

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROBLEM OF FAKE NEWS

Don't believe everything you read on the Internet.

—Thomas Jefferson

Unsurprisingly, the decline of traditional media has been in large part a result of the Internet. The peak year for print newspaper circulation in the United States was 1984.¹ Then began a long slide due in part to losing market share to cable TV, but things really began to crumble with the large-scale public availability of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, many newspapers began a self-stoking cycle: revenues fell, they cut back staff, their product shrank, and subscribers continued to flee.

Analysts have warned in recent years that by offering steadily less in print, newspapers were inviting

readers to stop buying. Most papers have sharply reduced their physical size—fewer and smaller pages, with fewer articles—and the newsroom staffs that produce them. “It just seems impossible to me that you’re cutting costs dramatically without having some impact on the editorial quality of your product,” said Peter Appert, an analyst at Goldman Sachs. “I can’t prove that this is driving circulation, but it’s certainly something that if I were a newspaper publisher would keep me up at night.”²

In the most recent Pew Research Center “State of the News Media” report from 2016, they give the full nightmare:

For newspapers, 2015 might as well have been a recession year. Weekday circulation fell 7% and Sunday circulation fell 4%, both showing their greatest declines since 2010. At the same time, advertising revenue experienced its greatest drop since 2009, falling nearly 8% from 2014 to 2015. ... In 2014, the latest year for which data were available, newsroom employment also declined 10%, more than in any other year since 2009. The newspaper workforce has shrunk by about 20,000 position, or 39%, in the last 20 years.³

Meanwhile, over at the broadcast and cable TV networks, they were experiencing decline of another sort. In the last chapter we saw that the process of forsaking fact-based investigative reporting for opinion-based pundit-driven coverage had already begun as early as the 1990s. The TV networks (along with newspapers) had already been scaling back or closing their foreign news bureaus for years, in favor of cheaper, domestic coverage.⁴ By 2015—at least from a financial and ratings perspective—that looked like a prescient decision, as the biggest news story in decades was happening right here at home.

To say that the 2016 presidential election was a boon for the TV networks would be a vast understatement. Their viewership exploded and the profits began to roll in. CNN reported \$1 billion in gross profit for 2016, the best year in its history.⁵ Over at Fox (which was already the most profitable cable network) they were projected to make \$1.67 billion.⁶ Day and night, the public just couldn't get enough election coverage. "Year over year, daytime viewership grew by 60% for Fox, 75% for CNN, and a remarkable 83% for MSNBC."⁷ How did they do that? In large part, by giving the people what they wanted—and that turned out to be saturation coverage of Donald Trump. Fox News, of course, was happy to shill for Trump; some were already dismissing their coverage as nothing more than propaganda for the Republican party.⁸ But even at CNN, they ran Trump's rallies live and in full, with

no vetting or editorial comment. By some estimates, the cable news networks gave Trump nearly \$5 billion in free media during the 2016 election.⁹ But of course, it was in their self-interest to do so. Trump was the golden goose, and even while he profited by their coverage, the TV networks benefited as well. Did they let this cloud their responsibility to check some of Trump's lies? Many think they did, as few networks applied any higher standard of truth telling than the "false equivalence" tactic they had already used on scientific topics, whereby they included both Trump and Clinton supporters on their pundit panels. Some would go so far as to say that CNN helped to get Donald Trump elected president.¹⁰ CNN President Jeff Zucker won't go this far, but even he admits that "if we made any mistake last year, it's that we probably did put on too many of his [Trump's] campaign rallies in those early months and let them run."¹¹ Meanwhile during those rallies Trump was insulting the media at every turn. He put them in fenced pens and forbade them from taking cut-away shots of the crowd during his speeches. How did he achieve that? The news networks agreed to it, as a condition of enjoying the Trump bonanza. With newspapers on life support, and TV news all but in the tank at least for their own self-interest, where could the public go to vent their frustrations at the latest media-enabled outrage or get the straight dope from people they trusted? Straight to social media.

When it was created in 2004, Facebook was a social networking site that allowed users to connect with their existing friends and make new ones. They could share their thoughts and participate in an online community on whatever topic they liked. As it grew, Facebook gained strength as a news aggregator. This occurred not merely through people sharing news stories on their own pages, but also in the “trending stories” column on the right side of the page that was curated (and edited) by Facebook. This was driven by “likes,” so it targeted and displayed news stories we would be more likely to want to see. Naturally other companies wanted to get into the act, not only of presenting user content but of creating an alternative network for news stories that had accreted from other sources. YouTube was founded in 2005 and Twitter in 2006.

The rise of social media as a source of news blurred the lines even further between news and opinion, as people shared stories from blogs, alternative news sites, and God knows where, as if they were all true. As the 2016 presidential election heated up, more and more content on social media skewed partisan, which fit well with a “motivated reasoning” vibe enabled by technology. We could click on “news” stories that told us what we wanted to hear (whether they had been vetted for accuracy or not) as opposed to some of the factual content from mainstream media that may have been less palatable. Without knowing that they were doing so, people could feed their

desire for confirmation bias (not to mention score some free news content) directly, without bothering to patronize traditional news sources. Why pay for a newspaper subscription when you could get as many stories as you wanted from friends that had just as much to say about the events you were interested in? The “prestige press” didn’t stand a chance.

In a recent Pew poll, 62 percent of US adults reported getting their news from social media, and 71 percent of *that* was from Facebook. This means that *44 percent of the total adult US population* now gets its news from Facebook.¹² This reflects a sea change in the source (and composition) of our news content. With the decline in vetting and editing, how are we supposed to know anymore which stories are reliable? While traditional news is still out there, it’s getting harder and harder to tell what is a well-sourced, fact-driven piece and what is not. And of course some people just prefer to read (and believe) news that already fits their point of view anyway.

The result is the well-known problem of “news silos” that feed polarization and fragmentation in media content.¹³ If we get our news from social media, we can tune out those sources we don’t like, just as we can unfriend people who disagree with our political opinions. Whether our news feeds are reliable or fact free will depend on vetting by our friends and the algorithm that Facebook uses to decide which news stories we will “like” more than

others. How ironic that the Internet, which allows for immediate access to reliable information by anyone who bothers to look for it, has for some become nothing but an echo chamber. And how dangerous. With no form of editorial control over what is now sometimes presented as “news,” how can we know when we are being manipulated?

When I was about seven years old, I remember going to the local supermarket with my mom and standing in the checkout line. There I saw some sensational newspaper headline. I pointed it out to my mom, who said “Oh that’s trash. That’s the *National Enquirer*. They print all sorts of lies. You can’t believe that.” We then launched into an earnest conversation about how she could know it wasn’t true without even reading the story and how a newspaper could get away with printing something it knew was false. The *National Enquirer* still exists in paper form at the check-out line, so I ask you to imagine a twenty-first-century thought experiment. Suppose you brought home a copy of the *National Enquirer* and the *New York Times* and cut out the news stories with scissors. Then you placed them side by side in a collage, scanned them into an electronic format, and corrected the font so that you couldn’t immediately tell which one was which. How would you know at a glance which stories were true? But this is exactly how our news is presented to us now on news aggregator websites like Facebook, Google, and Yahoo. You might say that you’d look at the source of the story, but do you know

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which sources are reliable? If you see the *New York Times* you might be more inclined to trust it. But what if it says InfoWars? Or Newsmax? Or ABCNews.com.co?

There are so many “news” sources these days that it is nearly impossible to tell which of them are reliable and which are not without some careful vetting. Then there is the problem that some of the sources have taken on clever disguises to try to make themselves look as legitimate as possible. Is ABCNews.com.co a part of ABC News? It is not. With the presentation of traditionally vetted, fact-checked stories right alongside lies and propaganda, how can one tell what is true anymore? Indeed, what a perfect storm for the exploitation of our ignorance and cognitive biases by those with an agenda to put forward.

The History of Fake News

Fake news did not begin with the 2016 presidential election, nor with the invention of social media. Indeed, some have held that fake news was invented right along with the concept of “news” itself.

Fake news took off at the same time that news began to circulate widely, after Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439. “Real” news was hard to verify in that era. There were plenty of

news sources—from official publications by political and religious authorities, to eyewitness accounts from sailors and merchants—but no concept of journalistic ethics or objectivity. Readers in search of fact had to pay close attention. ... [Fake news] has been around ... a lot longer, in fact, than verified “objective” news, which emerged in force a little more than a century ago.¹⁴

Fake news continued down through the ages, even during the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. Just before the French Revolution, a number of pamphlets appeared in Paris recounting the near-bankruptcy of the government. These were put out, however, by rival political factions, who used different numbers and blamed different people. Finally, enough information came out that people began to get the true picture, “but, like today, readers had to be both skeptical and skilled to figure out the truth.”¹⁵ During the American Revolution, fake news appeared by both the British and the Americans, including Benjamin Franklin’s pure fiction that some of the “scalping” Indians were working alongside King George.¹⁶

Fake news continued in America as elsewhere long after that, but finally a standard of “objectivity” began to emerge. According to Michael Schudson, in his wonderfully clear and insightful book *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*:

Before the 1830s, objectivity was not an issue. American newspapers were expected to present a partisan viewpoint, not a neutral one. Indeed, they were not expected to report the “news” of the day at all in the way we conceive of it—the idea of “news” itself was invented in the Jacksonian era.¹⁷

What happened during the Jackson era that led to the idea of nonpartisan, strictly factual news?

This has to do with the rise of the first American wire service, the Associated Press. The telegraph was invented in the 1840s, and, to take advantage of its speed in transmitting news, a group of New York newspapers organized the Associated Press in 1848. Since the Associated Press gathered news for publication in a variety of papers with widely different political allegiances, it could only succeed by making its reporting “objective” enough to be acceptable to all its members and clients. By the late nineteenth century, the AP dispatches were markedly more free from editorial comment than most reporting for single newspapers. It has been argued, then, that the practice of the Associated Press became the ideal of journalism in general.¹⁸

This did not mean that fake news disappeared, or even that single newspapers were more “objective.” The Associated Press may have given them the raw material to be more nonpartisan, but individual newspapers continued to do as they wished.

Objective reporting did not become the chief norm or practice in journalism in the late nineteenth century when the Associated Press was growing. ... At the turn of the century there was as much emphasis in leading papers on telling a good story as on getting the facts. Sensationalism in its various forms was the chief development in newspaper content.¹⁹

These were the days of “yellow journalism,” when media moguls like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer were at war with one another over newspaper circulation. No one is sure where the term “yellow journalism” came from in the 1890s, but it was widely understood to describe salacious, over-the-top, scandal-driven journalism that had more interest in attracting readers than in telling the truth.²⁰ How bad did things get? Bad enough to start a war: “The Spanish-American War would not have occurred had not the appearance of Hearst in New York journalism precipitated a bitter battle for newspaper circulation.”²¹ To make things worse, this seems not to have been an

inadvertent consequence of carelessness, but rather a deliberate effort to boost circulation:

In the 1890s, plutocrats like William Randolph Hearst and his *Morning Journal* used exaggeration to help spark the Spanish-American War. When Hearst's correspondent in Havana wired that there would be no war, Hearst ... famously responded: "You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war." Hearst published fake drawings of Cuban officials strip-searching American women—and he got his war.²²

As bad as this was, Hearst was not the only offender, nor was this the only incident of yellow journalism that led up to the Spanish-American War.

In 1898, the US Navy battleship, the *USS Maine*, blew up while off Havana, Cuba, killing more than 250 Americans. The cause was never discovered. But the yellow press jumped to the conclusion that the Spanish did it deliberately. "Remember the Maine" became the slogan of the yellow press, driving public opinion toward war.²³

But then, at the height of the yellow journalism craze, the idea of objectivity began to claw its way forward:

If we look back throughout history, we realize that the rich and powerful have always had an interest (and usually a means) for getting the “little people” to think what they wanted.

In 1896, in the bawdiest days of yellow journalism, the *New York Times* began to climb to its premier position by stressing an “information” model, rather than a “story” model, of reporting. Where the Associated Press was factual to appeal to a politically diverse clientele, the *Times* was informational to attract a relatively select, socially homogeneous readership of the well to do.²⁴

With some notable bumps along the way, the notion of objectivity in journalism began to take hold, right up until today, when we seem to be emerging from a period where we have become so spoiled in expecting objectivity from our news sources that we have taken it for granted.

It wasn't until the rise of web-generated news that our era's journalistic notions were seriously challenged, and fake news became a powerful force again. Digital news, you might say, has brought yellow journalism back to the fore.²⁵

But let's step back for a moment. From a certain perspective, isn't objectivity and nonpartisanship an amazing thing to expect from a news source? If we look back throughout history, we realize that the rich and powerful have always had an interest (and usually a means) for getting the “little people” to think what they wanted. Before

the printed word became an inexpensive source of rival information, one would not be surprised that the king—or whoever controlled the money and politics of the era—really could “create his own reality.”²⁶ This is why the idea of a free media—even one polluted with fake news—was such a revolutionary (and recent) concept. But where did we get the idea that this should come at no cost to us or that we are not required to be active participants in ferreting out the truth? As we have seen, for most of its history the news media has been partisan. Pamphlets were political. Newspapers had owners with business interests and other biases. Indeed, has this ever really changed? Yet we feel entitled to objectivity and are shocked when our news sources do not provide it. But have we been supporting this expectation of fact-based nonpartisan coverage with our dollars? Or really—before the election woke us up—even paid close attention to what was being lost? It is easy to blame technology and claim that “these days it is different.” But technology has always had a role in fake news. The printing press and the telegraph each played a part in the ebb and flow of what we expect from journalism. But it has also had an effect on us too. The Internet makes it so easy (and cheap) to get news that we have gotten lazy. Our feeling of entitlement has eroded our critical thinking skills. And isn’t this at least part of what has created such a fertile environment for the reemergence of fake news?

Fake News Today

We have had a lot to say so far about the history of fake news, but we still have not defined it. What is fake news? Fake news is not simply news that is false; it is *deliberately* false.²⁷ It has been created for a purpose. At the beginning of the 2016 election season, perhaps that purpose was “clickbait.” They wanted you to click on a provocative headline so that you would add a few cents to their coffers, in much the same way that the *National Enquirer* entices you to slip it into your grocery cart with headlines such as “Hillary: Six Months to Live!” But then the darkness descended. Some of the creators of “fake news” began to notice that the favorable stories about Trump were getting many more clicks than the favorable ones about Hillary—and that the *negative* stories about Hillary were getting the most clicks of all. So guess which ones they doubled down on? In this environment, fake news evolved from clickbait to disinformation. It morphed from a vehicle for financial gain to one for political manipulation.

A good deal of fake news in the 2016 election originated from the Balkans and other parts of Eastern Europe. On November 25, 2016, the *New York Times* ran a story headlined: “Inside a Fake News Sausage Factory: ‘This Is All about Income.’”²⁸ Here we learn about Beqa Latsabidze, a struggling university student from Tbilisi, Georgia, who was living with two roommates and trying to make a little

cash off Google ads. He claims that at first he posted positive stories about Hillary Clinton and waited for the cash to roll in, but it didn't work. Then he started to do the same for Donald Trump and found a gold mine. "It's all Trump ... people go nuts for it," he said. "My audience likes Trump ... I don't want to write bad things about Trump. If I write fake stories about Trump, I lose my audience." So he doubled down on the Hillary-bashing and favorable tales about Trump and made thousands of dollars. His most lucrative story was pure fiction: that the Mexican government had announced they would close their border to Americans if Trump won the White House. When pressed, Latsabidze said that he had no political motive; he was just following the money. He also professed amazement that anyone would mistake anything he had written for real news. "Nobody really believes that Mexico is going to close the border." In fact, he said that he didn't think of what he did as "fake news" at all, but instead saw it as "satire."²⁹

Now that all seventeen American intelligence agencies have concluded that the Russian government was actively involved in hacking the US election, such claims of innocence must be taken with a shaker of salt. After the Kremlin broke into the Democratic National Committee's computers in search of information that could be used to manipulate the election—and a good deal of the pro-Trump fake news came from Russia and its satellites—is

it really so hard to believe that some of the financial incentive (or at least the idea) behind Hillary-bashing fake news may have come from political sources? The hackers themselves may have been interested only in money, but whose purposes were they serving? Indeed, one tiny town in Macedonia accounted for over a hundred pro-Trump websites. Are we to believe that this was not a coordinated effort and that there was no ideological goal behind it?³⁰

This question lingered as the purveyors of fake news jumped the ocean and began to originate from the United States. Two months after the “sausage factory” article, the *New York Times* ran another bombshell about anti-Hillary fake news when it caught up with Cameron Harris, a recent Davidson College graduate and Trump supporter, who was responsible for a “masterpiece” of fake news on his “Christian Times” website. His headline said: “Tens of Thousands of Fraudulent Clinton Votes Found in Ohio Warehouse.”³¹ Harris invented a janitor, purloined a picture of British ballot boxes from the Internet, and cooked up the whole thing right from his kitchen table. And the story was shared with six million people! Like the Georgian hacker, Harris claimed that his only motive was money. He made about \$5,000 in a few days but said that the most important thing was that he learned something. “At first it kind of shocked me,” he said, “how easily people would believe it. It was almost like a sociological experiment.” When Harris’s role in the story came out, he was

immediately fired from his job and expressed remorse for what he'd done, though he justified it by saying that fake news had been created on "both sides."³²

One must of course be careful when speculating about motive. The FBI and congressional investigations of Russian hacking in the 2016 presidential election are still underway and we do not yet know how deeply coordinated these efforts might have been.³³ What does seem clear is that whether or not most of the originators of fake news in the US presidential election had ideological motives, their actions had political impact. How many people who read the story about Hillary's "ballot stuffing" believed it and may have shared it with others who had not yet decided how to vote? Similarly, how many stories in Breitbart and other right-wing outlets that speculated over whether Hillary had a brain tumor amounted at least to "disinformation"—if not outright fake news—intended to have a political effect? Indeed, can't carelessness or willful ignorance serve an ideological goal? After the election, when businessman Eric Tucker tweeted a photo of buses in Austin, Texas, and said that he thought they were being used to bring in paid protestors against Donald Trump, he didn't make a dime, but he certainly had a hand in poisoning the news with his fact-free speculation. His post was shared 16,000 times on Twitter and more than 350,000 times on Facebook, eventually reaching Trump himself,

who tweeted that professional protestors were now being incited by the media.³⁴

As we saw earlier with the example of science denial, there are those who are lying and those who are lied to, but both are dangerous to the truth. Climate change denial may have started with the economic interests of oil companies, but it quickly became a political ideology with potentially catastrophic impact. Similarly, fake news about the 2016 election may have started as clickbait, but it was soon weaponized as political sabotage. Fake news is a deliberate attempt to get people to react to one's misinformation, whether for the purpose of profit or power. But in either case, the consequences can be dire. Less than a month after the presidential election, a deranged man walked into a Washington, DC, pizzeria and discharged a rifle, saying that he was investigating a story he had read about how Bill and Hillary Clinton were running a child sex slave ring from the business. This was the result of a fake news story (complete with the hashtag #pizzagate) that had been spreading across social media and alt-right websites.³⁵ Thankfully, no one was hurt. But might there be other potentially harmful consequences of fake news? BuzzFeed reports that in the three months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, the top twenty fake news stories on Facebook got more shares than the top twenty real news stories.³⁶ Could this have turned the tide for Trump?

If the Spanish-American War was started by fake news, is it so outrageous to think that another war could be too?

Or possibly led to an even more perilous outcome—such as nuclear war?

A few weeks after “pizzagate,” the Pakistani defense minister threatened nuclear retaliation against Israel as a result of a fake news story he had read that said “Israeli Defense Minister: If Pakistan sends ground troops to Syria on any pretext, we will destroy their country with a nuclear attack.”³⁷ If the Spanish-American War was started by fake news, is it so outrageous to think that another war could be too? Where might this stop? Fake news is everywhere. If you don’t believe me go to Google and type in “did the Holocaust happen?” In December 2016, the top search result would have brought up a neo-Nazi website.³⁸ The day after the election, the top Google story for “final election result” was a fake story with phony numbers that asserted Trump had won the popular vote.³⁹

Down the Rabbit Hole

Throughout his first year as president, Trump has tried to exploit the idea of fake news for his own purposes by branding anything he does not want to believe as fake.⁴⁰ From the podium at a pre-inauguration news conference in January 2017, Trump refused to take a question from a CNN reporter, saying that he was reporting fake news. What was the impetus? It seems that CNN had reported

that both Trump and Obama had been briefed on a still-unverified intelligence report that had made some salacious claims about Trump. CNN did not report the content of those claims nor say that they were true. All they had done was accurately report that Trump and Obama had been briefed on them. But this was enough for Trump to dismiss it all as “fake news.” In the ensuing months, Trump said it was fake news that the media had reported infighting among his aides at the White House, that his poll numbers were falling, and a host of other double-sourced verified factual claims. What a moment in meta-irony. Can the identification of fake news itself now be considered an exercise in spreading fake news?

Here we must remember: fake news is not merely news that is false (or embarrassing, or inconvenient). If the American media is peddling fake news it would have to be *deliberately* falsifying news content. There would have to be an ideological or other purposeful motive behind it. And without evidence to suggest that there is a conspiracy in the American news media, this just seems laughable. We should circle back here to the idea that fake news is *intentionally* false. It is like lying. It is created for the purpose of getting someone to believe what one is saying, even if one knows that it is not true. In this way, one might think that fake news is actually just another word for “propaganda.”

In his book *How Propaganda Works*, Jason Stanley disputes this view and makes the point that propaganda

should not be confused with biased or even manipulative communication. Propaganda is not necessarily an attempt to convince someone of something that is untrue, nor should one think that all propagandistic claims are made insincerely. Instead, Stanley defines propaganda as a means to exploit and strengthen a flawed ideology.⁴¹ If this is right, it means that any analogy between fake news and propaganda is far more complicated—and dangerous—than what we have so far imagined. For according to Stanley, the purpose of propaganda is not merely to deceive; it is instead an attempt to rule.

In a recent radio interview on NPR, Stanley made the point that the goal of propaganda is to build allegiance.⁴² The point is not to communicate information but to get us to “pick a team.”⁴³ To the extent that Trump is using some of the classic techniques of propaganda (stirring up emotions, denigrating critics, scapegoating, seeking division, and fabricating), Stanley warns that we may be headed down the path of authoritarian politics. The goal of propaganda is not to convince someone that you are right, but to demonstrate that you have authority over the truth itself. When a political leader is really powerful, he or she can defy reality. This may sound incredible, but it is not the first time we have heard echoes of this even within American politics. Remember when Karl Rove dismissed critics of the George W. Bush administration as part of the “reality-based community”? Rove then followed up with

the memorable (and chilling) observation that “we’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”⁴⁴

Some ideas are so frightening that one hopes they could not be true. Yet Stanley makes the point that this sort of authoritarian defiance over reality can actually be quite popular. To lie and get away with it is the first step in political control. Stanley paraphrases Hannah Arendt when he says “what convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but rather, open defiance.” On a similar subject, Arendt once observed that “the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction ... true and false ... no longer exist.”⁴⁵

This takes things pretty far. But even if one disagrees with Stanley, and sees fake news only as intentional deception for some monetary reward (which perhaps had an unfortunate political influence) we would be foolish to ignore the historical parallels, which suggest that such control of information can be a serious political threat. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, was a master at exploiting cognitive biases like “source amnesia” and the “repetition effect.” Goebbels said that “propaganda works best when those who are being manipulated are confident they are acting on their own free will.”⁴⁶ Deception, manipulation, and exploitation are recognized tools to create an authoritarian political order.

Trump's strategy is perhaps different from this, yet not unrecognizable:

1. Raise questions about some outlandish matter (“people are talking,” “I’m just repeating what I read in the newspaper”), for instance that Obama was not born in the United States or that Obama had Trump wiretapped.
2. Provide no evidence (because there isn’t any) beyond one’s own conviction.
3. Suggest that the press cannot be trusted because they are biased.
4. This will lead some people to doubt whether what they are hearing from the press is accurate (or at least to conclude that the issue is “controversial”).
5. In the face of such uncertainty, people will be more prone to hunker down in their ideology and indulge in confirmation bias by choosing to believe only what fits with their preconceived notions.
6. This is a ripe environment for the proliferation of fake news, which will reinforce items 1 through 5.
7. Thus, people will believe what you say just because you said it. Belief can be tribal. It doesn’t take much to get people to believe what they want to believe, if it is being said by someone whom they see as an ally and they are not

being challenged by reliable counterevidence (and sometimes even when they are).

Who needs censorship when the truth can be buried under a pile of bullshit? And isn't this precisely what the issue of post-truth is all about: That truth does not matter as much as feelings? That we can't even tell anymore what is true and what is not?

Timothy Snyder is a Holocaust historian who has written a provocative book called *On Tyranny*.⁴⁷ He offers it as a warning to remain aware of the path we're on, where something like fake news and alternative facts can easily march us down the road to authoritarian politics. Indeed, in a recent radio interview, Snyder warned that "post-truth is pre-fascism."⁴⁸ This may seem a heavy conclusion to draw from something as facile as fake news. But with today's social media to facilitate the spread of misinformation faster than a propagandist's dream, shouldn't we at least be awake to this possibility?

The question lingers of whether fake news is just propaganda. If fake news is created just to get money from you, it seems more like fraud. But even if it is intended to mislead you into believing a falsehood, one might argue that this is not yet full-blown propaganda. As Stanley argues, the goal of propaganda is not to fool you, but to assert political dominance. Deception can be an effective means of doing this, but it is not the only way. True

authoritarians do not need your consent. If post-truth really is pre-fascism, maybe fake news is merely an early tactic, whose purpose is to soften us up for what comes later. Fake news confuses us and makes us doubt whether any source can be trusted. Once we don't know what to believe anymore, this can be exploited. Perhaps true propaganda comes later—once it doesn't matter whether we believe it—because we already know who is in charge.

Fighting Back

We've all seen the charts that purport to show which media outlets are biased and which are reliable.⁴⁹ But you know what's coming next don't you? In response, conservative talk show host Alex Jones's website Infowars attacked one popular version and posted his own chart. In just the same way that there are "fact-checker" websites like Snopes, *PolitiFact*, FactCheck, and the *Washington Post*, there are those who claim that these are biased. Indeed there are now even allegations of left-leaning versions of fake news.⁵⁰

What can we do? First, remember that it serves the interest of those who are engaging in deception to succumb to the idea of false equivalence. When we say "a pox on all your houses" we are playing right into the hands of those who would have us believe that there is no such thing as

truth. With that principle firmly in mind, here are some concrete steps we can take.

First, recognize the systemic problem and see how it is being exploited. Facebook and Google now account for 85 percent of all new online ad revenue in the United States.⁵¹ They are behemoths. Given that, some have said that they should be the ones to stamp out fake news. Since the election, both Facebook and Google have announced measures to crack down on fake news. Just after the election, Google said that it would ban websites that spread fake news from using its online advertising service.⁵² This goes to the heart of all those Balkan and other fake news factories that make money from Google ads one click at a time. But there is a problem: how to be sure that one has identified all and only those websites that promote fake news—and how to handle any backlash? At Facebook, they announced that they would no longer permit ads from websites that displayed misleading or illegal content.⁵³ Yet here again there is a problem because, according to one computer science expert, “you never really see sponsored posts from fake news sites on Facebook.”⁵⁴ Most of the fake news that people get from Facebook comes from posts by friends, and it is unclear whether Facebook can (or wants to) do anything about that. Once before they got burned for “interfering” with their trending news feature by using trained editors to vet it rather than an algorithm, and they pulled back after complaints from conservatives.⁵⁵ Others have

suggested that the giant tech companies should figure out some way to quash fake news with a system of ratings and warnings, just as Facebook now polices its site for nudity and terrorist beheadings, and Google attempts to scrub for child porn. But these attempts to “filter out” fake news along with other objectionable content would surely suffer from accusations that the screeners are being biased in their judgment of biased content.⁵⁶

Are there better methods? According to Brooke Binkowski, managing editor of the fact-checking website Snopes, “pinching off fake news isn’t the answer. The answer is flooding it with actual news. And that way, people will continue looking for information, and they will find vetted, nuanced, contextual, in-depth information.”⁵⁷ While this sounds sensible, it surely will not rehabilitate the most motivated partisans, who look for stories that confirm their preexisting beliefs. Yet it does have the benefit of precedent. After all, isn’t “flooding” how fake news became so prominent in the first place? So perhaps the solution is to support investigative news organizations in their mission to provide sourced, vetted, evidence-based coverage. Maybe we should buy those subscriptions to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* after all, instead of relying on ten free articles a month. Indeed, as previously noted, some people must already be doing this, for subscriptions are way up at these newspapers and the *Washington Post* has just hired a flood of new journalists.⁵⁸

Second, one might make a bid for more critical thinking. One hopes that colleges and universities are already engaged in this mission. There is a wonderful book by Daniel J. Levitin entitled *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (previously published under the title *A Field Guide to Lies*, but retitled after the post-truth craze).⁵⁹ Here one can learn all about the techniques of statistics, logic, and good inference that are invaluable to good reasoning.

What about those “digital natives” who are still too young for college, but will grow up in a world of fake news and deception that they must learn to navigate? One of the most heartening stories I’ve read comes from Scott Bedley, a fifth-grade teacher in Irvine, California, who is teaching his class how to spot fake news by giving them a rubric of things to watch for, then testing them with examples.

I needed my students to understand that “fake news” is news that is being reported as accurate, but lacks reliability and credibility. A good example are the widely shared stories of the pope endorsing one presidential candidate over another. I decided to devise a game, the goal being to tell fake news from real news. ... My students absolutely loved the game. Some refused to go to recess until I gave them another chance to figure out the next article I had queued.⁶⁰

What are the tricks he taught? Actually they are no tricks at all. A fifth-grader can do it. So what excuse do the rest of us have?

1. Look for copyright.
2. Verify from multiple sources.
3. Assess the credibility of the source (e.g., how long has it been around?).
4. Look for a publication date.
5. Assess the author's expertise with the subject.
6. Ask: does this match my prior knowledge?
7. Ask: does this seem realistic?

The only problem with Bedley's system? Now his fifth-graders won't stop fact checking *him*.

Implications for Post-Truth

The problem of fake news is intimately related to the phenomenon of post-truth. Indeed, for many they are one and the same. But this is not quite right, for it is like saying that the existence of nuclear weapons automatically presumes the apocalypse. Just because a weapon exists does

not mean that we must be foolish enough to use it. It is how we respond to the challenges that are created by our technology that makes the difference. Social media has played an important role in facilitating post-truth, but again this is a tool rather an outcome. It is a tired cliché to say that “a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth can get its pants on.” But that is a fact about untutored human nature, not our potential to rise above it. The electronic dissemination of information can be used to spread lies, but it can also be used to spread truth. If we have ideals worth fighting for, let’s fight for them. If our tools are being used as weapons, let’s take them back.