CHAPTER 2


Junk Food News and News Abuse for 2016–17

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Civilization, in fact, grows more and more maudlin and hysterical; especially under democracy it tends to degenerate into a mere combat of crazes; the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary.

—H.L. Mencken, journalist/satirist, 1918

EMERGING IDIOCRACY: A BRIEF RECKONING

In 1985, Neil Postman warned about an emerging threat to the US in his book Amusing Ourselves to Death. In his well-researched and troubling assessment, “Americans are the best entertained and quite
likely the least well-informed people in the Western world.”

Postman’s powerful, provocative argument strongly suggested most in the US knew little to nothing about what mattered most. Twenty-five years later, in *Dark Ages America*, Morris Berman wrote that “a world remade in the image of Walt Disney, and driven by an increasingly sophisticated communications technology, is the total breakdown of civilization.”

By the time Berman wrote these words he had been documenting what he saw as the decline of the US for over a decade. He believed that the US had devolved into an ignorant population obsessed with trivial matters, whose lifestyle and positions came at the expense of civilized democratic society. By 2017, the signs of democratic society in decline have become quite visible: forty years of diminishing wages for the middle and working classes, the biggest wealth gap in a century, ongoing election fraud, endless wars, massive national debt, high and rising rates of childhood obesity, as well as increasing maternal and infant mortality rates.

In fact, by 2017, just as Postman and Berman presciently projected, and only a decade after the unintentional predictions in Mike Judge’s satirical film *Idiocracy*, US citizens had elevated a reality TV celebrity and real estate tycoon with no political experience in the public sector to the ultimate seat of power: Donald J. Trump became president of the United States.

Berman’s and Postman’s writings demonstrate that the real threat to a civilized society is *stupidity*. Individuals lacking critical thinking skills, once taught by public educational institutions, and who utilize little of the fact-based knowledge about the world around them which the free press is supposed to provide, constitute a real and growing concern. The collective result is that many Americans lack the skills and knowledge needed to understand the interconnected workings of society and to ferret out corruption. In fact, a nation of critical thinkers aware of how political and economic institutions are supposed to function in a free society is a threat to those in power. Iconic comedian and critic George Carlin once explained this concept when he noted that those in power “don’t want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. They don’t want well-informed, well-educated people capable of critical thinking. They’re not interested in that. That doesn’t help them. That’s against their interests.”
Carlin notes that a critically thinking and informed population would not simply react emotionally, but rather would offer real solutions to declining wages, wealth inequality, election fraud, endless war, national debt, lack of healthcare, and many other pressing but surmountable problems.

Instead of addressing these issues, however, corporate media have taken Americans on a detour, blaming marginalized groups far from the centers of power, such as immigrants, socialists, and people struggling with mental illness or addiction, for all of society’s ills. This bait and switch not only deflects from the many challenges Americans face in their nascent democracy, it worsens them. The corporate press pull this bait and switch by peddling an unhealthy diet of Junk Food News and engaging in News Abuse. Junk Food News is a term coined by Project Censored’s founder, the late Carl Jensen. It refers to how the corporate media cover trivial yet sensational stories at the expense of more newsworthy ones. Junk Food News stories, while often titillating, are distractions from issues that most impact society. Former Project Censored director Peter Phillips created the term News Abuse, which refers to stories that are newsworthy but are presented in a slanted, spun, partial, or trivializing manner by corporate media as a form of propaganda.

The reporting of these kinds of news stories over the past several decades has compounded problems with the democratic process in the US. A public ill-equipped with the basic knowledge of how the political and economic systems work cannot alter or change them effectively. The corporate media wittingly and unwittingly continue to exacerbate this problem. This chapter examines the phenomenon in two key areas. The first, the Junk Food News section, looks at how news consumers’ attention is deflected from more significant stories by trivial matters. This year, we specifically note the continued under-reporting of one of the most important stories of our time—the threat of climate change, or what investigative journalist Dahr Jamail more specifically calls “anthropogenic climate disruption.” It bears noting that even during last year’s presidential debates, the moderators, all considered luminaries by the corporate mass media, failed to ask the candidates even one question about this crucial issue. So it may not be surprising that the corporate media were also more concerned
with who was or was not attending the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner, Olympic crimes and behavior, and the Best Picture Oscar snafu at the Academy Awards, to note a few lowlights. The second key area examined in this chapter, our News Abuse section, documents the explosion of so-called “fake news” and how it has been weaponized for partisan hackery to denounce anything that threatens the power or policies of the ruling class while legitimizing actual fake news.

Though these maddening trends have grown ubiquitous over the last year, it is important to keep in mind that historically they are nothing new. The media may have come to call these methods of mass distraction by new names, but anyone armed with knowledge of the past is already familiar with the most accurate term these methods go by: propaganda.

**JUNK FOOD NEWS**

_The years passed . . . mankind became stupider at a frightening rate._

_Some had high hopes the genetic engineering would correct this trend in evolution, but sadly the greatest minds and resources were focused on conquering hair loss and prolonging erections._

—Narrator, _Idiocracy_, 2006

A majority of people in the world believe that climate change is the biggest problem facing humanity. However, for the corporate media, other stories often trump the importance of climate change research. For example, although a majority of people in the US and Europe fear the impact of climate change, even more people find ISIS to be a significant threat despite the extraordinarily low probability of being the victim of a terrorist attack. In fact, people in the US are as likely to be crushed to death by their TVs or to drown in their bathtubs as die in a terror attack, yet Americans are quite enthralled by their TVs and there is no sign of an impending national “War on Personal Hygiene.” Simply put, many seem to be afraid of, and fixate on, the wrong things. The interests of media consumers are linked to what the corporate media fixate upon and how they present information in emotional ways, often devoid of factual or historical context. In addi-
tion to this kind of sensationalist and repetitive news coverage based on public fears, the ongoing challenge of weeding through Junk Food stories can be equally daunting, especially since many Americans don’t do much weeding. Rather, they indulge as a form of escape, skipping the main course and heading straight for dessert.

During the 2016–2017 news cycles, the corporate media peddled many tales that distracted from stories that highlighted the real and growing threat of climate change. As a result, those who do not believe climate change is real, or see it as a secondary threat to the likes of ISIS, remain ignorant of how climate change affects contemporary global society. Instead of coming to grips with what is happening outside of their homes, the American public digests a heavy diet of Junk Food News in their living rooms, staring at their increasingly large televisions that resemble the flickering shadows on a wall described in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, only the images projected are as cheap and flimsy as a Play-Doh republic.
On February 26, 2017, CNN reported, “Trump Declines to Attend White House Correspondents’ Dinner.” The story focused on the backlash against Trump for refusing to attend the annual White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA) dinner. The WHCA demonstrates everything wrong with the US media, as it invites a collection of journalists reporting on the president to drink and dine with the politicians and celebrities they are supposed to be scrutinizing in the name of democracy. In 2007, then—New York Times columnist Frank Rich argued that the dinner is “a crystallization of the press’s failures in the post-9/11 era” as it “illustrates how easily a propaganda-driven White House can enlist the Washington news media in its shows.” In fact, the corporate media’s anger over Trump not making nice with them does not indicate their willingness to speak truth to power so much as it demonstrates their frustrated eagerness to ingratiate themselves.

Trump announced his decision to skip the correspondents’ dinner, which raises money for journalism scholarships, using his preferred mode of communication: Twitter. Trump publicly announced that his absence at the dinner was a statement against journalists and the media’s critiques of his administration. It was another salvo in his war on the press. According to CNN, “Trump’s decision is not surprising given the negative things the President has said about the media, such as suggesting they are ‘the enemy of the American people.’” Even before he was “electored” (chosen by the Electoral College without winning the popular vote), Trump received near-constant coverage for his Tweets, ostensibly political squibs that often entertained and amused the American public while distracting them from more newsworthy stories. CNBC covered the same correspondents’ dinner story a day later. Their coverage managed to exaggerate and further increase tensions between the White House and the national media when they dramatically reported that “in recent days, a debate has erupted over whether the WHCA should altogether cancel its event, widely regarded as elbow-rubbing between Hollywood, media and political elites.”

The corporate media high school grudge match over Trump not attending their party distracted from more newsworthy stories,
such as the widespread famine in Yemen. Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting pointed out that, while the corporate media covered Trump’s refusal to party with the people responsible for holding him accountable, the independent press covered the ongoing famine and human tragedy in Yemen. In fact, on February 27, a United Nations report noted that the two-year-old US-backed Saudi-led war, which left over ten thousand dead and forty thousand wounded in the region, was intensifying the crisis. The UN report stated that the prolonged conflict led to over 90 percent of Yemeni citizens experiencing famine and/or malnutrition. The report warned “that another 7.1 million people are ready to fall into the emergency level of hunger if the situation does not improve. In all, 19 of the 22 governorates of Yemen are experiencing severe hunger.” The corporate media and Trump jockeyed for who would have the last laugh over the WHCA dinner, where the only item on the menu they all should have been eating was crow. As for the Yemenis? Let them eat cake seemed to be the mantra.

Olympic-Sized Hypocrisy Flooding the Airwaves

The summer of 2016 was a great one for media spectacles. Not only was Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, hosting the Summer Olympic Games, the US presidential election was in full swing. The corporate media latched on to what seemed to be a shocking story. US swimmers Ryan Lochte, Jimmy Feigen, Jack Conger, and Gunnar Bentz claimed they were robbed at gunpoint while at the games in Brazil. The robbery allegedly took place after a party the four men were returning from, possibly after a night of drinking. Originally, Lochte reported that they were stopped by armed men and were forced to hand over their money, but later he said they were stopped at a gas station. The station attendants stated that the swimmers stopped at the gas station to use the bathroom, during which time the four men broke a door and soap dispenser. A guard on duty even drew his weapon in an effort to prevent the swimmers from running away after observing their actions. The only thing being robbed here was the dignity of the US Olympic team.

The incident sparked outrage in Brazil. Mario Andrada, a spokesman for Rio 2016, said in a news briefing, “Let’s give these kids
a break.”26 Use of the word “kids” is an indication of how Andrada intended to frame the incident as the antics of youth, not crimes committed by adults who clearly knew better. Using the term “kids” was an attempt to downplay the swimmers’ role in the situation and gave their wanton destruction of property, not to mention their flat-out lies and attempted cover-up, an air of innocence. Andrada concluded more hagiographically, “Sometimes you take actions you later regret. They are magnificent athletes. Lochte is of one of the best swimmers of all time. They had fun. They made a mistake. It’s part of life. Life goes on.” Indeed, for many privileged white males, after committing a crime, “life goes on.”27

While these “bad boy” celebrity Olympians mostly got to swim away with few consequences and no formal charges, another US Olympic winner, African American gymnast Gabby Douglas, was tried and convicted by the public in a vicious bullying Internet campaign for . . . lying about crimes she committed? No. For being “unpatriotic” (gasp!). During the medal ceremony when Douglas stood on the platform, she did not put her hand over her heart when the national anthem played. This apparent “traitorous” act did not sit well with vicarious “America First” viewers at home (that Douglas was a gold medalist seemed to be lost on this demographic).28 As a result, she was branded “unpatriotic.” Douglas was criticized widely across the Internet, including in racist terms, and was the subject of a massive bullying campaign that overshadowed her major accomplishments, while the white “boys will be boys” floated home.29

Meanwhile, the corporate media’s infatuation with Olympic athlete behavior overseas distracted from the coverage of widespread natural disasters at home. On August 12, more than four trillion gallons of rain fell in Louisiana.30 By August 17, state officials reported that the flooding was on an historic and unprecedented scale. The federal government declared it a major disaster.31 Instead of covering the storm’s implications for the larger issue of climate change and extreme weather patterns, the corporate media focused on sensational images of flooding and then turned their attention back to the Olympic fodder. Without adequate media coverage, it was hard to raise the awareness needed to increase relief efforts, which directly corresponded to how few understood the massive scale of the floods.32
While the damage caused was less than that of Hurricane Katrina, twenty thousand residents had to be rescued, ten thousand were placed in shelters, and several people lost their lives. This momentous tragedy in Louisiana went widely underreported, robbed of coverage by Olympic-sized hubris and misdirected outrage.

**Envelopegate: And the Winner Is? The Fossil Fuel Industry**

The 89th Annual Academy Awards drew particularly unwelcome attention with an unplanned and anticlimactic folly of a finale. It became clear about a minute into the victory speech for Best Picture that the wrong movie was initially announced as the winner, which meant that the losers were already giving a speech for an award they did not win. The day after the Oscars, the corporate media couldn’t help but rehash over and over the mix-up in which *La La Land* was mistakenly announced as winner of the Best Picture award, until *Moonlight* was revealed as the real winner during the erroneous victory speech. It was an awkward moment, to be sure, but one that was quickly righted, yet also one that sent the corporate media into a feeding frenzy speculating about some possible scandal, one they hyped but that never actually emerged. From MSNBC to CNN to ABC, the story, dubbed by Big Media as the “Best Picture Mix-Up,” was more like a Big Picture Mix-Up. While the corporate media was buzzing about the wrong film being announced as the winner, the independent press was covering a story of far more significance in the bigger picture—a coalition of more than five hundred community leaders, elected officials, business moguls, health officials, and politicians calling for doubling the strength of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a clean air and healthy climate program. A gathering of this size to enact policies to prevent further climate change is certainly worthy of major attention. But instead the American public was treated to endless punditry on who was responsible for the year’s Best Picture blunder.

Five days before the Oscar flap, Common Dreams covered a release by Environment America announcing 546 leaders signing an initiative that promised to “deliver clean air and a safe, healthy climate for us all.” Despite this important developing story, the corporate news
instead opted to report on the mix-up at the Academy Awards. NBC went so far as to release an investigative article on how exactly the mix-up occurred and interviewed the person who wrongly announced the award.35 None of the five-hundred-plus people who signed the environmental initiative were interviewed by any major media outlets. The topic of doubling the strength of America’s best climate and clean air program is clearly newsworthy because, over the last decade, it has already helped cut emissions in half while creating cleaner air and preventing “600 premature deaths, 9,000 asthma attacks, and 43,000 lost work days.”36 If people cared as much about what is happening to the climate as they did about who won the Oscars we could be living in a very different, vastly improved world.

NEWS ABUSE

I’m not going to give you a question. You are fake news!

—President-Elect Donald Trump, to CNN’s Jim Acosta (who was trying to ask him a question at an official press conference), January 11, 201737

An Ongoing Truth Emergency

In 2010, Project Censored’s Peter Phillips and Mickey Huff argued that the US was facing a “Truth Emergency.”38 They explained that, “[i]n the United States today, the rift between reality and reporting has reached its end. There is no longer a mere credibility gap, but rather a literal Truth Emergency . . . [this] is a culmination of the failures of the fourth estate to act as a truly free press.”39 Despite living in the digital age when we are awash in a sea of information, there is a paucity of reason among the public at large to contextualize and make sense of much of it. Phillips and Huff cited the bogus WMD claims and other underreported and misreported atrocities of the US war in Iraq to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this Truth Emergency.

Sadly, through 2017 little had changed. A recent example of this ongoing Truth Emergency reminds one of the adage, “The first casualty of war is truth.” This can be seen in the fog of war that blankets Syria. The corporate media, along with Republican and Democratic
leaders, repeatedly touted unsubstantiated and disputed claims about Syria as a pretext for war—most notably that President Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons on his own people during the first week of April, killing scores and injuring hundreds more, including women and children (according to UNICEF). What followed was a propaganda blitz that paved the way for President Trump to order the firing of fifty-nine Tomahawk missiles on targets in Syria, which killed nine innocent people in villages, including four children. Another report claimed fifteen were killed, including nine civilians and six others on a targeted base. Not only was the US strike not called out as a naked act of aggression, it was celebrated by the political establishment and corporate press in the US and beyond.

Most notably, Brian Williams (yes, the same Brian Williams who was suspended by NBC and later reassigned by MSNBC after falsely claiming he was in an aerial firefight in Iraq) used the word “beautiful” three times when describing the Tomahawk missile strike that President Trump ordered to be launched at Syrian targets. Similarly, Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Senate minority leader, proclaimed, “Making sure Assad knows that when he commits such despicable atrocities he will pay a price is the right thing to do.” Democratic Senator Dick Durbin declared, “My preliminary briefing by the White House indicated that this was a measured response to the Syrian nerve gas atrocity.”

However, US and NATO assertions regarding Assad’s involvement have been disputed by many, including veteran investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, and MIT professor of science, technology, and security policy Theodore A. Postol, both of whom studied the incident in detail. Postol stated that the White House intelligence account could not be true as the attacks appeared to come from the ground, not from the air as the White House claimed. Further, the Tomahawk missile retaliatory strike came before any evidence proving Assad’s involvement in the gas attack was ever corroborated.

This is a complicated matter, to be sure, one that even sparks vivid disagreements among the anti-imperialist and pacifist Left in the US. To question official narratives should not mean people are automatically pro-Assad—or pro-Putin, for that matter. More importantly, what does it mean to be pro-truth in a post-truth world, when the
truth can be elusive, especially in an environment addled by propaganda coming from many sides? The corporate media’s engagement in News Abuse concerning Syria, much like Iraq over a decade earlier, appears to be part of an attempt to build public support for a full-blown US invasion, which makes accurate reporting and publishing of diverse perspectives all the more crucial.

There are, nonetheless, two aspects of the Syrian story that are absolutely clear, though hardly reported: the cost of overseas aggression first and foremost in human life (e.g., the seven-hundred-plus civilians killed since spring by US-led coalition bombings in Syria); and second, the cost to American taxpayers. The “beautiful” ordinance in Trump’s Tomahawk missile offensive alone cost $88 million, payable to Raytheon, one of the biggest players in the military-industrial complex, whose stocks shot up 3 percent after the strikes.44

In Education We Trust?

A major countermeasure to News Abuse and propaganda is having access to an education rooted in factual details, transparent sources, and critical thinking skills. This involves moving beyond confirmation bias and developing the ability to embrace cognitive dissonance, to be able to change one’s mind in the light of new information. This can be daunting at times, but it’s part of becoming a critical and independent thinker. Yet for some, this is so daunting that it requires doubling down on false ideas. Case in point: take right-wing media personality Glenn Beck and pseudo-historian David Barton. For $375 a head, they offer training camps to teach graduating high school students their revisionist, partial version of history. Amanda Marcotte of Salon referred to their historical narrative as “one that valorizes straight white men as humanity’s natural leaders and grants Christian fundamentalism a centrality to American history that it does not, in reality, have.”45 Marcotte also noted that, “[i]n Barton’s history, the Founding Fathers’ idea of government was rooted in fundamentalist Christianity, instead of Enlightenment philosophy, and the contributions of people of color are minimized in service of centering Christian white men as the righteous shepherds guiding everyone else.”46 Beck, who has
historically had a tenuous relationship with reality, engages in the production of educational content that is demonstrative of how this Truth Emergency is spreading, as it were, from training camps to the college classroom.

Marcotte continued, “Beck isn’t subtle about his intention to give college professors headaches by filling their classrooms with fledging right-wing nuts spewing ‘alternative facts’ about history.” According to Beck, “Your kids will be challenged to go and find the documents to make the cases that they’re most likely going to have to make in college with their professors . . . I guarantee you the professors at college will have the wrong answer.” However, despite such confident presumptions, much of what Barton and Beck promote contradicts established historical facts.47

Of course, education does not only take place in schools—or training camps, for that matter—as much of what people learn comes in one way or another from mass media. Further compounding this Truth Emergency is the lack of critical media literacy education in US schools. The education system in the US often falls short of combating the many bad influences of mass media on the public. In fact, forty years ago, as media became a larger part of citizens’ lives in industrial democracies, most European and Asian nations mandated that students had to be taught media literacy in schools.48 These courses taught basic skills, like how to verify facts and sources. In the US at the same time, other than education groups such as Project Censored, there was little offered in the way of media literacy. Instead of addressing these challenges head-on, given the large-scale problems associated with mass media propaganda in the US, the education system drifted to the same for-profit model of information dissemination as the mass media, yielding many of the same results.49 Only this past year, in the wake of widespread alarm over so-called “fake news,” have lawmakers suddenly begun to take media literacy education more seriously—though even the bills that have been proposed, in states like California and Massachusetts, are vague and will take years to implement.

Critical theory scholar Henry A. Giroux further argues that the for-profit model of education emphasizes that individuals are supposed to blame themselves for all manner of problems rather than criticize the social order and those who construct it. The market-driven discourse in
higher education, including the corporatization of education that privileges administrators over faculty (who become low-paid workers while students are seen as customers), has outlawed or marginalized those faculty who do talk about critiquing the system rather than teach students to accept it and work with it.50 As outlined by Phillips and Huff,51 the for-profit model replaced intellectual criticism with establishment sycophancy in the corporate press decades earlier, and the education industry has followed suit. Americans have been left with a top-down managed news and education system, spread out among a cornucopia of corporate news outlets and a mirroring curriculum that teaches students to consume information like they consume products, in a use-and-dispose manner rather than a critical one. In this age of so-called “fake news” and “alternative facts,” developing critical thinking skills may not be on the test, but outside of the classroom it is the test, and it seems many in the US are not making the grade. Ultimately, this has significantly negative societal ramifications, especially for those already facing political and economic marginalization.

Giroux concludes that a “democracy cannot exist without informed citizens and public spheres and educational apparatuses that uphold standards of truth, honesty, evidence, facts and justice. Under Trump, disinformation masquerading as news . . . has become a weapon for legitimating ignorance and civic illiteracy.”52 To combat this, he states, Artists, educators, young people, journalists and others need to make the virtue of truth-telling visible again. We need to connect democracy with a notion of truth-telling and consciousness that is on the side of economic and political justice, and democracy itself. If we are all going to fight for and with the most marginalized people, there must be a broader understanding of their needs. We need to create narratives and platforms in which those who have been deemed disposable can identify themselves and the conditions through which power and oppression bear down on their lives.

This is not an easy task, but nothing less than justice, democracy and the planet itself are at risk.53
Of Fake News and Alternative Facts

Since the fall of 2016, when the former host of NBC’s *The Apprentice*, Donald Trump, was “electored” president of the United States, the term “fake news” became ensconced in the US lexicon. In fact, in the course of one week in mid-January 2017, the trend of people researching the term “fake news” on Google jumped one hundred-fold above pre-election levels. Trump and his supporters denounced any critiques of him as being “fake news.” For example, Trump himself accused CNN of being a “fake news organization” because they questioned the validity of his statements, which is what journalists are supposed to do. Interestingly, Trump did not weaponize this term himself, but had help from an unlikely source—the Democrats. The Democratic National Committee (DNC), aghast at their embarrassing loss in an election they and many “experts” saw as a slam dunk for Hillary Clinton, are the ones responsible for weaponizing the term “fake news” in the first place, blaming the phenomenon for what many described as Clinton’s stunning defeat. In fact, Clinton remarked after losing the election that “it’s now clear that so-called fake news can have real world consequences.”

The partisan practice of labeling inconvenient truths as “fake news” undermined credible journalism while distracting the public from the barrage of actual fake news (i.e., propaganda) flooding our global society. One survey conducted by HuffPost/YouGov terrifyingly concluded that people, regardless of party lines, are likely to see any news that is in opposition to their beliefs as “fake news.” This is also the product of confirmation bias. For decades, scholars have defined state-sponsored and corporate media propaganda posing as journalism and advertisements posing as news stories as “fake news.” Actual fake news is an affront to the democratic process because it is being conflated with real journalism. Weaponizing “fake news” allows for truths that might hold those in power accountable to be brushed aside instead, because they are deemed “fake news” without any explanation of what makes them fake.

The conflating of inconvenient truths with “fake news” has resulted in what some are now calling a post-truth world. Oxford Dictionaries concluded that “post-truth” was the word of the year for 2016.
Oxford defines the term, an adjective, “as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”60 In post-truth America, an individual’s proclivity becomes reality, regardless of the facts. Thus, Americans’ unwillingness or inability to decipher between fact and opinion or argument and belief is dangerous, not only for the democratic process but also for the foundations of contemporary society. The Internet’s promise of delivering endless information to circumvent a post-truth world has not succeeded in producing a well-informed populace. Instead, the inflation of spurious information coupled with an education system that does not teach critical media literacy to students and does not show them how to navigate and participate in the digital world has resulted in a dystopia of falsehoods that are now referred to as “alternative facts.”61

This post-truth environment of “fake news” gave inevitable rise to this gem of a term, which refers to an outright lie that is introduced and then used as evidence to support a desired conclusion. The phrase was coined on January 22, 2017, when Trump’s counselor, Kellyanne Conway, used it during a Meet the Press interview to defend White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s false claims about the size of President Trump’s inauguration crowd.62 While critics and late night hosts have used the phrase “alternative facts” as fodder for ridicule, it soon became clear that these falsehoods were now part of the new, de facto, official narrative being used to construct an emerging alternate reality.63

The list of “alternative facts” began to stack up fast. Here is a sampling: White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer claimed three times that there was a terror attack in Atlanta, Georgia, despite the fact that it never occurred; Trump made veiled references to how deceased nineteenth-century abolitionist and intellectual Frederick Douglass was still alive, “an example of somebody who’s done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more”; US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Dr. Ben Carson, a brain surgeon, claimed without socio-economic relevancy or historical context that African American slaves were immigrants who worked hard and found success in America; US Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO) insisted without evidence that the overwhelming number of letters, emails, phone calls, and voicemails received as the Trump administration attempted
to repeal and replace Obamacare was the result of “paid protesters”; Trump claimed that Sweden was being overrun by refugees; Spicer claimed that Hitler did not use “chemical weapons”; Trump said that former president Andrew Jackson opposed the Civil War despite having died fifteen years prior to its start; and last but not least, the mother of the phrase “alternative facts,” Kellyanne Conway, in no less than three interviews said that Trump’s travel ban was justified by citing a fictitious “massacre” in Bowling Green, Kentucky. All of these claims and statements are completely false, and appear to have only been uttered to justify policies or positions of the Trump White House. What we have here is nothing short of a war on reality.

To promote an incontestable narrative fueled by alternative facts, the Trump administration has surrounded itself with media lapdogs, in both the corporate and independent press, rather than watchdogs. Propagandists, sycophants, and extremists have filled the ranks of the inner media circle to promote and justify the administration’s image and agenda. For example, Alex Jones of Infowars, who was labeled by his lawyer as a “performance artist” during his 2017 divorce proceedings, has built an economically successful career based largely on lies for monetary gain, and continuously defends and preaches the dogma of President Trump as gospel, even going so far as to say that he would die for him. Similarly, so-called “alt-right” extremist Lucian Wintrich was welcomed into the White House Press Briefing Room by Trump’s cabinet to act as a mouthpiece despite his history of blatant discrimination and his lack of journalism experience. The creation of Trump’s self-sustaining media cocoon, aptly nicknamed “Trump TV,” attempted to provide Trump and his staff immunity from media criticism.

However, Trump also has allies in the corporate media who use alternative facts and fabricated terms to legitimize his behavior. For example, after Trump was undoubtedly exposed for lying about then-president Barack Obama’s wiretapping of Trump Tower, Jeffrey Lord of CNN insisted that Trump did not lie, but rather that he just speaks “Americanese.” A term similar to “alternative facts,” “Americanese” works to remove the responsibility of truth-telling from officials at the highest levels of government, who are expected to be honest, transparent, and accountable.
And if that’s not enough, Trump’s chief strategist, Steve Bannon, is former CEO of the now well-known, right-wing nationalist news site Breitbart. In May, Trump issued retroactive ethics waivers, with a blanket waiver to all Executive Office of the President appointees, including Bannon. The waiver allows all covered under it “to work with subjects they had in the private sector before joining the government.” The Office of Government Ethics noted that Bannon was still restricted from talking about specific policy matters with members of his former media company, but called the development “problematic.”

The DNC’s Own Alternative Facts: The Russians are Coming . . . with Fake News!

Although one would think that a Republican Party hedging their bets on outright falsehoods would empower the Democratic Party to use facts to their advantage, it has instead resulted in the Democrats developing and weaponizing their own “alternative facts” and “fake news.” In the 2016–2017 news cycles, these included not only the idea that Hillary Clinton was electable, but also, among a long list of things, that “fake news” and Russian hackers cost her the election. Although there were numerous outright false stories about Hillary Clinton, including Internet yarns that claimed she was involved in running a child sex ring (dubbed “Pizzagate”), one would be hard-pressed to prove that fake news was directly responsible for the outcome of the election. Nonetheless, Clinton’s supporters in the corporate media, largely at MSNBC and the Washington Post, derided “fake news” as the primary culprit for the election upset. Callum Borchers and Margaret Sullivan of the Washington Post correctly critiqued how Trump and his supporters weaponized “fake news,” but did not go as far as admitting that the corporate press engaged in their own form of it, and in some cases did so in support of Hillary Clinton. The Washington Post’s fact-checker, Glenn Kessler, claimed, “People seem to confuse reporting mistakes by established news organizations with obviously fraudulent news produced by Macedonian teenagers.” Such statements helped give the false impression that corporate media outlets are the only legitimate ones, while all others are “fake news.” However, that type of discussion about “fake
news” distracted from the more insidious, intentionally misleading corporate media reporting during the election.

The Democrats had sought to feed pro-Clinton propaganda to the corporate media during the primaries, as Clinton’s staff organized off-the-books cocktails with “influential reporters, anchors and editors” to win their support.74 Information about this quiet collusion between Clinton’s staff and the corporate media was found in an email from Jesse Ferguson, Deputy National Press Secretary for Hillary Clinton, to John Podesta, former chairman of the Clinton campaign, published by WikiLeaks. The privileged guests at the cocktail meeting included journalists from CNN, the New York Times, CBS, MSNBC, and the Huffington Post. WikiLeaks’s introduction to the DNC’s leaked emails stated that the goal of the meeting was to “[g]ive reporters their first thoughts from team HRC in advance of the announcement” and help them with “[f]raming the HRC message and framing the race.”75 While the Clinton campaign clearly did their best to stitch up the support of
the corporate media, that same corporate media may have inadvertently contributed to Clinton's defeat. Trump's name appeared in twice as many headlines as Clinton's, and Trump received nearly triple the overall coverage. While some of that coverage was more critical, it still added up to $2 billion in free exposure,76 lending credence to the adage, “there is no such thing as bad press.”77

The Democratic Party could also be responsible for Clinton's poor showing because it actively worked with the corporate media to bury primary challenger Bernie Sanders, who was drawing large crowds and the support of millennials, currently the largest potential voting demographic in terms of sheer numbers. Furthermore, the DNC actively worked to promote Trump as the hopeful Republican nominee during the primaries, believing he would be an easier candidate for Clinton to defeat in the general election.78 This barrage of reasons for Trump’s “electored” victory should not imply that Clinton faced insurmountable odds—after all, Obama faced incredible odds and won—but rather should contribute to establishing that Clinton constituted a risk to her party.

Rather than face the shortcomings of their candidate, the DNC resurrected a Cold War–style red-baiting campaign, and the Russian hacking tale was born with the help of the corporate press. In November 2016, the Washington Post, a paper known to have connections with the Democratic Party, published an article boldly titled “Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News,’ Experts Say.”79 The article, written by former national security editor Craig Timberg, cited an anonymous organization, PropOrNot, that created a list of some two hundred independent news outlets it dubbed “useful idiots” at best and outright Kremlin operatives at worst. PropOrNot accused these outlets, without evidence or identifiable “experts,” of peddling Russian-inspired “fake news.” In fact, the list included numerous independent outlets that were comprised of real journalists that had been critical of establishment figures of both major parties (e.g., CounterPunch, Truthout, and Naked Capitalism, among others from the libertarian Right to the anarchist Left). The methodology of PropOrNot was never explained by Timberg, yet the organization's list was uncritically touted as cutting edge on the matter, even though they were nontransparent in every way. After several of the
organizations on the list threatened to sue the *Post*, a partial retraction was issued by the executive editor, Marty Baron, who stated,

The Washington Post on Nov. 24 published a story on the work of four sets of researchers who have examined what they say are Russian propaganda efforts to undermine American democracy and interests. One of them was PropOrNot, a group that insists on public anonymity, which issued a report identifying more than 200 websites that, in its view, wittingly or unwittingly published or echoed Russian propaganda. A number of those sites have objected to being included on PropOrNot’s list, and some of the sites, as well as others not on the list, have publicly challenged the group’s methodology and conclusions. The *Post*, which did not name any of the sites, does not itself vouch for the validity of PropOrNot’s findings regarding any individual media outlet, nor did the article purport to do so. Since publication of The *Post’s* story, PropOrNot has removed some sites from its list.80

Baron neglected to mention the threats of lawsuits in PropOrNot’s decision to remove some names, or that lawsuits had anything to do with the *Post’s* decision to run the partial retraction. Also, while Baron claimed the *Post* did not vouch for the validity of the list, he aggressively promoted the piece on Twitter, writing, “Russian propaganda effort helped spread fake news during election, say independent researchers,” while linking to the Timberg headlined article, “Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News’ during Election, Experts Say.” When considered alongside the fact that Timberg’s article directly linked to PropOrNot’s website without a single critical murmur, it could seem as if the *Post* was promoting their own version of “fake news.”81

Shortly thereafter, in an alarming display of hypocrisy, the Washington *Post* removed all doubt about how the corporate press generates actual fake news when it published an article titled “Russian Hackers Penetrated U.S. Electricity Grid through a Utility in Vermont, U.S. Officials Say.” The article authoritatively claimed that Russians had hacked a power grid in Vermont. However, the story turned out to be demonstrably false.82 The *Post* issued a correction eleven hours later
that clarified it was only a hacked laptop, and that no one had actually contacted the power plant or verified details of the story prior to publishing. But by then, the Washington Post’s story had become an Internet “fake news” phenomenon in its own right.

Despite the lack of evidence linking Russian hackers to “fake news” websites or any evidence proving that these types of stories cost Clinton the election, numerous politicians, reporters, and commentators still saw Red everywhere—no matter what, facts be damned, Russia must have cost Clinton the election. New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow declared, “It is absolutely clear that the Russians did interfere in our election. This is not a debatable issue. This is not fake news. This is not a witch hunt. This happened.” Blow was not alone. By early 2017, intelligence officials and corporate news outlets repeatedly claimed, without making public any corroborating evidence, that Russians had hacked the election. Some of the most vocal proponents of the Russian hacking tale have been Louise Mensch, who has a sordid past of peddling unsubstantiated claims; Democratic Party apologist and MSNBC host Rachel Maddow; Eric Boehlert of Media Matters; Democratic Party–friendly pollster Matt McDermott; and comedian and critic Bill Maher.

Rolling Stone journalist Matt Taibbi argued that the reason so many journalists touted their belief in the Russian hackers tale without evidence—a belief he called “Putin Derangement Syndrome”—is that no one wants to be the person to claim the story is false and then get proven wrong. So instead, these reporters, commentators, and politicians jump on board with the claim, knowing they won’t be blamed individually if all of them turn out to be wrong. Taibbi argued that the Russian story was a distraction from the problems within the Democratic Party: “If the [Democratic] party’s leaders really believe that Russian intervention is anywhere in the top 100 list of reasons why some 155 million eligible voters (out of 231 million) chose not to pull a lever for Hillary Clinton last year, they’re farther along down the Purity of Essence nut-hole than Mark Warner.” The media’s ongoing demonizing of Russia, however, was successful. One NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll found that 55 percent of Americans were “bothered by Russian election hacking.” This is despite no smoking gun evidence coming to light of actual Russian hacking that demonstrably tipped the scales in Trump’s favor.
The demonization concerning Russian-inspired “fake news” was not reserved for Russia alone, as social media companies like Facebook and Google were also blamed for the supposed flood of “fake news.” Outlets like BuzzFeed, Fox, National Public Radio (NPR), Vox, New York Magazine, and MSNBC, among others, piled on. The conjecture from the Huffington Post and MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow went even further, arguing, without evidence, that the Russian government was behind a fake news “tsunami” that elevated both Sanders’s campaign in the primary and Trump’s victory in the general election. The marriage of Russian hackers with “fake news,” while still uncorroborated, has been extremely successful. A 2017 Harvard University poll found that millennials believed that 48.5 percent of the news they saw in their Facebook feeds was fake. This resulted in members of the Democratic Party proposing legislation for the immediate retractions of incorrect statements and the elimination of “fake news.”

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg initially scoffed at accusations that his company peddled “fake news” that swayed the 2016 presidential election. However, mounting pressure led Facebook to examine the issue of fake news on its social media platform. By late 2016, Facebook had agreed to team up with the Poynter Institute’s International Fact-Checking Network, a group consisting of five corporate news outlets, to develop a tool that will fact-check stories for Facebook users. Their algorithmic tool, released in March 2017, claimed it would flag “fake” news (labeling it as “disputed”) and promote “fact based” stories. The decision by Facebook to create these algorithms was hailed by corporate outlets such as the Washington Post, Huffington Post, and NBC. Facebook also began cracking down on “Fake News Accounts,” closing over thirty thousand accounts through spring of 2017. However, their approaches are far from foolproof and pose threats to free speech and expression.

One recent investigation into Facebook’s algorithms and internal rules regarding the limits of hate speech and political expression yielded troubling insights. ProPublica’s research into a trove of internal company documents revealed previously secret information about Facebook censors (what the company calls “content reviewers”), suggesting that, “at least in some instances, the company’s hate-speech rules tend to favor elites and governments over grassroots
activists and racial minorities. In so doing, they serve the business interests of the global company, which relies on national governments not to block its service to their citizens."\textsuperscript{97} The ProPublica report further noted that “Facebook’s rules constitute a legal world of their own. They stand in sharp contrast to the United States’ First Amendment protections of free speech, which courts have interpreted to allow exactly the sort of speech and writing censored by the company’s hate speech algorithm.” Facebook’s “color blind” algorithmic approach to policing content is an example of their wish to remain unaccountable while deliberately engaging in censorship. Legal scholar Danielle Citron pointed out that while an indiscriminate filter might sound egalitarian, it does not actually provide equal protection to all groups, and, in fact, it will “protect the people who least need it and take [protection] away from those who really need it.”\textsuperscript{98}

It should be noted that Facebook’s rules regarding why particular content is censored are not published, so they are not specifically made known to users who have little means by which to appeal decisions that seem to be made in the dark, and with no real way to measure consistency. Further, Facebook announced that, in addition to increasing its use of algorithms, it intends to nearly double its number of hired censors to 7,500 this year.\textsuperscript{99} These approaches to addressing issues of political speech and expression, as well as fake news concerns, however possibly well-intentioned, are not only controversial but are misguided and anti-intellectual. ProPublica’s review showed how these rules were imperfectly and unequally applied, nontransparent, and paternalistic. Most of all, they go against the very fiber of the First Amendment.

\section*{CONCLUSION}

\textit{Facts and the truth are not partisan. They are the bedrock of our democracy. And you are either with them, with us, with our Constitution, our history, and the future of our nation, or you are against it. Everyone must answer that question.}

—Dan Rather, former anchor, \textit{CBS Evening News},

two days after Trump’s inauguration\textsuperscript{100}
After the numerous efforts to fight fake news and combat alternative facts, who will check the fact-checkers and what criteria will be used? Fact-checking alone can never scale to the threat posed by actual fake news, which is rightfully called propaganda. Instead of what amounts to censorship by social media sites outsourcing to fact-checking organizations and employing various algorithms, McCarthyite blacklists used by sites like PropOrNot that include entirely legitimate independent journalistic outlets as “fake news,” or legislation designed to limit the effects of the “fake news” by literally banning the media from lying (good luck with that one!), the real antidote is one that Project Censored has relied upon for over forty years—critical media literacy education.

The corporate media’s lauding of Facebook’s act of censoring so-called “fake news” is emblematic of the problems concerning press freedom in the US. We not only need a more open media, we need one that encourages more critical thinking. People need access to education that teaches people how to think, not what to think, with a focus on how to determine information and source integrity as well as how to formulate and ask critical questions. Instead of addressing these challenges, the corporate press, which has increasingly covered more and more Junk Food News stories over the years, have now helped weaponize the real problem of fake news, often using the threat of fake news to justify censorship of information and individuals critical of establishment power and the plutocracy.

On January 20, 2017, a president who was both a symptom and a product of post-truth America moved into the White House, with hordes of the Ignorati on his coattails. Since then, the Democratic Party and the corporate media have engaged in scapegoating while rewriting their past failures, further helping to pave the way for a post-truth dystopia. Their endless infatuations with Russia, hacking, and “fake news” are examples of what H.L. Mencken described as a “combat of crazes . . . to keep the populace alarmed . . . by an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary.” This charade of speculation takes away from other important and very real issues—such as rising inequality, structural racism and sexism, endless wars, the impact of climate change, and more provable corrupt and criminal behaviors inside the Trump administration.

As this book goes to print, investigations into Trump and his
administration are underway on several fronts. Time will tell what those may yield. But the failures of the corporate media and education system have already contributed to the current post-truth environment by creating nothing short of an epistemological crisis. This has proven to be detrimental to our democratic process and an affront to the First Amendment rights of the American people. Creating the better world we envision will not depend on rewriting recent history to suit our purposes or flatter our illusions, but rather will depend on creating an ever more democratic, diverse, and critical free press.

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Notes


5. Idiocracy, directed by Mike Judge (Twentieth Century Fox, 2006). According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), “Private Joe Bauers, the definition of ‘average American,’ is selected by the Pentagon to be the guinea pig for a top-secret hibernation program. Forgotten, he awakes five centuries in the future. He discovers a society so incredibly dumbed down that he’s easily the most intelligent person alive.” (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0387808/) Little did Judge know it would not take five hundred years, but rather a little over a decade.


7. George Carlin, Life is Worth Losing, directed by Rocco Urbisci (HBO, 2005).


10. Idiocracy, directed by Mike Judge.


18. Adam Johnson, “Downplaying US Contribution to Potential Yemen Famine,” Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), February 27, 2017, www.fair.org/home/downplaying-us-contribution-to-potential-yemen-famine/; “For almost two years, the United States has backed—with weapons, logistics and political support—a Saudi-led war in Yemen that has left over 10,000 dead, 40,000 wounded, 2.5 million internally displaced, 2.2 million children suffering from malnutrition and over 90 percent of civilians in need of humanitarian aid.”


20. Ibid.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
35. Smith, “#Envelopegate.”
39. Ibid.

mote-an-alternative-history/.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.


50. Ibid.


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53. Ibid.


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58. “Advertising Disguised as News,” TV Tropes, no date, tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?
Main/AdvertisingDisguisedAsNews; Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, Manufacturing


inaugural-crowd-than-obama.


Sullivan, “It’s Time to Retire the Tainted Term.”


Matt Taibbi, “Putin Derangement Syndrome Arrives.”


90. Borchers, “Millennials Don’t Like Trump.”


96. Ibid.


98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

