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***“Living in a Post-Truth Era”***

The three articles below are a small sample of the attention that has been focused recently on “post-truth,” “fake news,” and the manipulation of facts and beliefs to shape a political or partisan agenda.

- Are we all complicit in this phenomenon, or are we the victims of something out of our control?
- Is this an entirely new problem, brought on by new technology, the Internet, and social media? And are we talking about lying or something different from lying?
- Hasn't misinformation always been a tool, especially in times of war? What clues can we find in our history that indicate that what we're experiencing is not really new -- but rather that the methods have become more sophisticated, more accessible to everyone, more powerful, and more visible?
- How does the constant flow of information make the spread of false news easier? Do traditional TV outlets like CNN and Fox News help or hurt?
- In what ways do we need to process news differently so that we aren't easily manipulated? Do teachers need to help students navigate the media with greater skepticism? Are there other things we can do?
- Is the truth still the truth? Are the facts still the facts? And if so, how can we maintain our ability to make the right judgments now and looking back on history?

## ***How the Internet Is Loosening Our Grip on the Truth***

THE NEW YORK TIMES **Farhad Manjoo** NOV. 2, 2016

Next week, if all goes well, someone will win the presidency. What happens after that is anyone's guess. Will the losing side believe the results? Will the bulk of Americans recognize the legitimacy of the new president? And will we all be able to clean up the piles of lies, hoaxes and other dung that have been hurled so freely in this hypercharged, fact-free election?

Much of that remains unclear, because the internet is distorting our collective grasp on the truth. Polls show that many of us have burrowed into our own echo chambers of information. In a recent Pew Research Center survey, [81 percent of respondents](#) said that partisans not only differed about policies, but also about “basic facts.”

For years, technologists and other utopians have argued that online news would be a boon to democracy. That has not been the case.

More than a decade ago, as a young reporter covering the intersection of technology and politics, I noticed the opposite. The internet was filled with [9/11 truthers](#), and partisans who believed [against all evidence](#) that George W. Bush stole the 2004 election from John Kerry, or that Barack Obama was a foreign-born Muslim. (He was born in Hawaii and is a practicing Christian.)

Of course, America has long been [entranced by conspiracy theories](#). But the online hoaxes and fringe theories appeared more virulent than their offline predecessors. They were also more numerous and more persistent. During Mr. Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, [every attempt to debunk the](#) birther rumor seemed to raise its prevalence online.

In [a 2008 book](#), I argued that the internet would usher in a “post-fact” age. Eight years later, in the death throes of an election that features a candidate who once led the campaign to lie about President Obama's birth, there is more reason to despair about truth in the online age.

Why? Because if you study the dynamics of how information moves online today, pretty much everything conspires against truth.

## **You're Not Rational**

The root of the problem with online news is something that initially sounds great: We have a lot more media to choose from.

In the last 20 years, the internet has overrun your morning paper and evening newscast with a smorgasbord of information sources, from well-funded online magazines to muckraking fact-checkers to the three guys in your country club whose Facebook group claims proof that Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump are really the same person.

A wider variety of news sources was supposed to be the bulwark of a rational age — [“the marketplace of ideas,”](#) the boosters called it.

But that's not how any of this works. Psychologists and other social scientists have repeatedly shown that when confronted with diverse information choices, people rarely act like rational, civic-minded automatons. Instead, we are [roiled by preconceptions and biases](#), and [we usually do what feels easiest](#) — we gorge on information that confirms our ideas, and we shun what does not.

This dynamic becomes especially problematic in a news landscape of near-infinite choice. Whether navigating Facebook, Google or The New York Times's smartphone app, you are given ultimate control — if you see something you don't like, you can easily

tap away to something more pleasing. Then we all share what we found with our likeminded social networks, creating closed-off, shoulder-patting circles online.

That's the theory, at least. The empirical research on so-called echo chambers is mixed. Facebook's data scientists have run large studies on the idea and [found it wanting](#). The social networking company says that by exposing you to more people, [Facebook adds diversity to your news diet](#).

Others disagree. [A study published last year](#) by researchers at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, in Italy, found that homogeneous online networks help conspiracy theories persist and grow online.

“This creates an ecosystem in which the truth value of the information doesn't matter,” said Walter Quattrociochi, one of the study's authors. “All that matters is whether the information fits in your narrative.”

## **No Power in Proof**

Digital technology has blessed us with better ways to capture and disseminate news. There are cameras and audio recorders everywhere, and as soon as something happens, you can find primary proof of it online.

You would think that greater primary documentation would lead to a better cultural agreement about the “truth.” In fact, the opposite has happened.

Consider the difference in the examples of the John F. Kennedy assassination and 9/11. While you've probably seen [only a single film clip of the scene from Dealey Plaza in 1963](#) when President Kennedy was shot, hundreds of television and amateur cameras were pointed at the scene on 9/11. Yet neither issue is settled for Americans; [in one recent survey](#), about as many people said the government was concealing the truth about 9/11 as those who said the same about the Kennedy assassination.

Documentary proof seems to have lost its power. If the Kennedy conspiracies were rooted in an absence of documentary evidence, the 9/11 theories benefited from a surfeit of it. So many pictures from 9/11 flooded the internet, often without much context about what was being shown, that [conspiracy theorists could pick and choose among them to show off exactly the narrative they preferred](#). There is also the looming specter of Photoshop: Now, because any digital image can be doctored, [people can freely dismiss any bit of inconvenient documentary evidence as having been somehow altered](#).

This gets to the deeper problem: We all tend to filter documentary evidence through our own biases. [Researchers have shown](#) that two people with differing points of view can look at the same picture, video or document and come away with strikingly different ideas about what it shows.

That dynamic has played out repeatedly this year. Some people look at the WikiLeaks revelations about Mrs. Clinton's campaign and see a smoking gun, while others say it's no big deal, and that besides, it's been doctored or stolen or taken out of context. Surveys show that people who liked Mr. Trump [saw the Access Hollywood tape where he casually referenced groping women as mere "locker room talk"](#); those who didn't like him considered it the worst thing in the world.

## **Lies as an Institution**

One of the apparent advantages of online news is persistent fact-checking. Now when someone says something false, journalists can show they're lying. And if the factchecking sites do their jobs well, they're likely to show up in online searches and social networks, providing a ready reference for people who want to correct the record.

But that hasn't quite happened. Today dozens of news outlets routinely fact-check the candidates and much else online, but the endeavor has proved largely ineffective against a tide of fakery.

That's because the lies have also become institutionalized. There are now entire sites whose only mission is to publish outrageous, completely fake news online (like real news, fake news has become a business). Partisan Facebook pages have gotten into the act; a recent [BuzzFeed analysis of top political pages on Facebook](#) showed that rightwing sites published false or misleading information 38 percent of the time, and lefty sites did so 20 percent of the time.

"Where hoaxes before were shared by your great-aunt who didn't understand the internet, the misinformation that circulates online is now being reinforced by political campaigns, by political candidates or by amorphous groups of tweeters working around the campaigns," said Caitlin Dewey, a reporter at The Washington Post who once wrote a column called "What Was Fake on the Internet This Week."

# ***The Real Story About Fake News Is Partisanship***

The New York Times **Amanda Taub**, JAN. 11, 2017

In his [farewell address](#) as president Tuesday, Barack Obama warned of the dangers of uncontrolled partisanship. American democracy, he said, is weakened "when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character are turned off from public service, so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are not just misguided, but somehow malevolent."

That seems a well-founded worry. Partisan bias now operates more like racism than mere political disagreement, academic research on the subject shows. And this widespread prejudice could have serious consequences for American democracy.

The partisan divide is easy to detect if you know where to look. Consider the thinly disguised sneer in most articles and editorials about so-called fake news. The very phrase implies that the people who read and spread the kind of false political stories that swirled online during the election campaign must either be too dumb to realize they're being duped or too dishonest to care that they're spreading lies.

But the fake-news phenomenon is not the result of personal failings. And it is not limited to one end of the political spectrum. Rather, Americans' deep bias against the political party they oppose is so strong that it acts as a kind of partisan prism for facts, refracting a different reality to Republicans than to Democrats.

Partisan refraction has fueled the rise of fake news, according to researchers who study the phenomenon. But the repercussions go far beyond stories shared on Facebook and Reddit, affecting Americans' faith in government — and the government's ability to function.

### **The power of partisan bias**

In 2009, Sean Westwood, then a Stanford Ph.D. student, discovered that partisanship was one of the most powerful forces in American life. He got annoyed with persistent squabbles among his friends, and he noticed that they seemed to be breaking along partisan lines, even when they concerned issues that ostensibly had nothing to do with politics.

“I didn't expect political conflict to spill over from political aspects of our lives to nonpolitical aspects of our lives, and I saw that happening in my social group,” said Mr. Westwood, now a professor at Dartmouth.

He wondered if this was a sign that the role of partisanship in American life was changing. Previously, partisan conflict mostly applied to political issues like taxes or abortion. Now it seemed, among his acquaintances at least, to be operating more like racism or sexism, fueling negative or positive judgments on people themselves, based on nothing more than their party identification.

Curious, Mr. Westwood looked at the National Election Study, a long-running survey that tracks Americans' political opinions and behavior. He found that until a few decades ago, people's feelings about their party and the opposing party were not too different. But starting in the 1980s, Americans began to report increasingly negative opinions of their opposing party.

Since then, that polarization has grown even stronger. The reasons for that are unclear.

“I suspect that part of it has to do with the rise of constant 24-hour news,” Mr. Westwood said, “and also the shift that we’ve unfortunately gone through in which elections are more or less now a permanent state of affairs.”

To find out more about the consequences of that polarization, Mr. Westwood, along with Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford professor who studies political communication, embarked on a series of experiments. They [found](#) something quite shocking: Not only did party identity turn out to affect people’s behavior and decision making broadly, even on apolitical subjects, but according to their data it also had more influence on the way Americans behaved than race did.

That is a sea change in the role of partisanship in public life, Mr. Westwood said.

“Partisanship, for a long period of time, wasn’t viewed as part of who we are,” he said. “It wasn’t core to our identity. It was just an ancillary trait. But in the modern era we view party identity as something akin to gender, ethnicity or race — the core traits that we use to describe ourselves to others.”

That has made the personal political. “Politics has become so important that people select relationships on that basis,” Mr. Iyengar said. For instance, it has become quite rare for Democrats to marry Republicans, according to the same Westwood/Iyengar paper, which cited a finding in a 2009 [survey](#) of married couples that only 9 percent consisted of Democrat-Republican pairs. And it has become more rare for children to have a different party affiliation from their parents.

But it has also made the political personal. Today, political parties are no longer just the people who are supposed to govern the way you want. They are a team to support, and a tribe to feel a part of. And the public’s view of politics is becoming more and more zerosum: It’s about helping their team win, and making sure the other team loses.

### **How partisan bias fuels fake news**

Partisan tribalism makes people more inclined to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true.

“If I’m a rabid Trump voter and I don’t know much about public affairs, and I see something about some scandal about Hillary Clinton’s aides being involved in an assassination attempt, or that story about the pope endorsing Trump, then I’d be inclined to believe it,” Mr. Iyengar said. “This is reinforcing my beliefs about the value of a Trump candidacy.”

And Clinton voters, he said, would be similarly drawn to stories that deride Mr. Trump as a demagogue or a sexual predator.

Sharing those stories on social media is a way to show public support for one’s partisan team — roughly the equivalent of painting your face with team colors on game day.

“You want to show that you’re a good member of your tribe,” Mr. Westwood said. “You want to show others that Republicans are bad or Democrats are bad, and your tribe is good. Social media provides a unique opportunity to publicly declare to the world what your beliefs are and how willing you are to denigrate the opposition and reinforce your own political candidates.”

Partisan bias fuels fake news because people of all partisan stripes are generally quite bad at figuring out what news stories to believe. Instead, they use trust as a [shortcut](#). Rather than evaluate a story directly, people look to see if someone credible believes it, and rely on that person’s judgment to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

“There are many, many decades of research on communication on the importance of source credibility,” said John Sides, a professor at George Washington University who studies political communication.

Partisan bias strongly influences whom people perceive as trustworthy. One of the experiments that Mr. Westwood and Mr. Iyengar [conducted](#) demonstrated that people are much more likely to trust members of their party. In that experiment, they gave study participants \$10 and asked how much they wanted to give to another player. Whatever that second player received would be multiplied, and he or she would then have a chance to return some of the cash to the original player.

How much confidence would the participant have that the other player would give some of the money back? They found that participants gave more money if they were told the other player supported the same political party as they did.

Partisanship’s influence on trust means that when there is a partisan divide among experts, Mr. Sides said, “you get people believing wildly different sets of facts.”

### **Beyond fake news: how the partisan divide affects politics**

The fake news that flourished during the election is a noticeable manifestation of that dynamic, but it’s not what experts like Mr. Iyengar and Mr. Westwood find most worrying. To them, the bigger concern is that the natural consequence of this growing national divide will be a feedback loop in which the public’s bias encourages extremism among politicians, undermining public faith in government institutions and their ability to function.

# Let's Get Metaphysical About Trump and the 'Post-Truth Era'

The nature of truth is a difficult philosophical problem, but the president hasn't made it any harder.

*THE WALL STREET JOURNAL* May 5, 2017

By Crispin Sartwell

Occasionally metaphysics invades politics, to the surprise even of metaphysicians like me. In this “post-truth era”—according, for example, to many of those who participated in the recent March for Science—the very nature of truth itself is at stake because of the Trump administration’s “alternative facts” and the growth of “fake news.”

In the Trump era, says celebrity physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson—who adds that this the most important thing he’s ever said—people “have lost the ability to judge what is true and what is not.” The Washington Post quotes Cara Santa Maria, a “science communicator”: “The very idea of evidence and logic and reason is being threatened by individuals and interests with the power to do real harm.”

The [New York Times](#)’s philosophy blog declares that “Trump stirs up confusion about the veracity of settled knowledge and, through sheer assertion, elevates belief to the status of truth.” Meantime, “We’re here to talk about the truth,” comedian Hasan Minhaj recently told the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner. “It is 2017 and we are living in the golden age of lying.”

The nature of truth may be the hardest philosophical problem. It may even be strictly insoluble, because many theories of truth might be true according to themselves, which doesn’t mean they’re true. The answers philosophers have given through the millennia have been as various and as mutually incompatible as could readily be imagined.

Truth has been held, among other things, to be the correspondence of what we say to reality; to be a matter of the way a set of beliefs hang together; to be what we all agree about or would agree about in the long run; or to be, as William James said, “what works best in leading us” to solutions to our practical problems. Gigantic systems of metaphysics have been built on the foundation of truth—or on its dismissal as a delusory question, as trivial or redundant.

Whatever truth may be, politicians have often been dishonest in various respects, and many or even all regimes engage in propaganda and fabrication of various sorts. To people such as those

quoted above, however, the current situation appears to be qualitatively new and different. The lies, it seems to them, are more thorough and destructive, coming from more authoritative sources, and the public is more gullible or vulnerable.

Philosophers may not know what truth is, but the sudden flourishing of alethiology in politics and media holds some lessons about what it is not. Let us take seriously for a moment the commonplace claim that left and right, or blue and red, live in “different realities”—each fed by different streams of information, each figuring out what to believe by feeling for the consensus of people they believe are like themselves.

Far from suggesting that the truth is a matter of coherence within a set of beliefs, or the way they hang together, this suggests that nobody on either side thinks that at all. Each side thinks the other side’s version of reality is globally false, and that its own is globally true. That does not commit anyone to saying they are both right—though they may both be quite wrong—but it does commit each of them to saying that a belief system can hang together very well and not be true.

That is, if you’re on the left, you probably think the right is getting its information from bad sources, believing whatever serves its agenda, producing a false worldview. If you’re on the right, you likely believe that the mainstream media is feeding people slanted information, a false narrative. But both sides agree the coherence of their opponent’s worldview is irrelevant to its truth. In some ways, the better it hangs together, the more dangerous and deluded it is.

Likewise, truth cannot be a matter of social consensus. That groups are in agreement has no tendency to show that what they believe is true, or else flat contradictions are true in a situation in which we are polarized into groups with contradictory beliefs. As consensus tightens, it degenerates into self-confirmation and collective delusion. Each side already believes this about the other, so each side is committed to the view that truth is something more than agreement. Nor can “truth” mean merely what works, if by “works” one means persuading people or guiding their behavior or opinions in some desirable direction.

That makes it very odd to formulate the thing in terms of alternative realities or the disintegration of truth itself. Both sides need the truth, and they need it not to be relative to any group’s particular set of beliefs—or they need to stop attacking their opponents. There’s nothing unusual about a situation in which people disagree about what the truth is, and the concept of truth itself is not particularly at stake right now.

It’s a bizarre misapprehension, in short, that truth is disintegrating or in crisis. Fabrications do not undermine truth—they presuppose it. Lies can harm people, but they can’t harm truth itself. They conceptually depend on it. The right conclusion from all this isn’t that truth is disintegrating, but that truth is hard and intrusive, that it does not readily bend to human will or agreement or narrative. The power of the Russian intelligence services or a Sean Spicer press briefing is considerable, but it does not include the ability to bend the fabric of reality.

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