populist, William Jennings Bryan, captured the nomination of one of the two main parties in 1896, his Democrats lost the general election. This time the populist won the whole thing.

In a valedictory interview with David Axelrod, President Obama has contrasted the current condition of the Democratic Party in the United States with both the Republicans and the Labour Party in Britain. The Democrats, he suggests, are in better shape than their rivals or equivalents elsewhere because they have not yet lost touch with fact-based politics.

But Trump's victory poses a challenge to the underlying hypothesis: that fact-based politics will win out eventually. If it is true that conspiracy theories tend to be a means for electoral losers to channel their frustration, the arrival of a cynical conspiracy theorist in the White House might upset those calculations. Is it possible to oppose that cynicism by redirecting it back at its source, or will the appearance of fresh conspiracy theories about Trump merely reinforce the worldview that he wishes to purvey? Alternatively, if the way for the losers to reassert their identity this time is to cleave to the conventional standards of evidence, do they risk ceding the field of mistrust in politics to their cynical opponents?

Democracies can accommodate quite a lot of irrationalism. What is not clear is whether they can accommodate it when it emanates from the center. There are plenty of other societies in the world where conspiracy theorizing has become a governing philosophy: Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey, increasingly Modi's India as well. These societies mimic functioning democracies in some respects, but they also increasingly resemble their authoritarian alternatives.

There will always be fringe figures in any democratic society who believe the nonsense they read and decide to take matters into their own hands. It is shocking when it happens, but democracies can cope. Pedophilia and pizza parlors will be told apart eventually, and the contagion from that kind of paranoia can be contained. Much harder to know is what happens when the contagion of conspiracy theorizing spreads out from the heart of government. There may be no real historical analogies for that in the American experience, certainly not since the early days of the Republic. But the examples from elsewhere in the world at present are not encouraging.

David Runciman is a professor of politics at the University of Cambridge, where he is a co-director of the Conspiracy and Democracy project.

Know-Nothing Nation

By Nathan Pippenger JANUARY 15, 2017

Machiavelli, one of our most famous theorists of deceit, reminds the prince that while everyone sees what he seems to be, few experience his real nature up close. This is counsel better suited to leaders far craftier than Donald Trump. Our new president is all text, sometimes in all caps. His temper tantrums, his view of himself, his lusts, his hatreds, and his feuds are no secret to anyone. When he lies, it is not usually or primarily to conceal his true self.

Trump is therefore no ordinary political dissembler — for one thing, his lies are more frequent, more audacious, and more ominous than most. Even so, it is difficult to see why his rise is so disturbing without focusing on his audience. We do not minimize the dreadfulness of the man himself if we also ask about the electorate that elevated him.

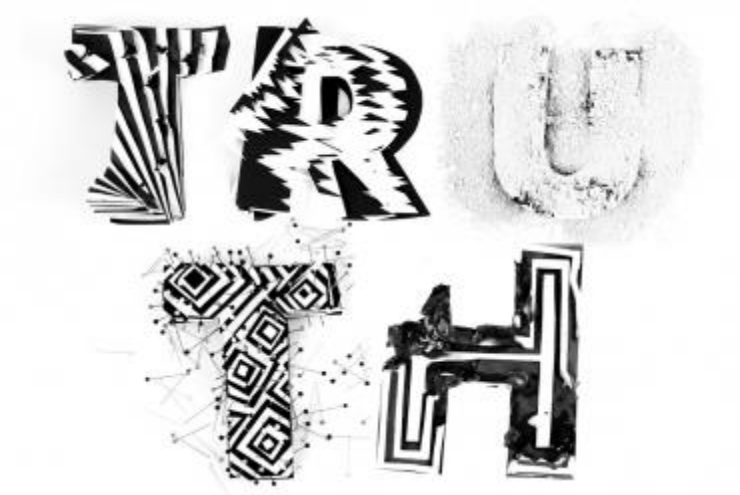
Look not at the liar, but at his audience.

Yet our usual assumptions may prove ill equipped for that task. When we talk about political dishonesty, our question is normally framed in terms of the vertical relationship between state and citizen: What should we do if the government lies to us? But in Trump's America, the problem is at least as much horizontal as it is vertical: Citizens are trading lies to each other.

Or, to be more precise, we are trying to perform democratic politics amid a public debate that has been momentarily captured by a movement characterized by a striking indifference to truth. Importantly, this is not simple manipulation via the familiar top-down channels of talk radio and Fox News, but a spread of pseudofacts disseminated voluntarily, via the horizontal channels of social media, by voters themselves. Researchers have found that far-fetched, easily debunked stories are vastly more popular on Facebook than real news, and that there is a much larger appetite for viral lies on the right.

Trump's most ardent supporters would surely object to this characterization, but one searches in vain for a similarly successful politician who has so systematically departed from most conventional standards of truth. Trump's day-by-day policy shifts and his manifold self-contradictions dissolve the possibility of honesty by

ignoring basic requirements of coherence and consistency. His tweets promoting fake, racially charged crime statistics and antivaccination propaganda reflect a near-total indifference to empiricism. His numerous appointments of major federal officials who wholly lack either relevant experience or policy knowledge demonstrate what he thinks of expertise.



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- Our Graduates Are Rubes **PREMIUM**
- When Truth Becomes a Commodity
- Fighting Fake **PREMIUM**
- The Plots Against America **PREMIUM**
- Facebook and Falsehood
- Google and the Misinformed Public

So if Trump represents a kind of truth to his supporters — about a corrupt system, the evils of politics-as-usual, the essence of American greatness, or whatever — it's a curious truth, one without coherence, consistency, empiricism, or expertise. The minority of American voters who have elevated him to the White House have bestowed an electoral blessing on this disregard for truth, energized Trump's most enthusiastic supporters, and guaranteed that this approach to public discourse — which Trump partly leads and is partly enabled by — will play an outsized, perhaps defining, role in American politics for years to come.

During the 2016 campaign, the preponderance of fake news on Facebook brought the social media behemoth under scrutiny for its role in our politics. But this is not merely a failure of technology. Voters who read and share wild-eyed stories about the Clintons having an FBI agent murdered, or Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump, are not simply gullible innocents. Rather, their actions demonstrate the vast distance between our familiar normative conceptions of political argument and citizens' actual practice of public conversation.

What of the idea that debate in a liberal democracy ideally turns on an exchange of reasons among citizens? Such a conversation is difficult enough when participants inhabit different epistemic universes, but it grows even more difficult when standards for securing agreement drift apart from each other. You should believe this — because I read it in the newspaper, because experts say so, because holding Opinion X also commits you to Opinion Y. These are forms of intellectual consistency, yes, but our willingness to be bound by them is also a stance on the authority and relevance of truth to our beliefs. In agreeing to see truth and its attendant qualities as authoritative, we place limits on what reasons are acceptable to give in an argument and to which knowledge it is appropriate to appeal.

In this populist moment, we often speak as if The People were (or at least wanted to be) a repository of truth and common sense. But if the 2016 campaign showed anything, it's that the appetite for the fake, the absurd, even the paranoid — both from candidates and new media — is now a major destabilizing force.

In other words: Look not at the liar, but at his audience. Here, another remark of Machiavelli's — striking in its bluntness — seems more relevant: "You will find people are so simple-minded and so preoccupied with their immediate concerns, that if you set out to deceive them, you will always find plenty of them who will let themselves be deceived." Even if the small-d democrat rightly cringes at the caustic accusation of mass simple-mindedness, Machiavelli undeniably captures the disquieting voluntarism of what we are now experiencing: many people "will let themselves be deceived."

How can we, individually or collectively, do anything about this? Just as we cannot stop politicians from lying, so we cannot stop other citizens from disregarding facts. But regardless of the fields in which we research and teach, we can still strive for consistency in our own thinking, call out lies, and remind people (not just our students) which sources are unreliable. And if frustrated voters are turning to catharsis instead of information, we should pursue, whenever reasonable, policies that address the frustrations that lead people to seek relief in political fairy tales and the reassuring bursts of a demagogue.

For the most part, then, we are constrained to acting in our own lives — but that is the only way to create the conditions that make it possible for us to act together. The rise of Trumpism has brought some dusty values back into fashion. It is now for the enemies of reaction to return to the language of citizenship, obligation, decorum, and truth. This does not require us to adopt a simplistic or monolithic idea of truth; by contrast, it requires that we reconcile some form of objectivity with a multiplicity of perspectives. Otherwise we are ripe for the authoritarianism our new president threatens. As John Dewey observed in 1941: "The freedom which is the essence of democracy is above all the freedom to develop intelligence; intelligence consisting of judgment as to what facts are relevant to action and how they are relevant to things to be done, and a corresponding alertness in the quest for such facts." That alertness for facts atrophies at our peril, and it may soon require us to act with unusual determination and foresight — as the scramble of scientists to copy government climate data before a possible Trump-led purge dramatically illustrates.

In linking freedom, intelligence, and democracy, Dewey captured an insight that we are now in danger of discarding. Our ability to remain a democratic society, he wrote, will largely be determined by how well we connect political intelligence — concerning how we, together, should act — with our horizontal processes of communication: "the method of conference, consultation, discussion, in which there takes place purification and pooling of the net results of the experiences of multitudes of people." This is a difficult task when our leaders withhold the truth from us. But it is impossible when we disregard it among ourselves.

Nathan Pippenger is a Ph.D. candidate in political theory at the University of California at Berkeley and a contributing editor at Democracy: A Journal of Ideas.

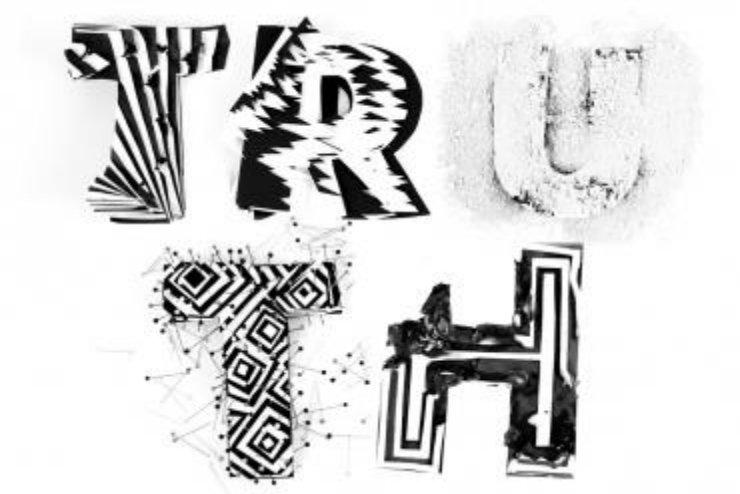
Fighting Fake

By Melissa Zimdars JANUARY 15, 2017 PREMIUM

A day before the election, during a discussion on journalism and bias, one of my students showed me "proof" that mainstream news organizations are not just liberal, but conspiratorially so.

It was an image of a headline: "The fix is in: *Newsweek* already has an issue in print, boxed and ready to ship, declaring Hillary Clinton the winner." The post came from a website called "D.C. Clothesline," and the corresponding "article" came from a website found simply through an IP address, which is apparently the home of "World Class Investigative Truth" by Jim Stone, a self-identified " 'deplorable' freelance journalist." On his site, Stone shows a screencap of a tweet by Milo Yiannopoulos, from Breitbart News, of a photograph of a *Newsweek* cover featuring Hillary Clinton with the headline "Madam President." Stone captions the photo, in part, "They really are going to steal it," implying that "the mainstream media" and Democrats were collaborating to rig the election just as Donald Trump had alleged throughout his campaign.

The problem with this claim? *Newsweek* had produced *two covers in advance*, one saying "President Trump" and the other saying "Madam President," to have either option ready post-election. The practice is not new. Yet the story became "evidence" of a conspiracy that quickly traveled across a maze of "truthy" and outright fake news websites.



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For years, I have watched with mounting concern as my students cited dubious sources in their work and in class. This incident made me realize that I needed to help them navigate this increasingly confusing and cluttered media world. So I created a resource listing "False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical 'News' Sources." The original Google Doc included more than 100 websites, ranging from fake news sources, such as the ones created by teenagers in Macedonia, to those that are sometimes reliable but use sensational and misleading headlines (think The Daily Kos, UsUncut, The Blaze, or Red State). I also included several tips for analyzing sources of information. In class, we spoke about journalism and the differences between writing from a particular political perspective and deceptive propaganda.

Though my students largely brushed it off, the Google Doc I had created was already going viral. In just two days, it was shared about 25,000 times on Facebook, gaining

attention from *The Los Angeles Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, NPR, and dozens of other news organizations around the world.

As the document racked up shares, I worked to clarify its contents, adding links to more media-literacy resources, and wading through hundreds of emails with suggestions of websites to add and requests to evaluate favorite webpages. Librarians and journalists around the country sent me notes of thanks and encouragement, with some offering to help expand the Google Doc.

But the tenor of the emails soon changed. The messages became hateful and harassing. Some of the websites included in my resource, such as Infowars, Natural News, and 100PercentFedUp.com, began posting personal, exaggerated, and false information about me. I was denounced as a liberal snowflake, a kooky lefty, a "crybully" professor, a Communist infiltrator from China, a fascist, a government censor, an "illiterate bitch."

Many of these websites also encouraged their readers to let me, as well as my colleagues and the president of Merrimack College, know how they felt. I started receiving emails saying that I should be shot or raped, and that my whole family deserved a slow and painful death. Some readers took it upon themselves to take out a classified sex ad on my behalf, and I somehow got signed up for multiple Ford F-150 test drives, plastic surgeries, and prescription-drug orders from Canada.

Some of this was amusing, especially the growing internet repository of Photoshopped images of me. But some of it I found to be genuinely scary. Campus security started maintaining a presence outside my office door, and our department administrator received dozens of threatening messages. At one point, an administrator offered to put me up in a hotel should I ever feel unsafe, and reiterated Merrimack's support of academic freedom amid the phone calls and emails demanding that I be fired.

Eventually the harassment dwindled from hundreds of such messages every hour to a handful a day. And the media coverage made my Google Doc much more interesting to my students. The disconnect between the defamatory articles and the person they knew proved why such websites belonged on my list in the first place.

Fake news has been around since the beginning of what we know as news, and neither fake news nor other false, misleading, or clickbait-y forms of news are going away anytime soon. Although these sites tried to make *me* go away, they have only

emboldened me. I’m now collaborating with a group of computer programmers and librarians to come up with tools to help people assess information on the web, and assembling an interdisciplinary anthology titled *Fake News*.

In an era of students’ secretly filming classes, guns on campuses, and professor watchlists, it feels like a scary time to be a professor — which means it’s an important time to be a professor.

Melissa Zimdars is an assistant professor of communication and media at Merrimack College.

Correction (1/17/2017, 11:50 a.m.): Because of an editing error, this essay originally misstated the author's part in assembling an interdisciplinary anthology. She is doing so not with a group, but with just one other scholar. The text has been updated accordingly.