

Fact-Checking the Establishment's "Fact-Checkers": How the "Fake News" Story Is Fake News

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It would be an understatement to say that during U.S. President Donald Trump's term in office, the issue of truth and falsehoods has been a central topic of political discourse. It was a reoccurring issue throughout the 2016 election and has only continued following his unlikely triumph. While naïve liberals who fetishize Trump would have us believe he [is the first political figure to ever lie routinely](#), the real radical departure of the numerous false statements that seemed to propel, rather than hinder, his success was their lack of refinement and unpredictability.

Shortly after Trump took the oath of office, campaign manager Kellyanne Conway infamously used the phrase "alternative facts" while defending Press Secretary Sean Spicer's dispute of the attendance drop at the inauguration ceremony from predecessor Barack Obama. The low-hanging fruit of Conway's remarks were widely interpreted as an instance of 'Orwellian doublespeak', but the kernel of truth in them was missed by the self-styled 'respectable' media of the establishment who hide behind a guise of objectivity and self-appointed expertise while positioning themselves as omniscient arbiters of truth. Spicer's claim was indeed an obvious lie, yet the general accuracy of Conway's point was that what one considers 'factual' often comes down to worldview.

For the U.S. political establishment, there is only one acceptable worldview. The terrifying significance of Trump's victory, which defied their so-called expert polling and turned the New York Times forecast needle 180-degrees, is that the propaganda arm of mainstream media has become irrelevant and the American political system is collapsing. Hillary Clinton's defeat was the culmination of a steady, inevitable process as evening news audiences have been shrinking for years while print media has approached near obsolescence. Simultaneously, more and more people are turning to alternative sources for news and information, albeit some of it unfortunate.

The introduction of the term "fake news" into the political lexicon has been deliberate and is a desperate attempt by the establishment to maintain its grip on the flow of knowledge. It was strategically re-appropriated by Trump himself, who frequently accuses mainstream media of reporting misinformation. Unfortunately, what he deems "fake news" is merely that which undermines him politically or personally, but there is a truth at the core of his crude attacks on the press. Trump's labeling of mainstream media as "the enemy of the people" was unintentionally accurate only because he was referring to that which undercuts his own power. Nevertheless, it is an appropriate label considering that 90% of mass media—newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, film studios, and internet news content—[is owned by just six conglomerates](#) in General Electric, News Corp, CBS, Disney, Viacom and Time Warner. Some like G.E. are contracted by the Pentagon.

Frankfurt School critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno once wrote of ‘the culture industry’, or how the mechanized standardization of popular culture homogenizes everyday life under capitalism. They would likely cringe at the very idea of the “fake news” phenomenon, which implies that what mass media typically produces is “real.” A billionaire reality television star becoming President is itself the perfect apotheosis of a society governed by a deceptive mass media rendering it docile. Unsurprisingly, the fourth estate was only interested in superficially reducing Trump’s attack on their credibility to his propensity to behave like a despot, something which in their counterfeit world only exists in other countries.

Not only does mass media provide the public with what comic George Carlin called an ‘illusion of choice’, but it acts as a dictation machine for the military-industrial complex. Most notably, virtually all the major news outlets parroted the lies of the Bush administration with its fabrication of evidence that Iraq possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction to sell the U.S. invasion of Baghdad in 2003. Its monumental failure to hold the Bush administration accountable has directly correlated with the rapidly declining public trust in the media ever since. Perhaps the reason the phrase resonated with voters during the election is because it generally acknowledged the enormous gap between the reported world and the actual one they live in. Noam Chomsky and the late Edward S. Herman wrote the definitive manual on the media’s propaganda function and social engineering in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*.

In reality, the phrase “fake news” was inserted into the mass political consciousness by the leading US spy agencies, who clearly favored a Clinton victory, through mass media to stoke fears of ‘domestic disinformation’ being spread on social networks by the Russian government. Just as in the lead-up to the Iraq War, major news outlets have simply repeated, instead of scrutinizing, the intelligence community’s unproven claims that Moscow manipulated voters by spreading ‘disinformation’ to influence the election. As a result, the meaning of the expression has been redefined to discredit any news from a political viewpoint that challenges the status quo. The media’s strings have been pulled by a modern equivalent of the C.I.A.’s Operation Mockingbird influence campaign during the Cold War which appears to have been resurrected for its sequel.

Trump’s opponent, Hillary Clinton, was equally responsible for the idiom’s ubiquitous usage and weaponized it in the same manner—not to identify actual disinformation, but to denote any claims, true or false, which tarnished her image. Clinton dismissed the significance of the WikiLeaks release of transcripts of her speeches to Goldman Sachs and leaked emails which exposed her conspiring with the Democratic National Committee for the party’s nomination against her primary opponent, Bernie Sanders. As a diversion, the genuine leaks were conflated with wild speculation on the right-wing fringe about her health and a debunked conspiracy about a child sex ring at a D.C. pizzeria. However, Clinton and the media *never disputed the leak origins and authenticity*.

This left the American voter a choice between a far right demagogue speaking to their confused grievances, or a career politician with close ties to a constellation of global financiers who professed to be a champion of women’s rights as she accepted millions from Persian Gulf monarchies that stone women to death for committing adultery. Unfortunately for Hillary, it was easy to tell she would be more comfortable at a Bilderberg Group meeting than at your local feminist bookstore. None of this is to say that Trump isn’t cut from the same cloth, but he expertly cast himself as an outsider up against an elite and they played right into his hand.

The foremost purveyor of truly damaging false news has been liberal flagship, the Washington Post. Owned by the world's wealthiest man in technocrat Jeff Bezos, whose company Amazon [provides the C.I.A. with its cloud infrastructure](#) through a \$600 million contract with the Defense Department, it is structurally incompatible for such an asset to ever be critical of the military-industrial complex without working against its financial incentive. Despite that enormous and undisclosed conflict of interest, the Post openly collaborated with the C.I.A. to leak unverified claims by anonymous officials that Russia 'cyber meddled' to undermine the democratic process in favor of a Trump victory. In a paradigm of yellow journalism, WaPo published such unreliable hearsay uncritically while keeping the evidence and sources entirely secret. They presented the accusations as if they should be taken at face value based on the intelligence community's supposed infallibility, as if to wipe clean the collective memory of the Iraq War and the disclosures of the NSA's global surveillance program.

The Washington Post [also promoted PropOrNot](#), an anonymously written website that labeled dozens of news sites, some of which this author has written for, as "routine peddlers of Russian propaganda." The site alleges that the spreading of articles by the targeted outlets somehow influenced the election, when the overlapping characteristic between the pages smeared was not support for Donald Trump or opposition to Hillary Clinton, but a critical regard for U.S. foreign policy across the political spectrum. PropOrNot also advertises a section entitled 'related projects' which mostly lists similar "fact-checking" websites promoted by Google and Facebook. Pseudo-analysis of news has become another weapon of choice for the establishment's psychological warfare, but unlike grassroots watchdog groups who hold journalism under a critical microscope such as [Media Lens](#) and [Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting](#), "fact-checking" sites mechanically repeat the pre-approved narratives of corporate media without exception.

The referees of truth endorsed by big tech all don the misleading disclaimer that they have no political affiliations or funding from biased organizations. Take for instance the highly cited FactCheck.org, owned by the Annenberg Public Policy Center and bankrolled by its endowment, the Annenberg Foundation. The late billionaire publishing tycoon Walter H. Annenberg is perhaps most known for his massive painting collection donated to prominent museums and his financial support for the arts. However, he spent much of his life in philanthropy for the purpose of [rehabilitating the family reputation tarnished by his crooked father](#), Moses "Moe" Annenberg, who was convicted in one of the largest tax fraud cases in U.S. history during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration.

CARBONDALE, ILL. MONDAY, AUGUST 21, 1939

ANNENBERG, SON FREED UNDER BOND



Moses Annenberg

Walter Annenberg

Moses Annenberg, publisher of the Philadelphia Enquirer and the Daily Racing Form and other racing publications, surrenders to the United States marshal in the Chicago, Ill., federal building following his indictment on charges of income tax evasion. He is accompanied by his son, Walter. After finger-printing the Annenbergs are released under bonds totalling \$125,000.

Moe Annenberg started his career working for newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst as a distribution manager where he hired mobsters like Lucky Luciano to terrorize their competitors. He later became a media mogul himself using the same illicit tactics until he was indicted for his financial misconduct in 1939. The young Walter Annenberg worked for his father and initially faced similar charges, but they were dropped after the elder Annenberg pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years in prison. While his father took the rap, Walter Annenberg was free to continue to build the family fortune and eventually a media empire, using his riches to carry on the family legacy of tax evasion in the form of charitable donations. The scam of philanthropy is a practice typical of the ultra-wealthy who mask their influence on global affairs under the phony banner of altruism.

Walter Annenberg later became a diplomat as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom under President Richard Nixon and was even knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, whom he frequently hosted at the Annenberg family's 200-acre estate along with numerous other figures in high society, from Ronald and Nancy Reagan to the deposed Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza. Despite FactCheck.org's endorsement from Silicon Valley oligarchs as an

impartial source, it turns out the Annenberg Foundation also [made huge financial donations](#) to the Clinton Foundation over the years and could not be more in the service of the powers that be.

Google also advertises the U.S.-government funded Polygraph.info as a reputable source, a site launched by the C.I.A.'s Radio Free Europe/Free Liberty and Voice of America "news" organizations. RFE/FL is currently based in Prague but was previously headquartered in West Germany during the Cold War where it broadcast its anti-communist propaganda to undermine the Soviet Union. Polygraph.info now serves a similar purpose of information warfare in cyberspace for the revived Cold War 2.0 while presenting itself as a fact-checking source to counter "Russian propaganda" outlets. The [C.I.A. openly admitted the true character of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty](#) and its origins on its own website:

"On June 1, 1949, a group of prominent American businessmen, lawyers, and philanthropists—including Allen Dulles, who would become Director of Central Intelligence in 1953—launched the National Committee for Free Europe (NCFE) at a press release in New York. Only a handful of people knew that NCFE was actually the public face of an innovative "psychological warfare" project undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). That operation—which soon gave rise to Radio Free Europe—would become one of the longest running and successful covert action campaigns ever mounted by the United States."

Meanwhile, the [most dubious](#) of all the advocated verification sites is the popular domain Snopes.com. Snopes was founded in the mid-90s originally as Urban Legends Reference Pages, a site started by an apparently ordinary California couple, David and Barbara Mikkelsen, to 'debunk' urban folklore. Its moniker comes from a fictional family in the Snopes trilogy of novels by renowned modernist writer William Faulkner. In the series, the Snopes family consists of disturbed relatives who commit murder, pedophilia, bestiality, pornography, racism, theft, corruption and other misdeeds. Thus, anyone 'exposed' by the site making claims it determines to be false are likened to a seedy member of the Snopes family.

Despite its bottom-up outward appearance, the site never breaks from mainstream news accounts of events. For example, Snopes maintains that the well-documented allegations of ties between the volunteer rescue organization Syrian Civil Defense, AKA the White Helmets, and terrorist groups participating in the Syrian Civil War is "false." It does not address that there are multiple videos of White Helmets members facilitating and participating [in executions](#), [celebrating](#) with militants of Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Al-Nusra Front, and [dumping the bodies](#) of Syrian Arab Army soldiers. The issue is clearly still a matter of dispute among the journalism community as many credible figures, from Seymour Hersh to John Pilger, have expressed skepticism about the group, but Snopes per usual made a one-sided determination. It may be able to disprove tabloid fodder or the likes of Breitbart and InfoWars, but it is no authority on matters of geopolitics and should not be irresponsibly promoted as such. Maybe it should stick to its roots debunking popular myths about whether or not earwigs crawl into human ears.

Since the site expanded to include politics and world events, it became extremely popular over time and now averages millions of views. In the meantime, Barbara and David Mikkelsen have gone through [a bitter divorce](#) and the latter has retained control of the site, hiring a team of assistants allegedly from its message board to replace his ex-wife. Although

it claims to have a tiny staff, Snopes somehow manages to produce an extremely prolific amount of investigative articles. Given its scope and body of work, it is difficult to believe it is only receiving its financial support from ad revenue and GoFundMe campaigns alone or is as small an operation it claims. Until recently it was in an ongoing legal battle with Proper Media, an advertising agency with a 50% stake in its ownership which for a time put its future in jeopardy.

Snopes does admit to accepting \$100,000 from Facebook for participating in their fact-checking partnership effort following the 2016 election. Rather than being punished for its mishandling of the private information of tens of millions of profiles, the social media giant is being rewarded for its failure to protect user privacy from data breaching. Earlier this year, Facebook announced it [had partnered with the Atlantic Council](#), an elite Washington think tank [funded by](#) the U.S. State Department, NATO, foreign governments like United Arab Emirates, weapons contractor Lockheed Martin, oil giant Chevron, and features Henry Kissinger on its board of directors. In a disturbing corporate-state collaboration, Silicon Valley has been empowered to be the umpire of determining authentic news and given the authority to stifle subversive content with no oversight or legal ramifications. All of this begs the question—who fact-checks the “fact checkers”? Who gets to determine what is or what isn’t “fake news”? The ruling elite, apparently.

In her memoir, Hillary Clinton made it clear what constitutes fake news—the release of her emails and transcripts of speeches revealing her corruption and subservience to Wall Street. WikiLeaks’ reporting was never impugned, however, therefore what constitutes “fake news” is actually *real news* or anything that threatens those in power. Instead of encouraging media literacy, the working class is regarded with utter disdain by the establishment who have made clear they must control what the public is allowed to see because they can no longer be trusted to make the correct decision, i.e. vote for the candidate favored by the military-intelligence apparatus. The true purpose behind the “fact-checking” PSY-OP is to stigmatize criticism of the neocon political establishment as a whole and liken anyone who does so to those who believe global warming is a hoax or that the earth is flat.

Unsurprisingly, it turns out that Trump, like Barack Obama before him, has only expanded the U.S. war machine as President. Unlikely it may seem to many, however, during the campaign he was the ‘peace candidate’ relative to Hillary Clinton. American voters certainly saw it that way and it may have just tipped the scales of the election. Last year, [an academic study was released](#) which made the argument entitled *Battlefield Casualties and Ballot Box Defeat: Did the Bush-Obama Wars Cost Clinton the White House?* Its summary states:

“Increasingly, a divide is emerging between communities whose young people are dying to defend the country, and those communities whose young people are not. In this paper we empirically explore whether this divide—the casualty gap—contributed to Donald Trump’s surprise victory in November 2016. The data analysis presented in this working paper finds that indeed, in the 2016 election Trump was speaking to this forgotten part of America. Even controlling in a statistical model for many other alternative explanations, we find that there is a significant and meaningful relationship between a community’s rate of military sacrifice and its support for Trump. Our statistical model suggests that if three states key to Trump’s victory—Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—had suffered even a modestly lower casualty rate, all three could have flipped from red to blue and sent Hillary Clinton to the White House.”

One must ascribe to chaos theory to see the forest through the trees in the Trump era. The significance of his victory is that it has been an enormous 'shock to the system' where the permitted political space has been opened to anti-establishment narratives across the spectrum. A similar shakeup came ten years ago in the form of the financial crash and not coincidentally the Occupy Wall St. and the Tea Party emerged. While it has the unfortunate side effect of emboldening the worst elements on the far right, it also has the potential to revitalize a left that was, sans Occupy, largely dormant under Obama. Those in power are well aware and the current wave of censorship is not about preventing a Trump re-election so much as it is about neutralizing the left.

The failures of the left throughout the past century, more specifically that of socialism, can also come from within. Social democrats betrayed the working class and participated in the slaughter of WWI until the Bolsheviks ended it. The left of today must be willing to learn from its mistakes more quickly. For example, many have expressed excitement that [Bernie Sanders is partnering with Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis](#) to counter the rise of ultra-nationalism worldwide, as far rightist Jair Bolsonaro was just elected the President of Brazil. Yet the social democracy that Sanders and Varoufakis advocate is only the most modest New Dealism to reform capitalism and make it more humane. However relatively progressive it may seem, it will likely prove no match for either the ruling class or the up-and-coming wave of far right populism. The fact that Sanders uses the Nordic model should be enough to know their limitations. Although he wisely jumped ship, it was Varoufakis' elected SYRIZA coalition in Greece which completely betrayed its constituency by capitulating to EU austerity and NATO expansion. History indicates that only a real alternative in genuine socialism and a working class willing to become militant will the promise of emancipatory politics ever be fulfilled.

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