

# Digging Deeper

## Politico-Corporate Media Manipulation, Critical Thinking, and Democracy

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### THE MYTH OF THE LEMMINGS

In 1958, the Disney Corporation, which now owns ABC, produced a film, *White Wilderness*, as part of its “True Life Adventure” series. The film showed lemmings, small mouse-like rodents, supposedly committing mass suicide by leaping into the sea. According to Disney’s narrator, “a kind of compulsion seizes each tiny rodent and, carried along by an unreasoning hysteria, each falls into step for a march that will take them to a strange destiny.” The Disney documentary is the source of the common belief that lemmings voluntarily march to their deaths.

Disney filmmakers faked the lemming scene, throwing them off the cliff. There is no evidence that blind compulsion ever moves lemmings in their natural habitats to commit suicide en masse.<sup>1</sup>

But we cannot blame the motion picture industry for such deceptions unless we are prepared to confront our own complicity in deceit. Mass deception by corporate media is possible because we, the “masses,” are *deceivable*. It is difficult but necessary to recognize our own collusion.

Democracy depends on an informed populace. The power of corporate media to propagate myth and present it as reality is a major factor in the evisceration of American democracy. American corporate media and government have done their utmost to propagate and

sustain an image of America as a beacon of freedom, the world's leading democracy and a majority of Americans have, in turn, embraced this comfortable, mythic view as their own. The truth about America—both its past and present—is less palatable and more inconvenient than the popular myth.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the primary motivation of gigantic media conglomerates like Disney is the amassing of profit, not truth. As a general rule, only if truth pays will they report it. Likewise, a government seeking power and control over its citizens (which is what all governments do to one extent or another) is likely to censor and whitewash the information it provides to its citizens, and even worse, to propagate disinformation, especially when the facts get in the way of implementing its own agenda. For example, the latter was the case in the lead-up to the Iraq War when the George W. Bush administration attempted to “make the facts fit the policy” in order to justify the war.<sup>3</sup>

So it would be naïve to expect a government that seeks power and control over its citizens *not* to use its influence over the corporate media in order to spread self-serving propaganda. Inasmuch as the corporate media need government to maximize their bottom line—through tax breaks, military contracts, relaxed media ownership rules, access to its officials and spokespersons, as well as other incentives and kickbacks—government has incredible power and leverage over the corporate media. Thus, instead of blaming the government for having lied to and deceived its citizens, better not to allow ourselves to be suckered into believing such propaganda in the first place. As this chapter argues, our liberties are most vulnerable to faulty thinking and best defended by sound logic.

## **AN ETHICS OF BELIEF FOR A FREE AMERICA**

We Americans are not *helpless* victims of the politico-corporate media establishment. Victims, yes: helpless, no. We largely permit ourselves to be duped and manipulated. If you think otherwise, then you are subscribing to a view of human nature that makes lemmings of us all, for no rodent has the uniquely *human* ability of complex rational thought. This includes the ability to doubt that for which one lacks

sufficient evidence, and to investigate a claim before believing it. As W. K. Clifford remarked in his famous essay of 1877, *The Ethics of Belief*, “It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence; and where it is presumption to doubt and to investigate, there it is worse than presumption to believe.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Clifford maintained that each and every one of us (and not just politicians, lawyers, journalists, and others who bear a fiduciary relationship to us) has a duty to question things before we commit them to belief. “It is not only the leader of men, statesmen, philosopher, or poet that owes this bounden duty to mankind,” stated Clifford. “No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.”<sup>5</sup>

So, in the sociopolitical context of mass media manipulation, how can we manage to avoid being deceived? The short answer is the one that Clifford has given—namely, by executing our duty to believe only on sufficient evidence.

However, this assumes that we are able, in the first place, to distinguish fact from fiction, and sufficient evidence from pseudo-evi-



dence. We must have a sense of what constitutes rational criteria for belief before we can even begin to determine if we have a good reason to commit something to belief. But this is possible only if we are privy to the sophisticated mechanisms that the politico-corporate media establishment uses to manipulate and garner our support.

For example, the Downing Street memos document that, prior to the invasion of Iraq, Bush did not truly believe that Saddam Hussein posed a serious threat to national security.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the Bush administration sought public support for invading Iraq and rightly believed that we, the American people, were feeling insecure enough after the attacks of September 11, 2001, to support the invasion if we were told it was necessary to prevent another terrorist attack. So the Bush administration used our vulnerability to manipulate our support.

## **HOW POLITICO-CORPORATE MEDIA MANIPULATION WORKS**

Unfortunately, we based our commitment to Bush's war on faulty thinking. The Bush administration dug the hole, exhorted us to jump in, and we listened. This same destructive pattern has repeated itself ad nauseam. The politico-corporate establishment has indeed attempted to manipulate Americans, but we have repeatedly permitted ourselves to be duped. This is because we have relied on faulty thinking rather than on sound logic.

Government and corporate media have encouraged the masses to engage in faulty thinking, in an effort to gain public support for self-serving agendas that typically cannot be justified rationally; the only way to get them through is by sophisticated means. For example, the Bush administration resorted to the systematic use of manipulation including:

- ▶ fearmongering (raising and lowering the terrorism alert level),
- ▶ well-poisoning (calling people who oppose the war “un-American”),
- ▶ making threats (threatening to jail journalists who publish “classified” government leaks),

- ▶ propagation of prejudice (media stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists and suicide bombers),
- ▶ claiming a divine right (as Bush did in waging war in Iraq),
- ▶ jingoistic appeals (positioning the American flag behind news anchors on Fox News),

and a host of other manipulative devices aimed at short circuiting rational argument.

All such manipulation works by appealing to Americans' interests and values. For example, many Americans were willing to surrender their right to privacy when government officials framed such compromises in civil liberties as a means to prevent another attack on the homeland. Similarly, the movement to pass a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman gained support when presented as a way of preventing the desecration of what is holy. The attempt by right-wing Republicans to get women to relinquish their legal rights to birth control and abortion—such as during the 2012 Mitt Romney–Paul Ryan presidential campaign—has been orchestrated by systematic intimidation through use of such language as “baby killer,” “murderer,” and “slut,” even though birth control prevents the need for abortions, and even though there are rational arguments on both sides of the abortion controversy. Americans were intimidated against protesting the war in Iraq because media presented such dissent as a refusal to “support the troops.” Those who had the courage to stand up to the politico-corporate machine were branded “traitors” and were accused of sabotaging the effort to “win the war on terror.”

From the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 to the Clear Skies Act of 2003, legislation adverse to Americans' common interests was euphonized (and euphemized) with names that implied support for the very causes that the acts flaunted. Thus, provisions of the PATRIOT Act, such as the notorious “sneak and peek” provisions, were arguably unconstitutional and therefore markedly *unpatriotic*, while the Clear Skies Act actually permitted widespread air pollution instead of cleaning it up. Yet the corporate media soft-peddled the legalization of such “unitary executive authority” while the average American citizen quietly acquiesced—some for want of knowledge, and others for failure to appreciate the potential of such legislation to undermine democracy.

Here then lies the crux of the problem: the corporate media do not ask the tough questions, and the people do not hold their feet to the fire. And public complacency reinforces government authority. We have tacitly condoned the demise of Fourth Amendment protections by not speaking up, and have passively sat by as the information portals have been dumbed down, controlled, and manipulated.

Nevertheless, we are a civilization governed by laws, and laws are supposed to ensure that the transfer of power preserves our civil liberties and democratic principles enshrined in the United States Constitution. Protection against encroachment on fundamental rights such as due process is not supposed to be based on faith that a government will not abuse its power. Thus, all Americans should care about the prospect that Barack Obama's administration (or a subsequent government administration) might, without judicial oversight, evoke the dubious provisions of the National Defense Authorization Act to destroy the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of anyone it perceives to stand in its way.<sup>7</sup>

To take back America, we must arm ourselves with reason. This means identifying and abandoning the self-defeating, anti-empirical, inauthentic, conformist styles of thinking that have made us gullible pawns, and substituting them for more rational, critical, and independent thinking.

While many Americans believe that the answer to stopping government oppression is to arm all Americans with guns, or at least to prevent government from placing any restrictions on our Second Amendment rights, neither proposal will achieve the desired end of protecting liberty and freedom if we are still uninformed, misinformed, or not thinking rationally. As our first priority, therefore, it is far better to "arm ourselves with the power which knowledge gives," as James Madison once wrote—to arm ourselves with reason and understanding.

## **HOW TO THINK FOR YOURSELF**

A single article cannot cover all the rational thought processes that can help to promote democracy and protect us against totalitarianism's creep.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the remainder of this article presents an

overview of six practices that are crucial to thinking for ourselves in order to defend our nation against its most formidable enemies, human gullibility and unreason:

1. Ask for explanations.
2. Look for consistency.
3. Question the status quo; don't just believe it.
4. Believe only credible authorities.
5. Watch out for fear mongering and demagoguery.
6. Beware of media-supported stereotypes.

Taken together, these six instructions provide a useful heuristic for determining whether you are justified in accepting any media claim. In what follows, each is considered in its turn.

### **1. Ask for explanations.**

Constant 24/7 news feeds on cable television networks such as Fox and CNN would suggest that Americans are kept well-informed; however, by any reasonable standard of what it means to be informed, this assumption is false.

What we really get when we tune into corporate network news is a stream of reports about disconnected events in the world with little or no attempt to explain them. This happenstance rendition of reality as depicted by corporate news media is an important part of herding Americans into blind conformity.

Political scientist Michael Parenti astutely observed, “We are left to see the world as do mainstream pundits, as a scatter of events and personalities propelled by happenstance, circumstance, confused intentions, bungled operations, and individual ambitions—rarely by powerful class interests.”<sup>9</sup> However, being adequately informed requires understanding these events, even though the underpinnings that support such knowledge have been removed. Thus, “we read or hear that ‘fighting broke out in the region,’ or ‘many people were killed in the disturbances,’ or ‘famine is on the increase.’ Recessions apparently just happen like some natural phenomenon (‘our economy is in a slump’), having little to do with the constant war of capital

against labor and the contradictions between productive power and earning power.”<sup>10</sup>

Decontextualized news reports enable corporate media to spin reality to serve specific political agendas. Thus, being told that the “insurgents killed ten American troops” leaves out the fact that the so-called “insurgents” were motivated to defend their homeland against invaders—not unlike what motivated the Americans themselves to attack British invaders during the Revolutionary War. Here, emotionally charged pejorative language (“insurgent”) fortifies the absolutistic notion that there is only one side to a story—the American side. The combination manipulates rather than informs.

So, as consumers of information, we must dig deeper beneath the surface by looking for explanations. We can’t simply expect the corporate media to provide them for us. We must conduct our own investigations and seek out investigative journalism that provides context and deeper understanding. This means gathering evidence from multiple sources, not just corporate media but also independent and foreign sources.<sup>11</sup>

For example, in the past decade, thousands have been killed by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)—commonly called drones—in Pakistan. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, since 2004 there have been 2,541 to 3,533 casualties estimated; 411 to 884 of these were civilians, and 168 to 197 were children. In addition, there were between 1,173 and 1,472 injured.<sup>12</sup> But the corporate media has given only lip service to these atrocities. The inadequate coverage by the corporate media is itself a story.

Digging deeper means finding out why these atrocities were not adequately covered, and taking a look at who owns the corporate media can help to uncover hidden motivation. The reality is less shocking when one learns that General Electric (GE) is a major drone and weapons manufacturer.<sup>13</sup> Prior to 2011, at the height of the Afghanistan War, GE owned NBC Universal, one of the largest media corporations on earth. Identifying and verifying connections among the media and telecommunication conglomerates and the US government help form the framework necessary to understand why the corporate media has been remiss in its First Amendment duty to keep the American people informed about questionable government activities, especially inside the military-industrial complex.<sup>14</sup>



Finding an explanation for something is not good enough, though. The explanation must not be based on speculation; it must instead be based on facts that make it *probable*. In other words, an explanation is probable to the extent that it is supported by known facts. Thus, the explanation that the US went to war in Iraq to free the Iraqi people from oppression does not adequately comprise enough known facts to be probable. For instance, it does not explain why the US invaded Iraq rather than some other nation such as Sudan, where the genocide in Darfur took place. Similarly, the explanation that the US went to war in Iraq because Saddam Hussein's regime posed a threat to the US does not take into account why the weapons inspectors were never able to find any such weapons, or why Bush ignored Hussein's open invitation for United Nations weapons inspectors to come to Iraq to look for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and interview Iraqi scientists and engineers.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the explanation that the motive for the war was to advance US influence in the Middle East is based on many verifiable facts: For example, the Bush administration was largely composed of members of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a politically influential group of far right ("neoconservative") ideologues whose professed goal was to advance the US's influence in the Middle East, especially Iraq, through military action. Also, according to the Downing Street memos, the Bush administration had already made up its mind to invade Iraq even though it admitted that the case for WMD was weak and that it was necessary to "make the facts fit the policy."<sup>16</sup>

## **2. Look for consistency.**

Facts must be consistent. To the extent that an explanation is inconsistent with the facts, the explanation is not probable. Reality is important in that it is consistent; if a claim is false it will sooner or later have to reckon with reality. One falsehood may be heaped on top of another in order to avoid reality's indictment, but sooner or later the false belief will run up against a consistent network of truth.

A false media claim is no different. This is why you need to check several independent sources before accepting something as fact. For

example, in 2005, when the *New York Times* “broke” the story that Bush was spying on Americans without warrants,<sup>17</sup> this contradicted Bush’s prior claim that he was first obtaining warrants. So why did Bush lie to the American people?

One possible explanation is that he did not want the American people to know that they were being spied on because they would protest and try to put an end to it. As it turned out, the *New York Times* did not quite tell the truth (or at least not the whole truth) either, for it claimed that Bush was only wiretapping American citizens’ international calls and not their domestic calls. However, Mark Klein, an AT&T whistleblower, refuted this claim by providing design documents of the equipment used to tap all calls (both domestic and international) and to route their contents to National Security Agency (NSA) computers hidden deeply within AT&T centers.<sup>18</sup> So, it appeared that neither the corporate media (in particular, the *New York Times*) nor the government cared to broker the truth; and this was evident by the inconsistency of their claims with verifiable facts.

### **3. Question the status quo; don’t just believe it.**

This leads to another important standard of rationality. Don’t believe something just because it’s popular. Indeed, some of the most popular beliefs are the biggest myths, as the Disney lemming story illustrated.

For example, federal law requires all telecommunication companies (such as Comcast and AT&T) to provide facilities for government surveillance equipment. How likely is it that these companies would divulge their roles in helping the government to spy on American citizens? Not very, and as a result, most Americans believe that their personal phone messages are private. But sometimes an unexpected comment by an invited guest can breach even the corporate media’s veil of secrecy. Here is one telling example:

After the authorities released pictures of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the deceased Boston bomber, his wife Katherine Russell placed a phone call to him. Corporate media, including the *New York Times*, downplayed any possibility that the phone conversation could be retrieved. Thus, the candor of Tim Clemente, a former Federal Bureau of Inves-

tigation (FBI) counterterrorism agent, caught CNN's Erin Burnett off guard when she interviewed him. "There's no way they actually can find out what happened, right, unless she tells them?" asked Burnett, attempting to lead Clemente to the status quo response. But here is the transcript of the dialog that followed:

CLEMENTE: No, there is a way. We certainly have ways in national security investigations to find out exactly what was said in that conversation. It's not necessarily something that the FBI is going to want to present in court, but it may help lead the investigation and/or lead to questioning of her. We certainly can find that out.

BURNETT: So they can actually get that? People are saying, look, that is incredible.

CLEMENTE: No, welcome to America. All of that stuff is being captured as we speak whether we know it or like it or not.<sup>19</sup>

Burnett's quip about what people are saying was obviously an attempt to discredit Clemente's claim; for if that is what people are saying, then they must be right. Right?

Wrong. And Clemente's bluntness about the truth resonates with the importance of not believing something just because it is popularly believed.

A popular antiwar slogan during the 1960s and '70s in the US—"What would happen if they made a war and no one came?"—underscores the very serious truth that unnecessary and immoral wars (such as the Iraq War) and other forms of needless aggression are possible only because masses of people are willing to unquestioningly support them instead of thinking for themselves. For many, it is heresy to question the authority of the commander in chief. These are people who say, "The president said there are WMD [weapons of mass destruction] in Iraq, so he must know. After all, he's the president." This is blind trust in authority, the type of trust that made it possible for power-grabbing "authorities" like Bush to cancel the great writ of habeas corpus, operate prison camps that mercilessly

tortured prisoners of war, contravene the Geneva Conventions, issue signing statements that nullified and trivialized the power of Congress, ignore congressional subpoenas, fire federal prosecutors for political reasons not relevant to their performances, stack the Supreme Court with political ideologues calculated to rubber stamp the neoconservative political agenda, deprive citizens of their First Amendment rights to free speech and peaceful assembly, contravene the American citizen's Fourth Amendment right against warrantless searches and seizures, and a host of other illegal and unconstitutional actions and policies.

And it is the same blind trust that presently allows the Obama administration to operate illegal assassination squads, launch robotic drone attacks that kill innocent civilians and children, continue to operate the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, hold detainees indefinitely without due process, pass laws that permit government to conduct mass warrantless dragnets of millions of American citizens, and involuntarily detain and rendition American citizens without judicial oversight or protection. These and many other policies now operating under the Obama administration are a continuation—in some cases an expansion—of the Bush administration's illegal policies, except that they have now been made part of the legal fabric of our nation. In other words, many of the policies that were illegal under the Bush administration are now “legal” under the Obama administration.

And the majority of Americans do not even question “the law.” After all, these previously unlawful practices are now (officially) legal. Never mind that the First Amendment is supposed to protect peaceful assembly to protest government breaches of civil liberties, especially ones it alleges are “legal.” Unfortunately, the Obama administration made it clear how intolerant it was of the exercise of this fundamental constitutional right when it classified the Occupy movement as a “domestic terrorist threat” complete with FBI monitoring despite the fact that the only violence perpetrated was against the demonstrators by local authorities.<sup>20</sup>

But there is still another, even more insidious form of blind acceptance of authority that works through intimidation, and to which many have been party. Psychologist Erich Fromm referred to this form as *anonymous authoritarianism*.<sup>21</sup> Anonymous authoritarianism contrasts with blind acceptance of authority (in which there is

an identifiable person/s—for example, the president) by having no identifiable individual authority.

In anonymous authoritarianism, claimed Fromm, “nobody makes a demand, neither a person nor an idea nor a moral law. Yet we all conform as much or more than people in an intensely authoritarian society would.” Here the authority is a vacuous “It.” And what is “It”? It is “profit, economic necessity, the market, common sense, public opinion, what ‘one’ does, thinks, or feels.” Since this “authority” is not overtly identifiable, it is nearly unassailable. “Who can attack the invisible? Who can rebel against Nobody?”<sup>22</sup>

According to Fromm, the mechanism by which this form of authority works is that of *conformity*: “I ought to do what everybody does, hence, I must conform, not be different, not ‘stick out’ . . . The only thing which is permanent in me is just this readiness for change. Nobody has power over me, except the herd of which I am a part, yet to which I am subjected.”<sup>23</sup>

A clear antidote to this malignant form of thinking is that stressed by W. K. Clifford, as cited earlier: “It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence; and where it is presumption to doubt and to investigate, there it is worse than presumption to believe.”<sup>24</sup> Whether the claim in question is popular or not, whether you will be loved or hated for not believing (or disbelieving) it, and whether it makes you stand out or fit in, all these things are irrelevant but for the need—no, the *urgency*—to commit yourself only to that which has rational merit.

#### **4. Believe only credible authorities.**

Of course, we are not always in a position to assess for ourselves whether a claim has rational merit. To the extent that we are not experts or “authorities” on given matters, we must rely on the testimony of others who are indeed experts in their respective fields.

In this regard, Clemente’s testimony refuting the status quo belief that Americans still enjoy a right to privacy in their personal telephone conversations was credible for two reasons. First, he was a former *FBI* counterterrorism agent. If anyone knows about such matters, it is someone with his background and credentials. Second, he is presently a *former* *FBI* counterterrorism agent, so that he is less

likely to be taking his marching orders from his superior officers. The key term here is “less likely,” but this does not mean “necessarily.” For example, some so-called “military analysts” are really former government officials hired by the government to appear on talk shows to spread government propaganda.<sup>25</sup>

This is one reason why it is always preferable to rely on several independent authorities (where possible) rather than just one. Again, while this does not yield certainty, to the extent that credible experts agree, you have greater assurance that you have gotten hold of the truth.

## **5. Watch out for fearmongering and demagoguery.**

This is an ancient admonition. As Plato observed, democracies are typically destroyed from within rather than from without when a self-aggrandizing demagogue stirs up the passions of a gullible populace by falsely promising to keep them safe. Blaming others for the woes of state, this self-styled “protector” brings the alleged culprits to justice, winning the trust of the people, and eventually seizing power and becoming a tyrant.<sup>26</sup>

Saddam Hussein appears to have been such a scapegoat used by the Bush administration to justify the invasion of Iraq. The underlying strategy was classic. Want to support the invasion of a sovereign nation that poses no threat to the homeland? Just get average citizens to think they might be the next victims of al-Qaeda if they fail to jump on the war bandwagon.

This mechanism of fearmongering typically works by exaggerating the consequences of something untoward happening. For example, Georgia Republican Chairperson Sue Everhart warned that allowing gay marriage would create serious potential for fraud. “You may be as straight as an arrow,” she warned, “and you may have a friend that is as straight as an arrow. Say you had a great job with the government where you had this wonderful health plan. I mean, what would prohibit you from saying that you’re gay, and y’all get married.”<sup>27</sup>

But the truth is that there is no evidence to support the claimed trend toward the commission of fraud within the nine states and the District of Columbia in which gay marriage has been legalized. Nor is there any evidence that gay parents turn their children gay or that married gays are destroying traditional marriage. Yet these are views

popularly espoused in the media—most often by the fringe of the Republican Party—with little or no attempt to debunk them; in some cases, such as on Fox News, pundits defend the views.<sup>28</sup>

And it is not just gays who are the objects of groundless distortions of reality and fear mongering. “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women,” said televangelist Pat Robertson on the *700 Club* television show. “It is about a socialist, antifamily political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.”<sup>29</sup>

But it is just not clear how the “feminist agenda” (whatever exactly that is) is “socialist” and “antifamily,” much less that it will lead to witchcraft, capitalism’s destruction, or conversion of heterosexual women into lesbians. Frightening though such claims may sound to some, there is simply no evidence to support them. Such fear- and hatemongering works only if we are gullible and do not ask for evidence. Don’t be gullible. Ask for evidence before committing something to belief.

## **6. Beware of stereotypes.**

Asking for evidence can also defuse dangerous stereotypes, which are the coin of demagogues and hatemongers like Robertson. These are half-baked generalizations that rate, often in very unflattering terms, a class of people—like a race or a gender—without regard to individual differences among class members.<sup>30</sup>

It is small wonder that the simplistic portrayals of reality offered by corporate media reinforce stereotypes. An instructive example is the TV show *24*, which premiered on Fox in November 2001, just after 9/11, and aired through May 2010, during the height of the Iraq War. This show portrayed Arabs as terrorists, and encouraged dangerous, bandwagon thinking by depicting anti-American sentiments and hate crimes targeting Arabs.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, this is not a new trend. Indeed, the media have historically underwritten popular racial stereotypes. Consider, for example, the degrading portrayals of blacks and women in the popular 1950s CBS shows *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Father Knows Best*. Far from helping to liberate the socially oppressed, the corporate media have helped to legitimize such oppression in order to turn a profit.

Sadly, the price paid for this failure of media and culture to reject degrading stereotypes has been enormous, making it so much easier to exploit or even destroy them. Thus slavery was possible because slave owners told themselves that their slaves were not full-fledged human beings who were even capable of living freely. The oppressors of women thought the same of them. Unfortunately, though the victims of such exploitation have changed, the tendency to exploit is still very much alive.

Stereotypes rely on inadequate evidence; they are culturally transmitted, taught through the socialization we receive as children and through the popular images portrayed in the media.<sup>32</sup> For example, when 9/11 occurred, many Americans already had a stereotype of Arabs as terrorists, which they could use to justify their hatred of all Arabs. In fact, the stereotype of Arabs as terrorists arose in the late twentieth century, and earlier, they were popularly portrayed as villains, seducers, hustlers, and thieves.<sup>33</sup>

Stereotypes are driven by mindsets—the tendency to believe something even in the face of evidence to the contrary.<sup>34</sup> In an evidence-driven culture, stereotypes would not be accepted. Unfortunately, because all of us harbor stereotypes of one sort or another, it is important for us all to exercise willpower to resist pervasive, popular media images that support our preconceived, mindset-driven portrayals of human beings. Instead of acquiescing to belief in these images, we should make concerted efforts to be aware of our own stereotypes; to refute them by realizing that human beings need to be judged as individuals, as you yourself would wish to be judged; and to refuse to act on such simplistic, anti-empirical characterizations.

## **A NEW AGE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS**

The corporate media treat news consumers as means to the end of maximizing profits. Its commitment is not to democratic principles, even though many reporters who work for the corporate media are committed to these principles. What is finally aired or published by these companies is sanitized and whitewashed to the beat of what is most conducive to its bottom line, which includes rolling over for government if it is profitable to do so.



The people cannot afford to be the puppets of the politico-corporate media establishment, for the cost is the evisceration of the most precious asset of all: our freedom. Fighting back is the only recourse we have; and this means arming ourselves with the most powerful weapon known to humankind: rational thinking. Presently, there is a sea of veridical information floating in cyberspace amid the sludge of false-to-fact claims. As consumers of knowledge and information we must surf this massive data sea, separating falsehoods from truths, testing the claims of corporate media against those of the cyber world. We must look for evidence and consistency, and we must challenge popular media images, stereotypes, and explanations, rather than believing things just because they are asserted by government officials or their media spokespersons. We must challenge what these “authorities” claim with the evidence gleaned from independent, credentialed authorities. Instead of allowing ourselves to be manipulated by anti-empirical fearmongering and demagoguery, we must defeat them with the facts.

In short, we must all be deputized as citizen investigative journalists, digging deeper beneath the surface of the corporate media façade. We must anchor our beliefs firmly in reality, not the myth. We must cease the outsourcing of our free press principles to private, for-profit entities and we must do more than attempt to hold journalistic institutions to account. We must also take on the responsibility of disseminating fact-based, people’s narratives ourselves—in our communities person to person, and using whatever broader reaching communications technologies we have—as the corporate media become increasingly irrelevant in terms of accurately and meaningfully informing the public.

This means meeting our duty to think for ourselves head on. Democracy without responsible, vigilant media is not possible:

We must *be* this media!

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millan, 2010) and *Critical Thinking Unleashed* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), and *The Dutiful Worrier: How to Stop Compulsive Worry without Feeling Guilty* (New Harbinger, 2011).

## Notes

1. Riley Woodford, "Lemming Suicide Myth Disney Film Faked Bogus Suicide," Alaska Department of Fish and Game, September 2003, [http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=wildlifeneews.view\\_article&articles\\_id=56](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=wildlifeneews.view_article&articles_id=56).
2. See, for example, Elizabeth (Betita) Martínez, "The U.S. Creation Myth and Its Premise Keepers," in *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*, ed. David Solnit (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004), 51–60.
3. Text of the original Downing Street memos, <http://downingstreetmemo.com/memos.html>.
4. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," *Contemporary Review*, 1877, [http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w\\_k\\_clifford/ethics\\_of\\_belief.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html).
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6. See Downing Street memos, <http://downingstreetmemo.com/memos.html>.
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