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# TRUST, FACTS AND THE POST-TRUTH POLITICAL MOMENT

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**ITEM:** According to an [NBC/Wall Street Journal poll](#) in June, just a quarter of Republicans (26 percent) think Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election—even though this has been confirmed by the consensus of the American intelligence agencies.

**ITEM:** An [outbreak](#) of the highly infectious and potentially deadly disease of measles is occurring in states such as Minnesota because parents fear measles, mumps and rubella vaccinations will cause autism—despite the fact that extensive research has disproved any relationship between vaccines and autism.

**ITEM:** In 2014, [only half of Americans](#) believed human activity was driving global warming—despite the fact that all of the world’s major science academies have said they are convinced that climate change is happening and that human action plays a role, and that basic physics would lead one to conclude that more carbon-dioxide emissions lead to a hotter planet.

**ITEM:** [President Trump has insisted](#) that he would have won the popular vote had it not been for millions of illegal votes—despite the fact that this claim is not supported by any verifiable facts and that analyses of the election found nothing approaching such levels of voter fraud.



# THE PHYSIOLOGICAL APPEAL OF CONFIRMATION BIAS

In thinking about the current political moment, which has been dubbed a period of “post-truth” politics, it’s important to put things in perspective. Confirmation and disconfirmation bias—the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s beliefs and the tendency to reject new evidence that challenges one’s beliefs—is nothing new. It is a perennial human problem.

There are understandable reasons. For one thing, there’s a physiological component. Sara Gorman, a public health specialist, and her father Jack, a psychiatrist, explore this matter in their book “Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us.” They cite research that suggests that processing information that supports one’s beliefs leads to a dopamine rush, which creates feelings of pleasure. “It feels good to ‘stick to our guns’ even if we are wrong,” the Gormans told Elizabeth Kolbert in [The New Yorker](#). Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion,” says that “extreme partisanship may be literally addictive.”

On the flip side, “When something is inconsistent with existing beliefs, people tend to stumble. ... Information that is inconsistent with one’s beliefs produces a negative affective response,” according to Norbert Schwarz, Eryn Newman and William Leach, [experts](#) in cognitive psychology.

Brian Resnick, in a article in National Journal, reports that researchers at New York University’s Center for Brain Imaging are exploring how the human brain is hard-wired for partisanship and how that skews perceptions in public life. Once a partisanship mentality kicks in, according to Resnick, the brain almost automatically pre-filters facts—even noncontroversial ones—that offend political sensibilities.

As quoted in the [Resnick article](#), Jay Van Bavel says, “Once you trip this wire, this trigger, this cue, that you are a part of ‘us versus them,’ it’s almost like the whole brain becomes re-coordinated in how it views people.”

Beliefs are also often tied up with identities. “If changing your belief means changing your identity, it comes at the risk of rejection from the community of people with whom you share that identity,” according to chemist and science writer [Christine Herman](#). That is difficult to do, and it explains why people tend to reject facts that may challenge their identity-and-group-determining beliefs.



Group identity can influence how people perceive things. Dan Kahan, a psychology professor at Yale University, points out that fans of opposing teams tend to see different things when there's a close call by officials. It's not that fans who react one way are faking their reaction while others are authentic; it's that they actually perceive things differently.

In a sense, people see what they want to see, in order to believe what they want to believe. In addition, everyone likes to be proven right, and changing their views is an admission that they were wrong, or at least had an incomplete understanding of an issue.

There is an enormous amount of information to process as well; to help sort it out, people often need categories and ways of thinking and like-minded individuals. No one has the inclination, or certainly the time, to closely examine the validity of the endless information coming their way.

For example, what are the best studies on gun control and what do they show us? Do gun control laws (such as background checks) work? If so, how well? If easy access to guns makes deadly violence more common, how reasonable is it to expect that America can extinguish its supply of guns, which is approaching 300 million? How applicable are, say, the Australian and British examples? Are they models to follow?

What about the data on the role guns play in self-defense? And what about the argument that killers often choose gun-free zones (such as schools and movie theaters) to commit gun violence? This is a lot to sort through on just one topic, so individuals often defer to the judgments and expertise of authorities in a given field. And they tend to implicitly ascribe greater authority to those whose worldview they share.

As a species, then, humans are ever in search of data that confirm what they want to believe, what they already believe. "*L'illusion est le premier plaisir*" — "illusion is the first of all pleasures," Voltaire said. Everyone is tempted by delusions and denials so long as they constitute bricks in the walls they have chosen to build and to live behind. David Brooks of The New York Times has referred to people's "colossal incuriosity about the evidence" when it comes to thinking in different ways about strong beliefs.

The inclination to do this is particularly strong in times of division and dispute, when society seems to lack reliable authority figures in various fields. And Americans are plainly living in such a moment now.



# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In trying to locate this moment historically, recall the yellow journalism that characterized the last decade of the 19th century, when publishers William Randolph Hearst (New York Journal) and Joseph Pulitzer (New York World) used their papers in sensationalistic and hyperbolic ways to drive up circulation. **Yellow journalism also played a role in the Spanish-American War**, which is referred to as the first “media war.” According to historian **Michael Robertson**, “Newspaper reporters and readers of the 1890s were much less concerned with distinguishing among fact-based reporting, opinion and literature.”

The issue of partisan media goes all the way back to the founding of the United States. The papers in the early years of the republic—there were more than 250—were deeply partisan, biased and strident. One example: Commenting about the election of 1800 between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Philadelphia's Federalist paper, **the Gazette of the United States**, put things this way: “At the present solemn and momentous epoch, the only question to be asked by every American, laying his hand on his heart, is: ‘Shall I continue in allegiance to GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; Or impiously declare for JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!’” This kind of thing was not unusual.

When thinking about society's challenges, then, Americans need to understand the appeal of confirmation bias/motivated reasoning and recognize that they have manifested these tendencies long before now. They shouldn't glorify the past nor overstate the problems they face now.

At the same time, one shouldn't underestimate the threat posed by this moment. The political culture is sick, the nation is increasingly polarized and fragmented, and people's capacity to hear one another and reason together is deeply impaired. Facts are seen by many people as subjective, malleable and instrumental—a means to an ideological end. As a result, more and more Americans are living in a self-created reality. It's now possible, in ways that it never really was in the past, to isolate oneself in an information space that entirely confirms one's pre-existing views and biases.

We are seeing confirmation bias on steroids.

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries declared “post-truth” as the word of the year. It refers to circumstances in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” **Oxford Dictionaries President Casper Grathwohl** said “post-truth” could become “one of the defining words of our time.”

The great scholar and senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said decades ago,



“Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.” No one disputed Moynihan’s point. But on Nov. 30, 2016, during an interview on “[The Diane Rehm Show](#),” Trump supporter and then-CNN contributor Scottie Nell Hughes said this:

Well, I think it’s also an idea of an opinion. And that’s—on one hand, I hear half the media saying that these are lies. But on the other half, there are many people that go, ‘No, it’s true.’ And so one thing that has been interesting this entire campaign season to watch, is that people that say facts are facts—they’re not really facts. Everybody has a way—it’s kind of like looking at ratings, or looking at a glass of half-full water. *Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth, or not truth. There’s no such thing, unfortunately, anymore as facts* [emphasis added].

And so Mr. Trump’s tweet, amongst a certain crowd—a large part of the population—are truth. When he says that millions of people illegally voted, he has some—amongst him and his supporters, and people believe they have facts to back that up. (sic) Those that do not like Mr. Trump, they say that those are lies and that there are no facts to back it up.

Earlier this year, NBC “[Meet the Press](#)” host Chuck Todd asked White House counselor Kellyanne Conway why the White House had sent press secretary Sean Spicer to the briefing podium to falsely claim that “this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period.”

“You’re saying it’s a falsehood. And they’re giving—Sean Spicer, our Press Secretary—gave alternative facts,” she said. To which Todd responded, “Alternative facts aren’t facts, they are falsehoods.”

Later in the interview, Todd pressed Conway again on why the White House sent Spicer out to make false claims about crowd size, asking, “What was the motive to have this ridiculous litigation of crowd size?”

“Your job is not to call things ridiculous that are said by our press secretary and our president. That’s not your job,” Conway said.

Todd followed up, “Can you please answer the question? Why did he do this? You have not answered it. It’s only one question.”

Conway said: “I’ll answer it this way: Think about what you just said to your viewers. *That’s why we feel compelled to go out and clear the air and put alternative facts out there* [emphasis added].”

These comments by Hughes and Conway are noteworthy not because they are anomalous but because they are representative. They capture the spirit of this political age.

A combination of factors has reshaped American politics: social media and new technology platforms; micro targeting and psychometric methods in political campaigns; unprecedented polarization and hyper partisanship; the fragmentation of traditional media sources and the advent of information silos; and the intervention in U.S. elections by hostile powers using fake news,



misinformation and disinformation. The capacity to inject poison into the political bloodstream—in the form of lies and falsehoods, crazed conspiracy theories, smears and dehumanizing attacks—is unprecedented.

But that is hardly the whole of it. There are conditions that have allowed “post-truth” politics to take root.

One of them is low trust in institutions. According to Gallup, Americans’ confidence in the nation’s major institutions edged up in 2017, but only after registering historic lows over the previous three years.

The average percentage of Americans expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in 15 institutions—newspapers, television news, public schools, banks, organized labor, the Supreme Court, the criminal justice system, Congress, big business, small business, the police, church or organized religion, the military, the medical system and the presidency—is at 35 percent, up from 31 percent in 2014 and 32 percent in 2015 and 2016. But confidence in institutions was generally higher before 2007 than in the years since, and current levels are also very far below the highs registered throughout the second half of the 20th century.

Americans are still skeptical of most of the major institutions that make up U.S. society. Only three institutions—the military, small business and the police—garner a confidence rating above 50 percent. And only 12 percent of Americans say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Congress, highlighting what Americans say is, according to [Gallup](#), “the nation’s most important problem: a dysfunctional government that has lost much of its legitimacy in the eyes of the people it serves.”

Americans remain reluctant to put much faith in most of the institutions at the core of American society. This means there are far fewer institutions and figures of respect and authority who can declare certain things to be outside the boundaries of responsible discourse, who can say certain claims are preposterous and should be ignored. Instead, people who make false, outrageous and even indecent assertions are finding validation, affirmation and quite a large audience.

Take as an example radio host Alex Jones, who runs the fake news website Infowars.com. Jones is a conspiracy monger who has alleged that the U.S. government allowed the 9/11 attacks to happen and claimed the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax.

When pressed in an [interview with NBC’s Megyn Kelly](#) about Sandy Hook, Jones said, “I tend to believe that children probably did die here. But then you look at all the other evidence on the other side. I can see how other people believe that nobody died there.” But as Kelly pointed out, “There is no evidence on the other side.”

Nevertheless, according to Kelly, Jones’ YouTube monthly views reached 83 million in November 2016, more than five times higher than the previous



November; Infowars.com got a temporary White House press pass for the first time; and Donald Trump, who had been interviewed by Jones in December 2015, called him after the election to thank him for his help.

Twenty years ago, Alex Jones would have been viewed as a crank on the fringes of American political life, with very little influence. Today he has been legitimized in the eyes of many, a trusted voice, a source of information and confirmation.

To be sure, there is a continuum; some propagandists are worse than others. But the combined effects are deeply damaging. “The point of modern propaganda isn’t only to misinform or push an agenda,” said [Russian dissident and former world chess champion Gary Kasparov](#). “It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.”

An important qualification needs to be inserted here. It is not as though most Americans consider politics to be a fact-free zone, and most people would undoubtedly find Alex Jones’ influence on the political and civic culture to be pernicious.

The concern is that a minority of reckless, quasi-nihilistic voices, who have the ability to garner so much attention and cause so much disruption, despoil the political culture. Their influence is disproportionate to their numbers.

It may be helpful to think of it like the concept of “herd immunity.” So long as a certain percentage of the population is immune from a contagious disease, it provides protection to those who are not, since spread of the infection is contained. But if a society drops below the herd immunity threshold—say, 85 percent—the disease spreads. And those who were protected no longer are.

There can also be seepage. While the most outlandish conspiracies might not be believed, a general corrosive distrust can spread. People begin to view as optional facts that would have been accepted in the past. It’s as if consumers of information are walking through a cafeteria, choosing the facts they like and walking past the ones they don’t. Again, this kind of behavior has been present throughout much of American history. What’s different now is how widespread this phenomenon is.



# WHY POST-TRUTH POLITICS IS A PROBLEM

As a result Americans are losing a common factual basis for their national life. In 2009, Rush Limbaugh, easily the most influential figure in the history of conservative talk radio and one of the dominant figures within conservatism over the last quarter century, devoted part of his show to what those on the right referred to as “Climategate.” (A summary of the controversy can be found [here](#).) Limbaugh referred to the institutions of government, academia, science and media as the “Four Corners of Deceit.” He went on to say this:

We live in two universes. One universe is a lie. One universe is an entire lie. Everything run, dominated and controlled by the left here and around the world is a lie. The other universe is where we are, and that’s where reality reigns supreme and we deal with it. And seldom do these two universes ever overlap.

David Roberts of [Vox.com](#) wrote:

In Limbaugh’s view, the core institutions and norms of American democracy have been irredeemably corrupted by an alien enemy. Their claims to transpartisan authority—authority that applies equally to all political factions and parties—are fraudulent. There are no transpartisan authorities; there is only zero-sum competition between tribes, the left and right. Two universes.

I don’t think Limbaugh would dispute that characterization, and in fact the intensity of his feelings has only increased in the intervening years. But here’s the point: If you believe conservatives and liberals live in two universes, one of which is a pack of lies while in the other reality reigns supreme, then compromise is impossible. To compromise would be treasonous. Political opponents are enemies.

This attitude is hardly confined to the right. The 2016 Democratic nominee for president, Hillary Clinton, said the GOP would be “the death party” if its health care bill passed the Senate last summer. During a debate about the bill, Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts asked, “How to pay for all these juicy tax cuts for their rich buddies?” She responded, “I’ll tell you how: blood money.” Influential Hollywood activist Rob Reiner called for an “all-out war” against Donald Trump, whom he accused of “treason.” Liberals have referred to the tea party movement as terrorists, suicide bombers, hostage takers, the Hezbollah faction of the GOP, traitors and anarchists.

In such a toxic and mistrustful environment—partisan antipathy is at a record level, according to the [Pew Research Center](#)—people can’t reason together. Debate is hopeless. And when they lose the ability to persuade, all that’s left is compulsion and the exercise of raw power, intimidation and silencing those with whom they disagree.



This is becoming a country without shared reference points, where facts are politically weaponized. [Yale Law Professor Stephen L. Carter](#) puts it this way:

When disputes over facts are misconstrued as disputes over principles, the entire project of Enlightenment democracy is at risk. The liberalism of the Enlightenment rested critically on the supposition that agreement on the facts was a separate process from agreement on the values to be applied to them. The social theorist Karl Mannheim, in 'Ideology and Utopia,' argued that we would never be able to separate the two, that we would always wind up seeing the facts through the lens of our preformed ideologies. Thus liberal democracy, in the Enlightenment sense, was bound to fail.

The challenge is to prove Mannheim wrong, and right now America is not doing that as well as it should.



# THE MEDIA IN THIS POST-TRUTH AGE

What is the role of the media in all this? The answer is complicated by the simple fact that confidence in the press has fallen at least as precipitously as it has in other major institutions.

In a poll released in September 2016, Gallup found that Americans' trust and confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" have dropped to their lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32 percent saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. (The percentage of Republicans who say they have trust in the media has plummeted to 14 percent.)

For context: Gallup began asking this question in 1972, and on a yearly basis since 1997. Over the history of the trend, Americans' trust and confidence hit its highest point in 1976, at 72 percent, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal.

According to [Gallup's Art Swift](#):

Before 2004, it was common for a majority of Americans to profess at least some trust in the mass media, but since then, less than half of Americans feel that way. Now, only about a third of the U.S. has any trust in the Fourth Estate, a stunning development for an institution designed to inform the public.

According to the [Pew Research Center](#), from 1985 to 2011 the proportion of Americans who believe that "in general news organizations get the facts straight" dropped dramatically to 25 percent from 55 percent, and those who believe stories are often inaccurate rose to 66 percent from 34 percent.

Journalists have played a role in the rise of the massive distrust of the media. Some of it has to do with reporting that has proved to be wrong, such as a CNN report in June 2017 that claimed Congress was investigating a Russian investment fund with ties to Trump officials. (CNN retracted the story and fired three journalists.) Another example of a significant journalistic error occurred in early December of last year [2017], when ABC's Brian Ross incorrectly reported that during the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump had directed Michael Flynn to make contact with Russian officials before the election. (Ross was suspended without pay for a month.)

Over the decades there have been other high-profile scandals. Stephen Glass, a rising young star at the New Republic, turned out to have invented quotes, sources and events; New York Times reporter Jason Blair was discovered to have fabricated and plagiarized several stories; Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke won a Pulitzer Prize for a story that was



fabricated; and “CBS Evening News” anchor Dan Rather was forced to resign over his role in publishing a false story on President George W. Bush's National Guard service.

Moreover, the elite media has long tilted in a liberal direction. In one study, half of the journalists surveyed identified themselves as independents. But among journalists who align with one of the two major parties, four in five said they're Democrats. Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, says, “The best data out there shows that there are fewer Republicans working in traditional newsrooms and news generally than there used to be.”

The common rejoinder of journalists is that while as individuals they may be liberal, their views do not influence their coverage. But the liberalism manifests itself in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, from story selection to tone and intonation to the line of questioning that's pursued. Rosenstiel acknowledges that the imbalance “affects the discussion in newsrooms even when people are trying to be fair.”

Even in sports, networks such as ESPN are viewed by many people on the right as having allowed a liberal social agenda to seep into its coverage.

The result is that many people on the right have felt unheard, their views disrespected and delegitimized. Conservatives have turned to alternative sources of information, such as talk radio, the Fox News Channel and right-leaning websites.

That is understandable and, in some respects, healthy, offering a greater diversity in viewpoints than there once was. There was an imbalance, and a need for correction. But something happened along the way. People who in the past viewed news outlets as *biased* now view them as *fraudulent*. Especially on the right, one often hears charges of “fake news,” the product in part of the unrelenting attacks on the press by the president, who calls the news media “the enemy of the people” and targets individual journalists for vicious and cruel personal attacks.

America has never seen anything quite like it.

There's a purpose behind this effort to delegitimize media outlets: No matter what they say, no matter how incriminating the evidence against the president, some number of his supporters will simply dismiss it as part of a gigantic, industrywide conspiracy.

When Richard Nixon's “smoking gun” tape was released, revealing an effort to get the CIA to intervene with the FBI to stop the Watergate investigation, no one was denying the reality and meaning of the tapes. If the same thing were to happen today, some number of the president's supporters would probably reject the tapes as the product of fake news.

The chief television critic for The New York Times, James Poniewozik, says



the goal of the president is to argue that “there is no truth, so you should just follow your gut and your tribe.”

“This is the conversation the White House wants,” according to the Associated Press’ Jonathan Lemire. “Make everything muddy so partisans gravitate to their own corners.”

This is a complicated and serious matter, years in the making but amplified and made worse during the last two years. Americans need to carefully think about what needs to be done.



# WHAT TO DO

The most obvious thing for the press to do is to raise its standards and show more ideological balance, to report things more carefully than ever, to avoid errors that are often the result of rushing a story or wanting to sensationalize it. Journalists need to resist breathless reporting, jumping to premature conclusions and galloping ahead of the facts.

Self-restraint is necessary. The more ferocious the attacks made against it, the more detached and dispassionate, fair-minded and even-handed the press needs to become. As a friend put it to me, “As things speed up, we need to slow down.” So, too, does the American media.

Journalists also need to do less advocacy, to show less eagerness for stories to come out in a certain way, to not allow adrenaline rushes to drive reporting. “Our facts need to be squeaky clean and uncorrupted,” CNN’s Jake Tapper said in a recent [speech to the Los Angeles Press Club](#). “We are not the resistance, we are not the opposition, and we are here to tell the truth and report the facts regardless of whom those facts might benefit. ... Let us be revolutionaries by telling the truth at this time of deceit. But let us also make sure that we get our facts right.”

Nor does it help that the new media—most especially social media, and particularly Twitter—increasingly determine what is talked about. To an astonishing degree, Twitter sets the tone and drives the news agenda. There is no requirement that television news and newspapers be led by the nose by social media.

Steps can also be taken to try to ensure what has been called “integrity of information.” This can involve relentless fact-checking (though it’s not clear how effective even that is), greater news literacy, steps to improve the quality of journalism, and efforts to identify and deter misinformation/disinformation sites. It also can mean working with information distributors such as Facebook, Twitter, Google and Reddit to promote greater transparency and embedding fact-checking directly into these platforms; changing algorithms to impede the spread of questionable and false stories; and awarding ad credits to users who push back against misinformation (information that is unintentionally false)/disinformation (information that is intentionally false or inaccurate) and propaganda. (Kelly Born of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has written a very helpful and informative [paper](#) on these matters.)

Corporations need to do due diligence on websites where they advertise to ensure they aren’t inadvertently supporting hatermongering. It’s also important to example whether there are ways to remove incendiary material on social media without running afoul of the First Amendment. And when it comes to misinformation/disinformation campaigns that are being



coordinated and executed by hostile regimes, the U.S. needs to learn from countries such as Ukraine, which has experienced this and is beginning to take steps to defend itself. (One example of this is [Stopfake.org](https://www.stopfake.org), whose goal is to verify and refute disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine being circulated in the media, and now examines and analyzes all aspects of Kremlin propaganda, including information being distributed in other countries and regions.)

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in a [recent speech](#),

Perhaps the most important component of our effort is to try to help foster constructive engagement between government, civil society and technology firms. These companies have an interest in working with us on solutions, because disinformation is hurting their platforms and making them less usable. We cannot expect the technology companies to fight back on their own, but they cannot expect those of us working in civil society or government to solve the problem without their help. So we need the technology community to acknowledge the problem and be open to partnership.

There are structural solutions to look at: practical steps to help repair America's civic and political damage. But something else, and something deeper, must change as well: how citizens view truth itself, and how willing they are to fight for it and to fight falsity.

"Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth," wrote political theorist Hannah Arendt. She added, "Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation."

Destroy the foundation of factual truth, and lies will be normalized. This is what Czech dissident (and later president) Vaclav Havel described in the late 1970s when he wrote about his fellow citizens making their own inner peace with a regime built on hypocrisy and falsehoods. They were "living within the lie." In such a situation life becomes farcical, demoralizing, a theater of the absurd. It is soul-destroying.

The United States is still quite a long way from the situation Havel found himself in. But to keep it that way—to keep the civic vandalism from spreading—everyone has a role to play. Every citizen's responsibility is to refuse to accept the lies, the false narratives, and instead refute and expose them, and in so doing shatter the world of appearances.

If we as Americans dedicate ourselves to that end—if we commit to the civic education necessary to confront the challenges of the 21st century—we will live within the truth, and the truth shall set us free.



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