The Poisoning of the American Mind[1]

Lawrence M. Eppard

ABSTRACT

Humans are hard-wired to look for information that they agree with (regardless of the information's veracity), avoid information that makes them uncomfortable (even if that information is true), and interpret information in a manner that is most favorable to their sense of self. The damage these cognitive tendencies cause to one's perception of reality depends in part upon the information that a person surrounds himself/herself with. Unfortunately, in the U.S. today, both liberals and conservatives are regularly bombarded with misleading information as well as lies from people they believe to be trustworthy and authoritative sources. While there are several factors one could plausibly blame for this predicament, the decline in the quality of the sources of information that the right and left rely on over the last few decades plays a primary role. As a result of this decline, we are faced with an epistemic crisis that is poisoning the American mind and threatening our democracy. In his forthcoming book with Jacob L. Mackey, *The Poisoning of the American Mind*, Lawrence M. Eppard explores epistemic problems in both the right-wing and left-wing ideological silos in the U.S., including ideology presented as fact, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. What follows is an excerpt from that book, due out in early 2024 from George Mason University Press.

KEYWORDS: academia, Big Lie, cable news, cancel culture, confirmation bias, democracy, demographic change, disinformation, epistemic crisis, Fox News, ideological silos, illiberalism, institutionalized disconfirmation, internet, left-wing, malinformation, media, misinformation, motivated reasoning, polarization, post-truth, right-wing, social media, social sciences, virtuous lies, woke.

> "False, partisan, and often deliberately misleading narratives now spread in digital wildfires, cascades of falsehood that move too fast for fact checkers to keep up. And even if they could, it no longer matters: a part of the public will never read or see fact-checking websites, and if they do they won't believe them."

> —Anne Applebaum, author of *Twilight of Democracy*[2]

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[2] Quote from: Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2020), 113.

"These are dangerous times. Never have so many people had so much access to so much knowledge and yet have been so resistant to learn anything. In the United States and other developed nations, otherwise intelligent people denigrate intellectual achievement and reject the advice of experts. Not only do increasing numbers of laypeople lack basic knowledge, they reject fundamental rules of evidence and refuse to learn how to make a logical argument. In doing so, they risk throwing away centuries of accumulated knowledge and undermining the practices and habits that allow us to develop new knowledge."

—Tom Nichols, author of *The Death of Expertise*[3]

"Someday, historians will look back at this moment and tell one of two stories: The first is a story of how democracy and reason prevailed. The second is a story of how minds grew fevered and blood was spilled in the twilight of a great experiment that did not have to end the way it did."

—Adrienne LaFrance, executive editor of *The Atlantic*[4]

"In the 20th century, America built the most capable knowledge-producing institutions in human history. In the past decade, they got stupider en masse."

—Jonathan Haidt, coauthor of
The Coddling of the American Mind[5]

"The most obvious explanation for American political life since the end of the Cold War is that we have become an unserious country populated by an unserious people."

—Jonathan V. Last, editor of *The Bulwark*[6]

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[3] Quote from: Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-3.

[4] Quote from: Adrienne LaFrance, "The New Anarchy," *The Atlantic*, April 2023, 37.

[5] Quote from: Jonathan Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/.

[6] Quote from: Tom Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Assault from Within on Modern Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 87.

"The unbundling of truth makes the business of democracy ever more difficult to conduct. As we fly ever farther apart, we can only hear each other when we scream."

—Martin Gurri, author of *The Revolt of the Public*[7]

"With the rise of radio, television, and now the Internet, it sometimes seems that anyone can have their opinion heard, quoted, and repeated, whether it is true or false, sensible or ridiculous, fair-minded or malicious. The Internet has created an information hall of mirrors, where any claim, no matter how preposterous, can be multiplied indefinitely. And on the Internet, disinformation never dies. 'Electronic barbarism' one commentator has called it—an environment that is all sail and no anchor. Pluralism run amok. . . [M]any of the important issues of our day are reduced to he said/she said/who knows? Any person could be forgiven for being confused. This cacophony of conflicting claims is particularly unhelpful when it comes to sorting out matters related to science, because science depends on evidence, and not all positions are equally grounded in it."

—Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway,
authors of *Merchants of Doubt*[8]

INTRODUCTION

In the U.S. today, both liberals and conservatives are regularly bombarded with misleading information as well as flat lies by people they believe to be trustworthy and authoritative sources of information. As a result, we are faced with an epistemic crisis that is poisoning American culture. As Brookings Institution senior fellow Jonathan Rauch argues: "[T]his is the first time we have seen a national-level *epistemic* attack: a systematic attack, emanating from the very highest reaches of power, on our collective ability to distinguish truth from falsehood."[9] Unfortunately, I do not see an obvious way out of this mess.

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[7] Quote from: Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Stripe Press, 2018), 328.

[8] Quote from: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 240-241.

[9] Jonathan Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge," *National Affairs*, Fall 2018, https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-constitution-of-knowledge.

As one example, even years after it took place, most Republicans believed the 2020 presidential election was stolen[10]—despite not only a lack of evidence[11] but also the fact that the author of this "Big Lie" (Donald Trump) telegraphed that he would make such a preposterous claim *before the election even took place*.[12]

As another example, this time from the left, one risks serious damage to their reputation[13] in some progressive circles by simply acknowledging biological differences between men and women[14] and the impact of those differences on people's lives.

Misleading information comes in a variety of forms, including ideology presented as fact, malinformation (true information used in a misleading manner), misinformation (false information), and disinformation (intentionally false information).[15]

While there are several factors one could plausibly blame for our current predicament and I do not pretend to know all of the causes, I believe that the sources of information that the right and left rely on—and how some of those sources have declined in quality over the last few decades—play a primary role.

WE LIVE IN A GOLDEN AGE OF INFORMATION

I make a strong claim when I write that American culture is being poisoned, so I realize the whiplash this must cause the reader when I simultaneously argue that we live in a golden age of information. Let me explain.

Imagine for a moment that you were to travel in a time machine back a century or more into America's past. You greet somebody you encounter there and ask to be taken to their most impressive library. This person honors your request, and upon arrival he/she brags to you about the immense knowledge contained within the library's walls. You then retrieve your smartphone from your pocket (with a noticeable smirk on your face) and explain to your host that this small device in your hand gives you access to exponentially more information than their library could ever hope to. Your new acquaintance would be left speechless (if he/she believed you).[16]

You then hop back into your time machine, blast some Huey Lewis, and get up to 88 mph as fast as possible, leaving him/her bewildered as you disappear back to the future—all without kissing your mother!

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[10] Alison Durkee, "Republicans Increasingly Realize There's No Evidence of Election Fraud—But Most Still Think 2020 Election Was Stolen Anyway, Poll Finds," *Forbes*, March 14, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2023/03/14/republicans-increasingly-realize-theres-no-evidence-of-election-fraud-but-most-still-think-2020-election-was-stolen-anyway-poll-finds/?sh=113c205628ec.

[11] Isaac Saul, "Not Rigged! How We Know Recent Elections Are Not Fraudulent," *Skeptic Magazine*, November 1, 2022, https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/not-rigged-how-we-know-recent-elections-not-fraudulent/.

[12] Morgan Chalfant, "Trump: 'The Only Way We're Going to Lose This Election Is If the Election Is Rigged,'" *The Hill*, August 17, 2020, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/512424-trump-the-only-way-we-are-going-to-lose-this-election-is-if-the/.

[13] Aja Romano, "J.K. Rowling's Transphobia: A History," *Vox*, March 3, 2023, https://www.vox.com/culture/23622610/jk-rowling-transphobic-statements-timeline-history-controversy.

[14] Robert Lynch, "From Sex to Gender: The Modern Dismissal of Biology," *Skeptic Magazine*, April 7, 2023, https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/from-sex-to-gender-modern-dismissal-of-biology/.

[15] Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 162.

[16] Yes, yes, I understand, the phone would not work—no cell towers in that time, no internet, etc. etc. etc. Humor me and play along ☺.

It might seem odd to say this, but I nonetheless contend it is true: Americans have easier access to high-quality factual information, and more of it, than ever before.[17] As *The Atlantic's* David Frum quipped: "I was promised flying cars, and instead all I got was all the world's libraries in my pocket and the ability to videochat 24-hours a day for free with my grandchildren on the other side of the world."[18] This should in fact be a golden age of information.

The scale and quality of knowledge production that occurs in the modern world is a marvel and a historical breakthrough. As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains, our modern epistemic system is:

> "a set of institutions for generating knowledge from the interactions of biased and cognitively flawed individuals. English law developed the adversarial system so that biased advocates could present both sides of a case to an impartial jury. Newspapers full of lies evolved into professional journalistic enterprises, with norms that required seeking out multiple sides of a story, followed by editorial review, followed by fact-checking. Universities evolved from cloistered medieval institutions into research powerhouses, creating a structure in which scholars put forth evidence-backed claims with the knowledge that other scholars around the world would be motivated to gain prestige by finding contrary evidence. Part of America's greatness in the 20th century came from having developed the most capable, vibrant, and productive network of knowledge-producing institutions in all of human history, linking together the world's best universities, private companies that turned scientific advances into life-changing consumer products, and government agencies that supported scientific research and led the collaboration that put people on the moon."[19]

Jonathan Rauch has written extensively about our modern epistemic system. In this system, he notes that there are a variety of important rules[20] that have led to its success, including:

- Any hypothesis can be floated.
- A proposition qualifies as knowledge only if the larger epistemic community agrees that it has withstood vigorous questioning and criticism: "You can believe and say whatever

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[17] As naïve as it may sound now, many thought the internet and social media would *reduce* misinformation and disinformation, not unleash it. As Jonathan Haidt explains: "In the first decade of the new century, social media was widely believed to be a boon to democracy. What dictator could impose his will on an interconnected citizenry? What regime could build a wall to keep out the internet?" Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."

[18] Frum posted this on *Twitter* on February 13, 2020: https://twitter.com/davidfrum/status/1228009917682012160.

[19] Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."

[20] "[W]e need an elite consensus, and hopefully also something approaching a public consensus, on the *method* of validating propositions. We needn't and can't all agree that the same things are true, but a critical mass needs to agree on what it is we *do* that distinguishes truth from falsehood, and more important, on who does it." Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

you want. But if your beliefs don't check out, or if you don't submit them for checking, you can't expect anyone else to publish, care about, or even notice what you think."[21]

- Validated propositions are provisional—they qualify as knowledge only until they are debunked.
- The epistemic system is defined by its values and practices, not by its borders. It includes all evidence-based professions that require competing hypotheses to be tested and justified and that hold each other accountable for errors.
- There is no authoritarian oversight—the epistemic system relies on a decentralized,[22] non-coercive process that forces participants to convince each other with evidence and argument.[23]

Regarding the "truth" that this system produces, Rauch argues:

"In everyday vernacular, *reality* often refers to the world out there: things as they really are, independent of human perception and error. Reality also often describes those things that we feel certain about, things that we believe no amount of wishful thinking could change. . . [Objective reality] is a set of *propositions*: propositions that have been validated in some way, and have thereby been shown to be at least conditionally true—true, that is, unless debunked."[24]

This epistemic system includes many intelligent and hardworking people working across interconnected and often overlapping fields, including journalists, scientists, researchers, scholars, government workers, judges, lawyers, and social/political commentators, among others. The "body of validated propositions"[25] this community collectively produces is greater than the knowledge any one contributor could personally possess or understand. Participants work in places like news organizations, universities, government agencies, courts, law offices, think tanks, nonprofits, and corporations.

Within these organizations, there are a variety of important built-in guardrails and quality controls:

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[21] "What is often called the marketplace of ideas would be more accurately described as a marketplace of *persuasion*, because the only way to establish knowledge is to convince others you are right." Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[22] "Who can be trusted to resolve questions about objective truth? The best answer turns out to be no one in particular. The greatest of human social networks was born centuries ago. . . a decentralized, globe-spanning community of critical testers who hunt for each other's errors. In other words, they outsourced objectivity to a social network. . . Though nowhere encoded in law, the constitution of knowledge has its own equivalents of checks and balances (peer review and replication), separation of powers (specialization), governing institutions (scientific societies and professional bodies), voting (citations and confirmations), and civic virtues (submit your beliefs for checking if you want to be taken seriously)." Ibid.

[23] Rules from: Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 87.

"The distinguishing characteristic of journalism is professional editing, and its institutional home is the newsroom, which curates and checks stories, trains reporters, organizes complex investigations, inculcates professional ethics, and more. The distinguishing characteristic of academic research is professional review: a sophisticated, multilayered project distributed among university faculties, journals, credentialing organizations, scholarly conferences, and so on. Modern jurisprudence, policy development, and intelligence collection would be unthinkable without institutions like the courts, law schools, and think tanks, as well as agencies like the Congressional Budget Office, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Central Intelligence Agency, and many others—all staffed and run by elaborately trained people who exchange detailed knowledge across specialized channels, using protocols developed over decades and centuries. To be an accomplished scholar or journalist requires years of training and acculturation, which only institutions can provide."[26]

As cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach explain in *The Knowledge Illusion*,[27] human beings live within a community of knowledge. The entirety of human knowledge exists in the larger community, with only a tiny fraction contained within individual people's minds. Most of us do not know much about how even basic everyday things like toilets or zippers truly work,[28] despite how vitally important they are in the modern world. But does this lack of knowledge about myriad aspects of our daily lives hold us back? Not necessarily. In fact, it can be seen as an advantage:

"A modern society cannot function without a social division of labor and a reliance on experts, professionals, and intellectuals. . . No one is an expert in everything. No matter what our aspirations, we are bound by the reality of time and the undeniable limits of our talent. We prosper because we specialize, and because we develop both formal and informal mechanisms and practices that allow us to trust each other in those specializations."[29]

If each of us had to master everything we rely upon in order to function, it would be necessary for our world to be extremely limited and technologically basic. We are able to excel in the modern world not because of our incredibly complex understanding of it, but because of the *community's* collective understanding of it and our reliance on the expertise of others within that community to sustain it.[30]

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[26] Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[27] Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

[28] Sloman and Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion.*

[29] Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 14.

[30] Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker*, February 19, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds.

Our ever-evolving and ever-improving understanding of reality is produced by "error-seeking inquirers"[31] working within an impressive structured epistemic system of institutions, resources, rules, values, and norms involving "impersonal critical exchange to seek truth and hold each other accountable for accuracy":[32]

> "Although the network is a human creation and all its participants are people, it far exceeds the comprehension of its creators, and it undergoes a version of natural selection, driven by its own dynamics. The reality-based network behaves like an ecosystem, producing a body of validated propositions whose composition humans can influence but not control. That is objective reality, insofar as we can know reality. The totality of those propositions is as close as we come to objective truth."[33]

Members of this system have agreed to a social compact[34] assuring they "follow certain rules and forgo certain claims because other group members will do the same."[35]

The "error seeking" part of this is key. In a court of law, you are innocent until proven guilty. But in our epistemic system, it is useful to think about claims as being wrong (or at the very least, their veracity unknown) until shown to have significant empirical support. This is the only way it can be. The reverse—that all claims are true until proven false—would be epistemic chaos, as philosopher Guy Elgat points out in discussing whether we are all just brains in vats in some *Matrix*-style dystopia:

> "Should we then suspend our judgment and neither affirm nor deny the belief that we are brains in vats? Is it the most that we can hope for? It is easy to see that this way madness lies, for then we will also have to suspend judgment over an infinite number of equal or worse absurdities. We would thus have to admit that we can't really say whether unicorns are real or not, whether there is or there is not a troupe of invisible leprechauns dancing the hora behind our backs, or whether or not we are professional assassins whose incriminating memories

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[31] Jonathan Rauch: "The great advantage of scientific investigation is not that it frames hypotheses and then tries to confirm them (everyone does that), but that it floats and falsifies hypotheses on an industrial scale, something no other system can do." Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 58.

[32] Ibid, 15.

[33] Ibid, 87.

[34] In the current environment not everybody in the epistemic system is acting honorably: "[I]t is especially important to remember: politicizing an academic discipline like sociology or literary criticism, or spreading propaganda to discredit and drown out fact-based journalism, or shading an intelligence assessment to please a president, or lying to a judge: each of those is every bit as much an attack on the Constitution of Knowledge as is, say, banning the teaching of evolution or propagating fake science about vaccines. The reality-based community is defined not by its particular disciplines or findings but by its rules and values, and an attack on those rules and values in any one part of the community is an attack on them in every part." Ibid, 99-100.

[35] Ibid, 15-16.

are erased by our employers, the undetectable aliens from planet Xanadu. This would be utter epistemological bankruptcy."[36]

As Elgat argues, this would be epistemic anarchy: to assume a claim is true until proven false is to assume *all possible alternative claims* are true until proven false. The opposite is the only way the epistemic system can work: the veracity of claims is unknown until significant empirical support is demonstrated.

All knowledge claims must be (a) testable and falsifiable,[37] (b) offered up for rigorous critique by the larger community, and (c) able to withstand attempts at falsification in perpetuity:

> "For Popper, science proceeds by means of what he calls 'conjectures and refutations.' Scientists are confronted with some question and offer a possible answer. . . Popper says scientists then do their best to refute this conjecture or prove it wrong. Typically, it is refuted, rejected, and replaced by a better one. This too will then be tested, and eventually replaced by an even better one. In this way science progresses. . . For Popper, at the core of the scientific method is the attempt to refute or disprove theories, which is called the 'falsification principle.' If scientists have not been able to refute a theory over a long period of time, despite their best efforts, then in Popper's terminology the theory has been 'corroborated.' This suggests a possible answer to the question of why we ought to trust what scientists tell us. It is because, despite their best efforts, they have not been able to disprove the idea they are telling us is true."[38]

And as geophysicist Dorian Abbot and his colleagues write:

> "[R]eality-based scientific communities must be open to conceding and correcting errors. The ability of science to self-correct—one reason that scientific truth claims are uniquely credible—can be epistemically contrasted with conformity to religious and political dogmas, which are disturbingly closed to self-correction. Self-correction is facilitated by pluralism to maintain intellectual diversity and maximize the chances of uncovering provisional truths. Intellectual

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[36] Guy Elgat, "'Prove that I am Wrong!' What QAnon, Descartes, and Brains in Vats Have in Common," *Skeptic Magazine*, https://pocketmags.com/skeptic-magazine/244.

[37] "[Y]ou can keep accumulating evidence to confirm a hypothesis, and it will never prove it to be absolutely true. This is because you can't rule out the possibility of another similar hypothesis being correct, or of making some new observation that shows your hypothesis to be false. . . So while you can never prove a hypothesis true simply by making more confirmatory observations, you only need one solid contrary observation to prove a hypothesis false. This notion is at the core of the hypothetico-deductive model of science. This is why a great deal of science is focused on testing hypotheses, pushing them to their limits, and attempting to break them through experimentation. If the hypothesis survives repeated testing, our confidence in it grows." Tim Dean, "How We Edit Science [Parts 1 through 5]," *The Conversation*, March 17, 2017, https://theconversation.com/how-we-edit-science-part-1-the-scientific-method-74521.

[38] John Wright, "Why Should We Trust Science? Because It Doesn't Trust Itself," *The Conversation*, September 18, 2022, https://theconversation.com/why-should-we-trust-science-because-it-doesnt-trust-itself-188988.

diversity ensures vigorous skeptical vetting of scientific claims by a critical mass of doubters who ultimately accept being bound by objective truths once they have been rigorously determined by extensive evidence."[39]

Within the epistemic system, there are countless people with countless points of view and interests who are busy at work every day attempting to disprove the ideas that are published in academic journals, newspapers, and other major outlets of information:

> "What makes science so powerful is that it's intensely self-critical. In order for a hypothesis to pass muster and enter a textbook, it must survive a battery of tests designed specifically to show that it could be wrong. If it passes, it has cleared a high bar."[40]

Ideas are constantly tested against new pieces of evidence and our collective assumptions are adjusted according to how these challenges play out. As Mercatus Center visiting research fellow Martin Gurri notes, "We can never know with certainty that any proposition is right. We can only try to show that so far, it hasn't been proven wrong."[41]

Participants in the epistemic system have voluntarily plugged themselves into a decentralized yet organized network of (largely professional, trained/credentialed, experienced, specialized, and expert)[42] colleagues with diverse viewpoints[43] who read the work of others and then build upon it using acceptable, rigorous, and reproduceable methods. Participants share their methods and results with, and justify their interpretations of their findings to, the larger epistemic community so that it may critically evaluate their work. Findings are checked against existing information and alternative explanations in an objective and dispassionate manner[44]—while many participants are decidedly *not* objective and dispassionate, these are attributes of the *system as a whole* (when it is working properly) despite the failings of individuals within it. Outside evaluators act as devil's advocates who attempt to find shortcomings in the findings. System incentives tend to operate in such a manner that competing researchers or journalists are promised career gains when they show that a prevailing claim is wrong and that *their* work is actually more accurate. Others will try to replicate findings which challenge major preexisting understandings—bias may crop up in one person's work, but subjecting the findings to scrutiny by several other qualified people with

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[39] D. Abbot et. al., "In Defense of Merit in Science," *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 3, no. 1 (2023): 3.

[40] Dean, "How We Edit Science."

[41] Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public*, 266.

[42] "Creating knowledge is inherently a professionalized and structured affair. Whether you are engaged in bench chemistry, daily journalism, or intelligence analysis, testing hypotheses requires time, money, skill, expertise, and intricate social interaction. . . [A]t the core of the constitution of knowledge, by its very nature, are professional networks." Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[43] Helen E. Longino argued that, "[T]he greater the number of different points of view included in a given community, the more likely it is that [the community's] scientific practice will be objective." Jonathan Rauch argues that, "[W]hen we encounter an unwelcome and even repugnant new idea, the right question to ask is 'What can I learn from this?' rather than 'How can I get rid of this?'" Both from: Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 194, 198.

[44] And ideally a civil manner, critiquing the proposition, not its proponent.

varying viewpoints and interests (who are incentivized to prove the claims wrong) should reduce the impact of any one individual's biases on the overall process:

> "One way to look at science is as a system that corrects for people's natural inclinations. In a well-run laboratory, there's no room for myside bias; the results have to be reproducible in other laboratories, by researchers who have no motive to confirm them. And this, it could be argued, is why the system has proved so successful. At any given moment, a field may be dominated by squabbles, but, in the end, the methodology prevails. Science moves forward."[45]

As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt explain:

> "Each scholar suffers from confirmation bias—the tendency to search vigorously for evidence that confirms what one already believes. One of the most brilliant features of universities is that, when they are working properly, they are communities of scholars who cancel out one another's confirmation biases. Even if professors often cannot see the flaws in their own arguments, other professors and students do them the favor of finding such flaws. The community of scholars then judges which ideas survive the debate. We can call this process *institutionalized disconfirmation*. The institution (the academy as a whole, or a discipline, such as political science) guarantees that every statement offered as a research finding—and certainly every peer-reviewed article—has survived a process of challenge and vetting. That is no guarantee that it is true, but it *is* a reason to think that the statement is likely to be more reliable than alternative statements made by partisan think tanks, corporate marketers, or your opinionated uncle. It is only because of institutionalized disconfirmation that universities and groups of scholars can claim some authority to be arbiters of factual questions."[46]

Defining reality is not an endpoint but a constant process—propositions, tests, findings, challenges and critiques from the community, refined propositions and better testing in response to critiques, and on and on for eternity.

In the epistemic system, truth and reality are produced socially and collectively. The goal is to continuously stimulate as many new propositions as possible and then submit them to rigorous and systematic criticism in order to attempt to disconfirm them—knowing that truly valuable propositions will withstand even the most rigorous scrutiny.[47] Members aim to

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[45] Kolbert, "Why Facts."

[46] Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 109.

[47] "Once scientists have conducted their experiment and found some interesting results, they move on to publishing them. Science is somewhat unique in that the norm is towards full transparency, where scientists effectively give away their discoveries to the rest of the scientific community and society at large. This is not only out of a magnanimous spirit, but because it also turns out to be a highly effective way of scrutinizing scientific discoveries and helping others to build upon them." Dean, "How We Edit Science."

mistrust their senses, avoid certitude, and skeptically interrogate sacred values and beliefs (including those of the groups to which they belong). This is an open, public, and "social process of continuously comparing notes and spotting errors and proposing solutions."[48] Members should define what they know, and just as importantly, what they do not know.[49] Within this community, evaluation/disagreement/criticism/correction are expected and necessary.[50] Any proposition may be wrong and participants should expect intense scrutiny of their work, the point of which is to help identify both strengths as well as errors. While all people (including even the best researchers) have biases, the collective production of knowledge by a global community of scholars helps keep much of it in check. Strengths and errors identified in people's work provide lessons that are integrated into the existing literature, a body of knowledge that is now larger, more accurate, and more helpful to the world:

> "[A] hypothesis passes through one screen after another: testing, editing, peer review, conference presentation, publication, and then—for the lucky few ideas deemed important—citation or replication. . . [A]fter a process which can take years or even decades, a kind of social valve admits the surviving propositions into the canon of knowledge by granting them prestige and recognition, indicated with designations like 'generally accepted' or 'well confirmed.'"[51]

There are multiple layers of quality control and accountability,[52] from standardized credentialing processes, to internalized professional ethics which guide one's work, to peer review, to the expectation of transparency regarding one's methods (and increasingly their data, too), to dissemination of one's work to the larger community of experts for critiques and attempted replication, to sanctions by professional associations for misconduct, to name a few.[53]

In the epistemic system, authority rests not with individual people[54] but with propositions that the larger community has validated:

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[48] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 93.

[49] William Feather wrote that being educated means "being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't." From David Dunning, "We Are All Confident Idiots," *Pacific Standard*, October 27, 2014, https://psmag.com/social-justice/confident-idiots-92793.

[50] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 263.

[51] Ibid, 95.

[52] "It is important that we recognize the fallibility of science and the scientific method. But within this fallibility lies its greatest strength: self-correction. Whether mistakes are made honestly or dishonestly, whether a fraud is unknowingly or knowingly perpetrated, in time it will be flushed out of the system through the lack of external verification." Michael Shermer, "A Skeptical Manifesto," https://www.skeptic.com/about_us/manifesto/#0.

[53] "[T]hink of the constitution of knowledge as a funnel. At the wide end, millions of people float millions of hypotheses every day. Only an infinitesimal fraction of new ideas will be proven true. To find them, we run the hypotheses through a massive, socially distributed error-finding process. Only a tiny few make it to the narrow end of the funnel. There, often years later, a kind of social valve—call it prestige and recognition—admits the surviving propositions into the canon of knowledge." Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[54] "[S]cience helps us avoid dogmatism: the basing of conclusions on authority rather than science." Shermer, "A Skeptical Manifesto."

"It is not acceptable for a scholar to say, 'You have shown me convincing evidence that my claim is wrong, but I still *feel* that my claim is right, so I'm sticking with it.' When scholars cannot rebut or reconcile disconfirming evidence, they must drop their claims or else lose the respect of their colleagues. As scholars challenge one another within a community that shares norms of evidence and argumentation and that holds one another accountable for good reasoning, claims get refined, theories gain nuance, and our understanding of truth advances."[55]

Even dominant propositions are always assumed to be imperfect, provisional, and tentative—the weight of the empirical evidence at any given moment can change in the future as new evidence emerges.

The network of knowledge-producing institutions within our modern epistemic system is something to behold, unimaginable to our ancestors. The advances taking place each year in areas such as science, technology, and medicine are enormous. And there are more high-quality news and information outlets than ever before. People from different historical eras would be awestruck to find out that we have so many high-quality sources of information available to us *at all times in our pockets.*

Of course, our epistemic system regularly gets things wrong. Mistakes are frequently made. Peer review will sometimes fail. Journals will sometimes publish work that is not at all rigorous. News outlets get stories wrong. Findings that cannot be reproduced are sometimes accepted as settled fact for decades. Many participants fail to meet high standards on a regular basis. Some frequently violate established norms. There are members who are very bad at their jobs and use flawed methods. Some let their biases pollute their work or their evaluation of others' work. Some participants commit outright fraud. Others kill important lines of inquiry for unethical reasons. Some will intentionally mask their partisanship or self-interest in order to engineer outcomes that they favor. Many make claims far greater than the empirical evidence warrants—and some make claims diametrically opposed to the best available evidence. Some attack researchers whose findings make them uncomfortable.

All of these things are true, yet on the whole, the modern epistemic system eventually self-corrects and gets it right at a far greater rate than any alternative way of knowing. Whatever mistakes are being made at the current moment, one can be assured that we are closer to "the truth" and "reality" now than we were 50 years ago (and they were closer than those 50 years before them and so on). Our understanding of reality at any given moment is always imperfect, always provisional, and always tentative. It can and will change in the future as more information becomes available. We keep working, always inching closer and closer to the truth, year after year after year.

The modern epistemic system, with its "open-ended, depersonalized checking by an error seeking social network," is "the only legitimate validator of knowledge":

"Other communities, of course, can do all kinds of other things. But they cannot make social decisions about objective reality. . . [This assertion] goes down very

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[55] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 39-40.

badly with lots of people and communities who feel ignored or oppressed by the Constitution of Knowledge: creationists, Christian Scientists, homeopaths, astrologists, flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, birthers, 9/11 truthers, postmodern professors, political partisans, QAnon followers, and adherents of any number of other belief systems and religions. It also sits uncomfortably with the populist and dogmatic tempers of our time."[56]

The system's logic and structure ensure that, even though mistakes are made, the larger system will eventually identify, correct, and learn from these mistakes:

"The advantage of the reality-based community is not that it catches every error immediately, but that it catches most errors eventually, and many errors very quickly. No other regime can make that claim, or come anywhere close."[57]

The modern epistemic system's track record is unmatched by any other way of knowing.[58]

EPISTEMIC CRISIS

If what I say is true and the modern epistemic system is so great, then what's the problem? The problem is not with the system overall, but certain segments of that system which are currently malfunctioning. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the system is working just fine, the malfunctioning portions (such as some partisan media outlets on the right and some academic disciplines on the left) are exposing Americans to far too much misleading information.

Despite the unprecedented amount of high-quality information provided by our epistemic system in recent decades, major changes in both (a) how people access information (such as the rise of cable news, the internet, smart phones, and social media) and (b) the standards of evidence in some academic fields (such as the social sciences, where dubious claims have been gaining too much traction in recent years) have led to an explosion in bad information, too. We have plenty of good sources of information to choose from—the problem is separating them from the nonsense.

Concerning the astonishing amount of information being produced by our modern epistemic system, Jonathan Rauch writes:

"[B]y organizing millions of minds to tackle billions of problems, the epistemic constitution disseminates knowledge at a staggering rate. Every day, probably

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[56] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 87.

[57] Ibid, 75.

[58] Tom Nichols notes that, "[E]xperts being wrong on occasion about certain issues is not the same thing as experts being wrong consistently on everything. The fact of the matter is that experts are more often right than wrong, especially on essential matters of fact. And yet the public constantly searches for the loopholes in expert knowledge that will allow them to disregard all expert advice they don't like. . . No one is arguing. . . that experts can't be wrong. . . the point is that they are less likely to be wrong than nonexperts." Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 23-24.

before breakfast, it adds more to the canon of knowledge than was accumulated in the 200,000 years of human history prior to Galileo's time."[59]

In fact, a 2003 study from researchers at the University of California, Berkeley found that more information was being produced in a single year in the early 2000s than *the cumulative total of all preceding human history*.[60] If all of that information was reliable, or if people only stuck to the high-quality sources, there would be nothing to worry about. Unfortunately, far too many people are getting information from sources—such as partisan outlets (cable news, several internet websites) and some irresponsible academic fields (psychology, sociology, and others)—with questionable credibility and far too much bias. Despite enjoying easier access to more high-quality information than any other point in history, we also have easy (and often easier) access to more low-quality information than ever before: "A smartphone with social media apps is like a portable Thunderdome of argument. There are no teachers or editors, no gatekeepers or referees, no one to rule out lies, insults, illogical reasoning, or threats."[61] Tom Nichols, commenting on the wild west of information that we find ourselves in, joked that: "Imagine what the 1920s would have sounded like if every crank in every small town had his own radio station."[62]

Adrift in this vast ocean of both good and bad information, many people have a difficult time identifying what is reliable and what is not, and millions have become hopelessly addicted to misinformation and disinformation that makes them feel good because they agree with it.

Imagine sitting at a table in a restaurant one evening. On this night, you have decided that you would really like to eat a healthy meal (maybe you, like me, are perpetually trying to get into better shape!). Along comes your server with the plate of healthy food you ordered and places it on your table. At this point, 100% of the food in front of you is healthy. But before you can take a bite, another server brings three more plates to your table—but these three contain *unhealthy* food. Now only 25% of the food on the table is good for you.

Have these additional plates made your goal of a healthy meal less attainable? Not necessarily. It is only more difficult if (a) you are unable to identify which plate contains the healthy food and/or (b) you are unable to resist the temptation to eat off of the other three plates. This is a good metaphor for the current information landscape—there is an abundance of healthy food (factual information with limited bias), but the market has been glutted with junk food, too (such as misinformation and disinformation).

Numerous powerful actors and institutions bombard Americans with a fire hose of misleading information every day—information that appears credible, is delivered by seemingly trustworthy/credentialed sources, and is framed in such a way (it confirms people's prior assumptions, stokes their anger/fear/resentment/etc.) that gets the consumer hooked and wanting more. Human brains have always been wired to look for information that makes them feel good—this is not new. What changed was the rise of partisan talk radio and cable news in the 1980s and 1990s, along with technological changes like the internet, social media, and

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[59] Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."
[60] Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public*, 20.
[61] Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 16.
[62] Ibid, 16.

smart phones in the 2000s, which have made it possible to disseminate information that (supposedly) confirms any worldview—regardless of how fringe or detached from reality—in a cost-effective manner. It was much harder (and much less profitable) to reach tens of millions of people with misinformation and disinformation in the 1990s. No more.[63]

In addition, ideologically charged and empirically questionable research is being done in some academic fields around a variety of topics (perhaps most prominently about issues related to gender and race) at the same time that there is a growing tendency across academic fields to inject those findings into the public discourse. That is, there is a growing tendency in these fields not just to publish findings in academic journals with prohibitively expensive paywalls where only others with narrow expertise will see them, but to amplify these claims in the public square through television/radio/podcast appearances, op-eds, TED talks, etc.

In our current moment, cognitive biases that human beings have always had have now been both (a) weaponized by malicious actors (who spread disinformation, malinformation, and ideology disguised as facts—think Fox News)[64] and (b) unleashed by irresponsible actors (spreading information they do not know is low-quality) in dangerous ways (think fad psychology).[65] This is contributing to people being able to find sources which bend their "reality" to match their beliefs (instead of adjusting their beliefs to match the evidence), millions of Americans losing faith in notions of facts and expertise, and far too many being either ignorant of or rejecting accepted methods of establishing facts. Some have lost faith in the notion of reality altogether:[66] "[W]hat seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of *knowing* reality but to the existence of reality itself."[67] As political philosopher Hannah Arendt famously wrote, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction. . . and the distinction between true and false. . . no longer exist."[68] There are valuable tools that can help in the battle against all of this, but many Americans are either unaware of them, unskilled in using them, or unwilling to use them.

My main thesis boils down to this: (a) our hard-wired cognitive biases make us dumber the more we surround ourselves with low-quality sources of information and (b) Americans are increasingly surrounding themselves with low-quality information sources, such as partisan

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[63] As Jonathan Rauch explains: "[A]ccurate reportage is orders of magnitude more expensive to produce than disinformation," and, "[S]ocial media created a distribution platform for disinformation. Putting stuff out there costs effectively nothing." Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[64] For an example of the massive damage that Fox News has done to American society, see: Amanda Carpenter, "Exposed: Fox's Pander-for-Profit Business Model," *The Bulwark*, February 28, 2023, https://www.thebulwark.com/exposed-foxs-pander-for-profit-business-model/.

[65] For a critique of fad psychology see: Jesse Singal, *The Quick Fix: Why Fad Psychology Can't Cure Our Social Ills* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

[66] "Unlike ordinary lies and propaganda, which try to make you believe *something*, disinformation tries to make you disbelieve *everything*. It scatters so much bad information, and casts so many aspersions on so many sources of information, that people throw up their hands and say, 'They're all a pack of liars.' As Steve Bannon, a former Trump aide and former leader of *Breitbart News*, succinctly put it in an interview with *Bloomberg*, '[T]he way to deal with [the media] is to flood the zone with shit.'" Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[67] Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 10.

[68] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), 474.

media (cable news, some internet websites) and dubious information from some academic fields.

All human brains have hard-wired cognitive biases—biases which act like a monster who has an insatiable appetite for information that it agrees with (regardless of the information's veracity) and an intense hatred of information that makes it uncomfortable (even if that information is true). This monster can be constrained, but far too many of us don't know how to, don't care enough to, and/or don't want to, and instead we find ways to let the monster loose to do significant damage to our perception of reality.

OUR BIASED BRAINS

The human brain is not wired to do a very good job of identifying reliable news and information sources. This is true irrespective of political orientation, so it is not unique to Democrats or Republicans. Our hard-wired cognitive biases ensure that what we hope to be true about the world shapes our perceptions of what actually is true.[69] While this is a flaw in all human brains, we can in fact guard against this by surrounding ourselves with high-quality information. When we fail to do so and instead surround ourselves with questionable information, we become vulnerable to believing a lot of nonsense.

Humans are motivated to look for information that confirms their existing beliefs, avoid information that does not, and to interpret information to make it consistent with what they already believe. We look for information that makes us feel good about ourselves (makes us feel decent, intelligent, competent, informed, and so on) and sheds a positive light on the groups to which we belong:

> "Too often, we assume that better information will improve the character of a democracy, despite the abundant evidence that the most educated and literate generations in American history are now less civic-minded than their under-educated progenitors. The problems of maturity and selfishness, however, are far more daunting for modern liberal democracies. In an age of cheap and abundant information, it is relatively easy to be a better-informed citizen. But the commitment to become such a citizen requires changes in even small habits that many people are unwilling to make, including reading a reputable newspaper and turning off the gladiatorial propaganda of social media, video postings, and cable shows. If making such changes means feeling less good about ourselves, or even thinking less often about ourselves, many of us will simply refuse to do it."[70]

When our beliefs and reality are misaligned, one would think we would change our beliefs to match reality—but instead we often try to bend reality to fit our preexisting views. We are

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[69] Humans likely developed many cognitive biases "to make certain guesses or predictions. Those cognitive shortcuts save time, energy, and potentially lives. On the savanna, where underreacting to a danger can be deadly and statistical risk analyses are hard to come by, it makes sense to be guided by emotional responses to stimuli or threats." Rauch goes on to say that, "No one with a real-world time budget could process all of the information" in most circumstances. "Relying on shortcuts . . . is a necessary part of navigating daily life in a complicated world." Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 27.

[70] Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy,* 192.

more likely to believe information from people we trust and reject information from those we do not. We also have a hard time imagining that those we disagree with are operating in good faith.

Humans want their own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors to be in harmony, and prefer for them to be in harmony with those of people around them. Indeed, we often just channel the people around us without thinking through issues ourselves. As Jonathan Rauch explains: "What matters most from an evolutionary perspective is not that a person forms beliefs which are true; it is that she forms beliefs which lead to social success." He goes on:

> "We have hundreds of thousands of years of practice at believing whatever will keep us in good standing with our tribe, even if that requires denying, discounting, rationalizing, misperceiving, and ignoring the evidence in front of our nose."[71]

Humans try to avoid information that might destabilize their view of the world and/or threaten their core beliefs, identities, and deeply held opinions—after all, who wants to believe something that shatters their view of themselves, their deeply-held convictions, those they care about, and/or their way of life? As social psychologist David Dunning explains:

> "Some of our most stubborn misbeliefs arise not from primitive childlike intuitions or careless category errors, but from the very values and philosophies that define *who we are* as individuals. Each of us possesses certain foundational beliefs—narratives about the self, ideas about the social order—that essentially cannot be violated: To contradict them would call into question our very self-worth. As such, these views demand fealty from other opinions. And any information that we glean from the world is amended, distorted, diminished, or forgotten in order to make sure that these sacrosanct beliefs remain whole and unharmed."[72]

He later went on:

> "The most difficult misconceptions to dispel, of course, are those that reflect sacrosanct beliefs. And the truth is that often these notions can't be changed. Calling a sacrosanct belief into question calls the entire self into question, and people will actively defend views they hold dear."[73]

We want to be seen as smart and want to avoid threats to our status, reputation, self-image, or ego. When uncomfortable/disconfirming information makes it to us anyway, we tend to interpret it in a way that is as favorable to our sense of self as possible. As Jonathan Haidt notes, "When the facts conflict with. . . sacred values, almost everyone finds a way to stick with

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[71] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 30, 32.
[72] Dunning, "We Are All Confident Idiots."
[73] Ibid.

their values and reject the evidence."[74] And as Jonathan Rauch explains, "The more passionately we feel about something, the more likely it is that our reasoning is warped and unreliable," and "Often we think we are most rational and feel we can be most certain when we are in fact most mistaken and most deceived."[75] Additionally, he notes that: "When facts collide with beliefs which implicate our prestige or define our identity. . . the facts tend to bend."[76]

Human beings have several cognitive tendencies that can negatively influence how we seek and interpret information—here are some of the most frequently cited:

- Availability heuristic: A tendency to allow our judgement to be influenced by things that are readily available in our memory.
- Dunning-Kruger effect: A tendency for people with limited knowledge of a particular area to overestimate what they know in that area, because in order to possess accurate self-awareness of one's knowledge in a particular domain, one needs to have a baseline knowledge of that domain.[77]
- Epistemic tribalism: The tendency to evaluate information based not on conformity to common standards of evidence but to be consistent with our community's evaluation.
- Equality bias: The tendency for people, when making decisions together, to weight each participant's opinion equally, regardless of differences in each opinion's reliability, and even when this strategy leads to a suboptimal decision.
- Familiarity/repetition bias: A tendency to believe things which we hear often.
- Fluency bias: A tendency to believe statements which are easy to understand and assimilate.
- Illusion of asymmetric insight: The presumption that we understand others' thinking and motives better than they understand ours.
- Illusion of explanatory depth: The tendency to believe that one knows more than they actually do, especially about our modern, highly-complex world (ask yourself to explain in detail how a toilet or zipper works—this exercise makes me personally depressed at my lack of knowledge!).[78]

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[74] Chris Mooney, "Liberals Deny Science, Too," *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/10/28/liberals-deny-science-too/.

[75] And as Jonathan Rauch notes, "As demagogues have demonstrated time and again, the tendency to react emotionally to emotionally charged issues is easy to exploit and manipulate." He also notes that, "[W]hen forming political loyalties, we rationalize backward from our emotions and intuitions." Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 24-25, 27.

[76] Ibid, 32.

[77] Justin Kruger and David Dunning explain: "[W]e argue that the skills that engender competence in a particular domain are often the very same skills necessary to evaluate competence in that domain—one's own or anyone else's. . . For example, consider the ability to write grammatical English. The skills that enable one to construct a grammatical sentence are the same skills necessary to recognize a grammatical sentence, and thus are the same skills necessary to determine if a grammatical mistake has been made. In short, the same knowledge that underlies the ability to produce correct judgment is also the knowledge that underlies the ability to recognize correct judgment. To lack the former is to be deficient in the latter." Justin Kruger and David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," *Psychology* 77, no. 6 (1999): 1121-1122.

[78] Sloman and Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion*.

- **Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias**: A tendency to look for information that confirms one's existing beliefs, avoid information that does not, and to interpret information to make it consistent with what one already believes.
- **Perseverance bias**: A tendency to hold onto beliefs despite disconfirming evidence.
- **Source amnesia**: A tendency to misattribute where we learned information and how we know what we think we know.[79]

Jonathan Rauch notes that: "[B]ecause our biases evolved to guide us in some directions and away from others, they do not result in randomly distributed errors. Rather, the errors lead us down predictable pathways, again and again."[80]

Humans have always had these cognitive tendencies, so why are we so worried about them at this particular moment? Because aspects of our information ecosystem that used to constrain these hard-wired tendencies to some reasonable degree have been changed in ways that have unleashed them to be much more destructive.

AMERICA'S CHANGING INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Think back to the scene in the movie *Jurassic Park* where the tyrannosaurus rex escapes its enclosure, devours Donald Gennaro (the character of the lawyer representing the park's investors, played by Martin Ferrero), and nearly kills the other four patrons. Just minutes earlier, when the security systems were operating properly, everybody was safe despite the extraordinarily dangerous dinosaur lurking just a few feet away. Things went from perfectly safe to life-threatening when Dennis Nedry (Newman!) deactivated several park security systems so that he could steal dinosaur embryos. Had Nedry not done this, everybody could have enjoyed their time at the park (and the movie would have been much shorter and much less thrilling). The possibility of being eaten by dinosaurs would have still been a reality throughout their visit, but the risk would be very low as long as nothing about the security systems was changed.

Likewise, the cognitive tendencies discussed earlier are always present in our minds—whether or not they cause us harm is dependent upon the environments which surround us and whether these conditions unleash and amplify them or constrain them and lessen their impact.

When we only have a few sources of mostly high-quality information available to us, our cognitive biases are kept somewhat under control. This was the reality for me and my family when I was a child growing up in the Washington, D.C. area in the 1980s. A print edition of the *Washington Post* was delivered to our house early each morning and my parents watched a little bit of the evening network television news broadcast a few nights a week. My family did not listen to talk radio or watch the (very different) cable news that existed at the time, and it was not until I was much older that we had computers, smart phones, the internet, and social media. In the 1980s, my family and I were exposed to only a tiny fraction of the daily

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[79] List of cognitive biases developed based on the writings of a variety of people, including Jonathan Rauch, Tom Nichols, Lee McIntyre, Steven Sloman, Philip Fernbach, Elizabeth Kolbert, Justin Kruger, and David Dunning, among others.

[80] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 27.

information that people today are exposed to, and a much higher percentage of it was reliable compared with today.

I had plenty of people I knew in the 1980s and early 1990s—whether they were family members or family friends—who believed things that were not true. But the massively different contours of the information ecosystem then compared with today's ensured that they would have a harder time having those ideas validated by others:

> "I struggle to explain the scarcity of information [in the 1990s]. Nobody noticed what they couldn't yet imagine otherwise, as is the case with all historical change. . . Knowledge was different: Faced with an information problem, where could one shop for solutions? The library, or the bookstore, or the museum, or some other archive perhaps, but only if you already knew enough about the information you sought to know where to look."[81]

Finding ways to validate one's fringe beliefs was not impossible, but much harder. Which credentialed authorities would they turn to who would assure them that their beliefs were backed up by solid evidence? Where would they find a large community of people who agreed with them and could affirm their beliefs on a regular basis? Before the rise of cable news and the internet, this would have been much more difficult. So they kept much quieter about, and felt less confident in, their views than they would today. Today they can surround themselves with people who not only do not push back on what they espouse but actively validate and encourage their fringe beliefs. Today, they can find any number of (at least what they perceive to be) "credible" sources to validate their beliefs as facts. Today they can find many in-group communities on the internet, radio, and television to validate them and encourage them as well. Compared with the past, today they feel more confident in their version of reality.

Anybody who has seen a family member or friend radicalized by partisan media—as I have and I am sure many readers have as well—has seen how the changes in our information ecosystem have allowed our loves ones' cognitive tendencies, once constrained to a reasonable degree, to lead them down a dark path in recent years.

In our much larger and much more fragmented media landscape today, Americans face an unrelenting stream of information that spans the entire gamut from fact to disinformation—and millions have limited skills to help them (or have no desire to) differentiate the facts from the nonsense. This has unleashed our hard-wired cognitive biases to do much more damage. As Ian Bogost writes: "Nowadays, too much information is on offer, most of it bad or wrong, and we spend our time either sifting for gold in the filth or mistaking the filth for gold."[82] Or as NewsGuard co-founder Steven Brill explains:

> "Imagine you walked into a library, and there were a trillion pieces of paper flying around in the air, and you grabbed one, and you didn't know anything

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[81] Ian Bogost, "The Internet is Kmart Now," *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/12/kmart-yahoo-partnership-gen-x-e-business/672506/.

[82] Ibid.

about it, or where it came from or who's financing it. . . That's the internet, that's your Facebook feed, that's your Google search."[83]

And as Martin Gurri notes, "When proof *for* and *against* approaches infinity, a cloud of suspicion about cherry-picking data will hang over every authoritative judgement."[84]

A variety of factors have deactivated the security systems that kept our cognitive biases somewhat at bay in earlier times. One factor of course is increasing polarization[85] and partisanship (including negative partisanship and affective polarization):

> "The body politic is more fractious than at any time in recent memory. Over the past 25 years, both red and blue areas have become more deeply hued, with Democrats clustering in cities and suburbs and Republicans filling in rural areas and exurbs. In Congress, where the two caucuses once overlapped ideologically, the dividing aisle has turned into a chasm."[86]

As liberals and conservatives have moved further away from each other on the issues since the 1980s, they have less in common with each other and feel worse toward the other side: "If the people on the 'other side' are moving farther and farther away from you on a broad set of moral and political issues, it stands to reason that you would feel more and more negatively toward them."[87][88]

Partisanship refers to people who see themselves as aligned *with* a political party, people who form their political opinions due to their agreement with and fondness for a particular group of people. Negative partisanship refers to people who see themselves as aligned *against* a political party, disfavoring particular people or points of view because they are associated with a group they dislike/hate.[89] As political scientists Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster explain:

[83] Erica Pandey, "America's Kids Get an Internet Librarian," *Axios*, January 25, 2022, https://www.axios.com/2022/01/25/schools-misinformation-internet-newsguard.

[84] Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public*, 20.

[85] As Jeffrey Rosen explains, "Today, all congressional Republicans fall to the right of the most conservative Democrat, and all congressional Democrats fall to the left of the most liberal Republican. In the 1960s, at times, 50 percent of the lawmakers overlapped ideologically." Jeffrey Rosen, "America Is Living James Madison's Nightmare," *The Atlantic*, October 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/james-madison-mob-rule/568351/.

[86] Yoni Appelbaum, "How America Ends," *The Atlantic*, December 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/how-america-ends/600757/.

[87] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 129.

[88] "From the 1940s to around 1980, American politics were about as centrist and bipartisan as it has ever been." Ibid, 130.

[89] As David French argues, "America's most partisan citizens view their political opponents as deeply reprehensible. Overwhelming majorities of Republicans and Democrats view the other side as 'hateful,' 'racist,' 'brainwashed' and 'arrogant.' That's why they seek to squelch opposing views. They see no value in the speech of people they despise. Instead, they see only bad people expressing bad ideas in bad faith. We're losing the capacity for empathy. We simply can't place ourselves in the other person's shoes. Yet it takes a certain degree of arrogance to presume that we're so obviously correct that disagreement isn't just a sign of error but of moral

"The concept is pretty simple: Over the past few decades, American politics has become like a bitter sports rivalry, in which the parties hang together mainly out of sheer hatred of the other team, rather than a shared sense of purpose. Republicans might not love the president, but they absolutely loathe his Democratic adversaries. And it's also true of Democrats. . . Our research has shown that since the 1980s, supporters of both major parties, including independents who just lean toward one party or the other, have grown to dislike the opposing party and its elected leaders more than they like their own party and its elected leaders. . . Americans increasingly are voting against the opposing party more than they are voting for their own party. . . [P]artisans [have] come to see each other not just as political adversaries, but as enemies who want to harm the nation. . . [R]ather than seeking to inspire voters around a cohesive and forward-looking vision, politicians need only incite fear and anger toward the opposing party to win and maintain power. Until that fundamental incentive goes away, expect politics to get even uglier."[90]

Affective polarization refers to emotional hostility toward the other political party rather than non-hostile disagreement over issues.[91]

Other factors that have helped deactivate our cognitive security systems include the dawn of the internet,[92] a steep decrease in the cost of producing and disseminating information,[93] a decline in trust in (and often hostility toward) people and institutions which create and disseminate information,[94] the decline of traditional news outlets, the rise of partisan news outlets "detached from reality-based norms"[95] within a fragmented and siloed media ecosystem (including the rise of talk radio, cable news, and partisan websites),[96] growing

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defect." David French, "Two Different Versions of 'Cancel Culture,'" *The New York Times*, March 2, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/02/opinion/lab-leak-dilbert-cancel-culture.html.

[90] Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "'Negative Partisanship' Explains Everything," *Politico*, September/October 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/negative-partisanship-explains-everything-215534/. For more, see also: Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century," *Electoral Studies* 41, (March 2016): 12-22.

[91] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 41.

[92] As Lee McIntyre notes, "With fact and opinion now presented side by side on the Internet, who knows what to believe anymore? With no filters and no vetting, readers and viewers these days are readily exposed to a steady stream of pure partisanship." McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 87.

[93] "Information may want to be free, but knowledge wants to be expensive—very expensive. Just one investigative reporting project or academic study requires work by multiple full-time professionals and budgets in the tens of thousands and often much, much more. Whereas making stuff up is cheap." Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 135-136.

[94] Tom Nichols argues that, "[T]he death of expertise is. . . like a national bout of ill temper, a childish rejection of authority in all its forms coupled to an insistence that strongly held opinions are indistinguishable from facts." Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 28.

[95] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 10.

[96] As Jonathan Rauch notes, "Trump and his media echo chambers [normalized] lying in order to obliterate the distinction, in the public realm, between truth and untruth. They were practicing the hallowed (if infamous)

outrage-/anger-/fear-driven partisan news reporting, the 24-hour news cycle,[97] the blending of entertainment and news (into "infotainment"), the advent of social media[9899] (along with their algorithms[100] which often reward emotionally-charged content and are "sensitive to popularity but indifferent to truth"),[101] geographic sorting, and failures in academia (including increasing progressivism, questionable standards of evidence in some disciplines, and cancel culture) coupled with its increasing engagement with the public, among others.

      While I am primarily concerned with the impact of changes to our media ecosystem and failures in academia, a number of other factors are important to consider as well,[102] including growing American affluence (and associated narcissism and entitlement),[103] civic disengagement, egalitarian/anti-authority cultural trends (nobody is smarter than me/should

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art of disinformation. . . [T]heir goal was to denude the public's capacity to make any distinctions at all." Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 8.

[97] Which treats news like entertainment to keep people's interest, requires the elevation of non-news to the forefront to fill time, and requires networks to have analysis all day long, meaning many non-experts are opining about things about which they have little knowledge.

[98] Jonathan Haidt argues that, "In the 21st century, America's tech companies have rewired the world and created products that now appear to be corrosive to democracy, obstacles to shared understanding, and destroyers of the modern tower." He says that, "Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three." Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."

[99] A former Facebook executive was quoted as saying: "It literally is a point now where I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works." And a worker at Facebook was quoted as saying: "I am convinced the devil lives in our phones and is wreaking havoc on our children." Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy,* 172-173.

[100] Research shows that "posts that trigger emotions—especially anger at out-groups—are the most likely to be shared." Jonathan Haidt explains that, "One of the engineers at Twitter who had worked on the 'Retweet' button later revealed that he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place. As he watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool, he thought to himself, 'We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon.'" Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."

[101] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge,* 125.

[102] "What has caused such rancor? The stresses of a globalizing, postindustrial economy. Growing economic inequality. The hyperbolizing force of social media. Geographic sorting. The demagogic provocations of the president himself. As in *Murder on the Orient Express*, every suspect has had a hand in the crime." Appelbaum, "How America Ends."

[103] Narcissism meaning: "[T]he unhealthy preoccupation with the self to the exclusion of all else." Entitlement meaning: "[T]he selfish and self-absorbed conviction that our own importance merits constant reward." Tom Nichols argues that, "By definition, democracy is a community. By definition, a narcissist is incapable holding or granting membership in a community." Nichols discusses the work of Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*, who "raged against the arrival of the 'new narcissist,' a hedonist questing for personal fulfillment while fending off the onset of adulthood and its responsibilities." He wrote that the average American was an "overgrown child who 'extols cooperation and teamwork' while 'harboring deeply antisocial impulses,' who 'praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself,' whose 'cravings have no limits,' and whose constant demands for immediate gratification create a 'state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire.'" From Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy,* 91-92.

tell me what to do!),[104] illiteracy and anti-intellectualism, "emotional safetyism,"[105] political correctness, safe spaces and campus speech codes, DEI bureaucracies, the commodification of higher education, postmodern thought, credential inflation, increasing levels of educational attainment (and thus overestimation of one's knowledge), nostalgia, social resentment, demographic change, inequality, growing gender equality, changes to the economy, and the impact of an increasingly complex and globalized world.

THE COMEBACK OF YELLOW JOURNALISM

Partisan news is of course not new—in fact, misleading information has been disseminated since the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. Verified and objective news became the norm only during the 20th century. Jacob Soll notes that, "[A]s printing expanded, so flowed fake news, from spectacular stories of sea monsters and witches to claims that sinners were responsible for natural disasters."[106] Many people will likely remember learning in school about the incredibly low standards of journalism in 19th century America: "During the Gilded Age, yellow journalism flourished, using fake interviews, false experts and bogus stories to spark sympathy and rage as desired."[107] Such poor and unethical journalism caused a backlash and helped lead to the development of widespread use of objective and verifiable methods among news outlets in the U.S., and this became the dominant model in the 20th century. This was a tremendous accomplishment, and many trustworthy outlets still follow incredibly high standards—in fact, I believe we currently have access to more high-quality journalism than ever before. But changes in the media ecosystem have again flooded the market with partisan outlets spreading misleading information, and our society is paying the price. As Soll argues, "Digital news, you might say, has brought yellow journalism back to the fore."[108]

Since the late 1980s/early 1990s—with the rise of talk radio and cable news—and the 2000s—with the rise of the internet, smart phones, and social media—there has been an explosion in low-quality news and information sources:

> "Long ago is the time when everybody watched one of three national television networks. By the 1990s, there was a cable news channel for most points on the political spectrum, and by the early 2000s there was a website or discussion group for every conceivable interest group and grievance. By the 2010s, most Americans were using social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, which make it easy to encase oneself within an echo chamber. And then there's the 'filter bubble,' in which search engines and YouTube algorithms are designed to give

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[104] In the U.S., "Americans no longer distinguish the phrase 'you're wrong' from the phrase 'you're stupid.' To disagree is to disrespect. To correct another is to insult. And to refuse to acknowledge all views as worthy of consideration, no matter how fantastic or inane they are, is to be closed minded." Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 25.

[105] While criticizing emotional safetyism, Jonathan Rauch argues that, "If subjectively hurtful expressions are violence, then criticism is violence, and then science is a human rights violation." Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 202.

[106] Jacob Soll, "The Long and Brutal History of Fake News," *Politico Magazine*, December 18, 2016, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/fake-news-history-long-violent-214535/.

[107] Soll, "The Long and Brutal History."

[108] Ibid.

you more of what you seem to be interested in, leading conservatives and progressives into disconnected moral matrices backed up by mutually contradictory informational worlds. Both the physical and the electronic isolation from people we disagree with allow the forces of confirmation bias, groupthink, and tribalism to push us still further apart."[109]

There are myriad questionable (and sometimes downright dangerous) news and information sources available to Americans, sources which will validate any and all beliefs, including (but not limited to):

- AlterNet
- The American Conservative
- American Greatness
- The American Spectator
- American Thinker
- The Blaze
- Breitbart
- Buzzfeed
- CNN
- Daily Mail
- Daily Wire
- Democracy Now!

- Drudge Report
- The Epoch Times
- The Federalist
- Fox News
- The Gateway Pundit
- Huffington Post
- InfoWars
- Jacobin
- Mother Jones
- MSNBC
- The Nation
- National Review
- New Republic
- New York Post

- Newsmax
- One America News Network (OAN)
- RedState
- Salon
- Slate
- ThinkProgress
- Townhall
- Truthout
- Vice
- Vox
- Washington Examiner
- Washington Times
- ZeroHedge

I will explain the rubric I used to produce this list later, but I can assure you that, to qualify for this list, an outlet must have clearly documented problems with accuracy and/or bias.

So while Americans have easier access to as many high-quality sources as probably ever before, many cannot (or don't care to or are unwilling to) distinguish the trustworthy ones (like the Associated Press and Reuters) from the ones in the list above and/or they've become addicted to the junk.

Many Americans consume news and information from untrustworthy outlets that pass themselves off as legitimate news sources. The Fox Corporation, for instance, insists that it "is uncompromisingly committed to being neutral arbiters of timely news, and we consider journalistic independence and editorial integrity to be sacrosanct," and that their "foremost principles are the accuracy of information, clarity of opinion and quality of our content."[110] A regular consumer of Fox News, however, will be exposed to outrageous lies and conspiracy theories:

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[109] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 130-131.

[110] Fox, "Standards of Business Conduct," As of June 2022, https://www.foxcorporation.com/corporate-governance/sobc/guiding-principles/.

"Fox News lies to its viewers. Its most prominent personalities, among the most influential in the industry, tell their viewers things they know not to be true. This is not accusation, allegation, or supposition. Today, we know it to be fact. . . With Fox News, examples of the network's commitment to knowingly misleading its viewers abound. . . In 2020, the network successfully beat a defamation lawsuit by arguing that Tucker Carlson is 'not 'stating actual facts' about the topics he discusses and is instead engaging in 'exaggeration' and 'non-literal commentary.'"[111]

A true news organization, of course, would have no place for exaggerations, "non-literal commentary," lies, and conspiracy theories in its programming. Fox News is clearly not a legitimate news organization, despite its claims, having promoted wildly inaccurate information about climate change,[112] the "Great Replacement Theory,"[113] lies about "stolen" national elections,[114] and the ludicrous conspiracy theory that black helicopters are patrolling the U.S., "hunting" conservatives, "purging" them from society, and placing them in Guantanamo Bay.[115] These are just a few of the many examples of Fox promoting ideology presented as fact, misinformation, malinformation, and/or disinformation. As *The Bulwark's* Mona Charen writes, "Fox is not a news channel—it is the right's *Pravda*."[116] Yet millions of Americans consider Fox News a credible news organization and believe the untrustworthy information that it disseminates.

One of the most poisonous moments—of many—in the history of Fox News came in the aftermath of the 2020 election. The preponderance of evidence of course tells us that Joe Biden won the election, Donald Trump lost, and the number of election problems and irregularities was small, inconsequential to the result, and no worse than in previous elections.[117] But Trump claimed fraud anyway—a claim he had been laying the groundwork for among his supporters *before the election even took place*—and Fox News promoted this lie publicly on their airwaves despite knowing better privately:

"Top personalities, executives and producers at Fox News privately condemned 'reckless' claims from election fraud conspiracy theorists they dismissed as 'crazy' and 'insane.' But they were repeatedly invited on air on some of the

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[111] Adam Serwer, "Why Fox News Lied to Its Viewers," *The Atlantic*, February 19, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/fox-news-dominion-lawsuit-trump/673132/.

[112] Kimberly Nordyke, "'Fox & Friends' Slam SpongeBob SquarePants' 'Global Warming Agenda' (Video)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 8, 2011, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/fox-friends-hosts-slam-spongebob-220459/.

[113] Philip Bump, "Why Tucker Carlson's Recent Embrace of 'Great Replacement' Is Different," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/20/why-tucker-carlsons-recent-embrace-great-replacement-is-different/.

[114] Saul, "Not Rigged!"

[115] Claims made in Tucker Carlson's *Patriot Purge* documentary: https://nation.foxnews.com/watch/d6eecfabb4cb2572324269885cf21114/.

[116] Mona Charen, "Please Lie to Me, Tucker," *The Bulwark*, March 2, 2023, https://www.thebulwark.com/please-lie-to-me-tucker/.

[117] Saul, "Not Rigged!"

most-watched cable news programs in the country, where they amplified bogus statements about the 2020 presidential election and a voting machine company."[118]

We know that people at Fox knew better behind the scenes based on a trove of emails, text messages, and depositions that emerged from Dominion Voting System's lawsuit against Fox News:

> "The most compelling example of Fox News consciously lying to its viewers, however, arrived yesterday with the evidence in the defamation lawsuits filed by the voting-machine company Dominion, over claims aired on Fox News echoing Trump's lie that the 2020 election had been fixed by compromised voting machines. Dominion's latest filing argues that privately, Fox News hosts admitted that the allegations of election fraud being floated by Trump allies were baseless, but they kept airing them, in part because they feared that another right-wing network, Newsmax, was stealing their audience. The filing shows that when Fox News reporters shot down the allegations publicly, the network's big personalities were livid, complaining internally that telling their viewers the truth was hurting the network's brand. . . [I]nternally, the messages in Dominion's filing suggest that network officials knew they were exercising editorial judgment that would lead their audience to see the fictitious election-fraud allegations as not simply newsworthy, but legitimate, which they properly understood to be irresponsible."[119]

This trove included messages and testimony from Fox News hosts, producers, executives, and even Fox Corporation Chair Rupert Murdoch himself. Despite knowing the truth about the election, Fox News nonetheless helped Trump spread baseless lies in his attempt to overturn Biden's victory, which helped fuel the Capitol Insurrection of January 2021 and an even more divided and toxic American political culture that we are now burdened with.

CABLE NEWS & THE INTERNET: A FIRE HOSE OF NONSENSE

Even the wackiest of ideas can find communities and "sources" that will "confirm" them on the internet, where an endless amount of both good and bad information exists side by side. As Lee McIntyre, author of *Post-Truth*,[120] explains:

> "The cognitive bias has always been there. The internet was the accelerant which democratized all of the disinformation and misinformation and diminished the experts. Democratization has led to the abandonment of standards for testing beliefs. It leads people to think they are just as good at reasoning about

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[118] Alex Woodward, "'Insane, Lying, Complete Nut': How Fox News Stars Rejected Trump's Election Conspiracies While Network Pushed Them," *Independent*, February 28, 2023, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/fox-news-trump-election-lies-dominion-lawsuit-b2291010.html.

[119] Serwer, "Why Fox News Lied."

[120] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*.

something as anybody else. But they're not. At the doctor's office, I don't ask for the data and reason through it myself and decide on the course of treatment. It takes expertise and experience to make that judgement. Just like I can't fly my own plane. There is a scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where he is in a room with all of these goblets and chalices and doesn't know which one is the Holy Grail. That's where we are right now. We have the truth right in front of us, but we don't know which one it is. There is a slogan that science deniers use, 'Do your own research.' If science is about facts, why can't I just go out and find my facts? But you need guidance to know what is factual, you need experts. Many Americans have an enormous misunderstanding about science generally. They misunderstand the term 'theory,' for instance, thinking that any theory is as good as any other, rather than realizing that some theories are more credible than others because they are warranted by the evidence."[121]

Some of the best information in the world is on the internet—but so is some of the most useless (such as the website Goop, which, among many other wild claims, asserted you can cure depression by walking barefoot)[122] and downright dangerous information (such as InfoWars, which, among many other deranged claims, alleged that the Sandy Hook school massacre was staged by "crisis actors")[123] as well. As *The Death of Expertise* author Tom Nichols quipped, "The Internet lets a billion flowers bloom, and most of them stink."[124] He went on:

> "Some of the information on the Internet is wrong because of sloppiness, some of it is wrong because well-meaning people just don't know any better, and some of it is wrong because it was put there out of greed or even sheer malice. The medium itself, without comment or editorial intervention, displays it all with equal speed. The Internet is a vessel, not a referee."[125]

Without somebody and/or some level of personal knowledge to guide you, it is easy to fall prey to misleading information in this overwhelming cacophony of noise. Hyper-social beings with poor research skills—aka, most human beings—are prime candidates to fall victim to the misguided opinions of people they like who seem smart and are telling them exactly what they want to hear, and they are especially susceptible when such information and the communities that share it are so plentiful on the world wide web.

There is a wonderful cartoon by Peter Steiner that has made the rounds on the internet for years. In the cartoon, a dog is sitting at a computer and turns to another dog and confides,

[121] Lawrence Eppard et. al., "Obligations to the Future," *Journal of Working-Class Studies* 5, no. 2 (October 2020): 52.

[122] The Editors of Goop, "Earthing: The Art of Walking Barefoot," *Goop*, July 26, 2021, https://goop.com/wellness/health/earthing-how-walking-barefoot-could-cure-your-insomnia-more/.

[123] Dave Collins, "Alex Jones Ordered To Pay $473M More to Sandy Hook Families," *Associated Press*, November 10, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-shootings-business-connecticut-alex-jones-c6d0563dc17e7bfa83a881b44e7b9eec.

[124] Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 108.

[125] Ibid, 109.

"On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog." As the cartoon suggests, in real life it is much easier to pick up on whether somebody knows what they are talking about or not, to pick up on whether somebody is not to be trusted. But on the internet, misinformation/disinformation can be presented in beautiful font and perfect grammar with seemingly authoritative hyperlinked sources in an aesthetically pleasing web layout that looks no different than information presented by the Associated Press or Reuters. You need to either (a) know that the outlet is of low-quality and/or (b) already possess particular news literacy skills in order to tell the difference. If you don't, you might be following the advice of a dog (or worse). It is the wild west of information.

One of the more annoying sayings in the modern world is that you should "do your own research" on a controversial topic. The idea is that when we all have access to the internet, nobody can be lied to because all of the world's information is available to us online. There are numerous problems with this assertion. When the internet contains nearly 200 million active websites[126]—many of them aesthetically pleasing to the eye and seemingly authoritative despite containing faulty information—it takes some amount of knowledge to understand how to sift through the fire hose of information to determine what is factual and what is not.

Cable news is another place that will confirm extremely flawed ideas. To many viewers, cable news outlets appear to be legitimate news organizations that employ messengers who appear to be appropriately credentialed journalists. These channels then confirm the worldview of the viewer through the stories they choose to cover, the ones they avoid, and the ways in which they frame their stories. Viewers grow to trust these outlets since the information they present makes the viewer feel good and is presented to them by seemingly credentialed and knowledgeable sources who belong to the viewers' "tribe." But the journalistic standards of channels like Fox News, MSNBC, Newsmax, CNN, and One America News Network (OAN) are nowhere near the same as they are at places like the Associated Press and Reuters. Relying on cable news means taking in a lot of faulty information, and most of us do not have the time, knowledge, and/or desire to figure out what is true and what is not.

Commenting on the impact of cable news on our society, Ted Koppel wrote that:

"The commercial success of both Fox News and MSNBC is a source of nonpartisan sadness for me. While I can appreciate the financial logic of drowning television viewers in a flood of opinions designed to confirm their own biases, the trend is not good for the republic. . . Beginning, perhaps, from the reasonable perspective that absolute objectivity is unattainable, Fox News and MSNBC no longer even attempt it. They show us the world not as it is, but as partisans (and loyal viewers) at either end of the political spectrum would like it to be. This is to journalism what Bernie Madoff was to investment: He told his customers what they wanted to hear, and by the time they learned the truth, their money was gone."[127]

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[126] Estimate from InternetLiveStats.com.
[127] Ted Koppel, "Viewpoint: Olbermann, O'Reilly and the Death of Real News," *MLive*, November 21, 2010, https://www.mlive.com/opinion/kalamazoo/2010/11/viewpoint_olbermann_oreilly_an.html.

Cable news takes advantage of the audience's motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. As Koppel told Fox News's Sean Hannity directly, "You have attracted people who are determined that ideology is more important than facts."[128]

Using social media, Americans spread the flawed information presented on cable news and partisan websites to their like-minded friends and family members, many of whom have already tailored their online social networks to contain a disproportionate number of people they agree with. When social media algorithms figure out the political orientation of these consumers, they then feed them more and more partisan information.

Yevgeny Simkin offers a valuable take on the rise of social media and its impact on American society:

> "Let's take a short walk down memory lane. It's 1995. A man stands on a busy street corner yelling vaguely incoherent things at the passersby. He's holding a placard that says 'THE END IS NIGH. REPENT.' You come upon this guy while out getting the paper. How do you feel about him? You might feel some flavor of annoyance. Most people would also feel compassion for him as he is clearly suffering from something. No reasonable person would think of convincing this man that his point of view is incorrect. This isn't an opportunity for an engaging debate. . . Now fast forward to 2020. In terms of who this guy is and who you are absolutely nothing has changed. And yet here you are—arguing with him on Twitter or Facebook. And you, yourself, are being brought to the brink of insanity. . . Back in 2011 Chamath Palihapitiya left Facebook and said of his former company, 'It literally is a point now where I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works'. . . [Social media is] [a]n insidious malware slowly corrupting our society in ways that are extremely difficult to quantify, but the effects of which are evident all around us. Anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, QAnon, cancel-culture, Alex Jones, flat-Earthers, racists, anti-racists, anti-anti-racists, and of course the Twitter stylings of our Dear Leader."[129]

Because of all of this—the internet and social media, the decline of traditional news outlets, the rise of partisan and siloed media, along with increased polarization—many Americans now have difficulty differentiating legitimate journalism from biased partisanship and are becoming addicted to low-quality information sources. They are exposed to a fire hose of information each day, some of it high quality but much of it misleading or just downright wrong. A large portion of the population either believes the faulty information or has lost faith in the notion of high-quality information altogether. Many Americans—exhausted, overwhelmed, and disoriented by the amount of misleading information and unsure how to judge fact from fiction—have resigned themselves to the belief that there are no objective facts

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[128] McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 72.

[129] Yevgeny Simkin, "Social Media is the Problem," *The Bulwark*, July 31, 2020, https://www.thebulwark.com/social-media-is-the-problem/.

and no sources of information can be trusted. This is not true, but people believe it nonetheless.

This is incredibly damaging to our society. Without some semblance of a shared reality, our society will be dysfunctional. We must find some meaningful and effective way to address this problem.

IDEOLOGICAL SILOS & EPISTEMIC SECESSION

There is so much partisan information available on radio, television, and the internet, and it is made all the more damaging by the phenomenon of ideological silos—similar to what you might also have heard called "bubbles" or "echo chambers." Many Americans are increasingly locking themselves within ideological silos, meaning they are surrounding themselves with far too many like-minded people and partisan sources of information that leave them with an incomplete and flawed understanding of the world.[130] These silos are environments where people's beliefs and assumptions aren't sufficiently challenged because they are surrounded (in physical spaces, their social networks, and online) by people with similar beliefs and they get their information from partisan sources aligned with their worldview. This is of course a problem, because:

> "The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don't share your beliefs. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument. John Stuart Mill said, 'He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that,' and he urged us to seek out conflicting views 'from persons who actually believe them.' People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain."[131]

Let's explore ideological silos with two fictional characters. The first one we will call "Hannah." All of Hannah's friends are politically conservative, including those in her social media networks on Facebook and Twitter. The only news she watches is Fox News, and the only news stories her friends share with her are from conservative sources. Because of the people and information she has surrounded herself with, it would not be surprising for Hannah to have a very flawed understanding of the facts about climate change (perhaps she has been led to believe that it's wildly exaggerated or even a hoax). There just isn't enough factual information about this issue making its way to her, plenty of misleading or false information is always available, and everybody she knows (including those she loves and/or respects) seems to agree with her (and those who don't are people that Hannah distrusts and/or dislikes).

Likewise, let's explore the experiences of a fictional left-winger we will call "Bob." In Bob's left-wing silo, all of his friends and information sources are reliably progressive. When people ask Bob why he hates capitalism, he is able to immediately recite all of its shortcomings off the top of his head. But if he were asked to list its *strengths*, he would have a difficult time, not just because he has a negative view of it, but because he has never had to truly contend

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[130] How many readers have unfriended or unfollowed somebody on social media because of their opposing political views? I would bet a significant number—I'm embarrassed to say I have!

[131] Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."

with the strongest arguments in favor of capitalism. Bob took several college courses critical of capitalism and was able to avoid any courses detailing its strengths. Nobody in his silo ever talks about (or is even aware of) capitalism's positive aspects, all of the sources he trusts have assured him that his negative view is accurate, and he's never seen any high-quality information detailing the strengths of this economic system.

This is what ideological silos can do to us—overwhelm us with information that is favorable to our side's beliefs, hide information that questions them, and provide us with constant ideological affirmation from people we love and respect.

Inside of ideological silos, partisan messages are repeated back to people constantly, while the silo prevents them from frequently confronting contradictory messages. Certain elements of these silos—such as algorithms used by YouTube and other social media platforms—make matters worse, learning people's biases, feeding them more and more misinformation and disinformation from a particular partisan perspective, and assuring they see less and less trustworthy information.[132]

People within these silos understand reality and truth to mean something different from people in bubbles that are ideologically different. They have different understandings of epistemic authorities, methods, and standards of evidence. When people from different silos talk to each other, it can seem like they inhabit different realities: "A group creates a consensual moral matrix as individuals interact with one another, and then they act in ways that may be unintelligible to outsiders."[133]

In some respects, our country is experiencing a full-blown "epistemic secession"[134] or even "epistemic cold war."[135] As Jonathan Haidt argues:

> "The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past. It's been clear for quite a while now that red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history. But Babel is not a story about tribalism; it's a story about the fragmentation of everything. It's about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community. It's a metaphor for what is happening not only *between* red and blue, but within the left and within

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[132] "[S]oftware learned to hack our brains. Sophisticated algorithms and granular data allowed messages and images to be minutely tuned and targeted. These are powerful new tools that humans are not designed to encounter or resist." Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[133] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 10.

[134] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 174.

[135] As an example, Marjorie Taylor Greene stated: "We need a national divorce. We need to separate by red states and blue states and shrink the federal government. Everyone I talk to says this." She posted this on *Twitter* on February 20, 2023: https://twitter.com/mtgreenee/status/1627665203398688768.

the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional associations, museums, and even families."[136]

This is incredibly socially corrosive, causing rifts between millions of Americans and even dividing families and damaging friendships.

We no longer have a single national conversation, but several conversations all happening at once in different silos, operating on different sets of "facts," and disconnected from each other in important ways. As *Twilight of Democracy* author Anne Applebaum explains:

> "[T]he old newspapers and broadcasters created the possibility of a single national conversation. In many advanced democracies there is now no common debate, let alone a common narrative. People have always had different opinions. Now they have different facts. At the same time, in an information sphere without authorities—political, cultural, moral—and no trusted sources, there is no easy way to distinguish between conspiracy theories and true stories. False, partisan, and often deliberately misleading narratives now spread in digital wildfires, cascades of falsehood that move too fast for fact checkers to keep up. And even if they could, it no longer matters: a part of the public will never read or see fact-checking websites, and if they do they won't believe them."[137]

As Ben Sasse argues, "A republic will not work if we don't have shared facts." Former President Barack Obama similarly proclaimed that, "If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what's true from what's false. . . by definition our democracy doesn't work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis."[138] And as Jonathan Rauch argues, the rules of our reality-based epistemic system are "foundational to modern liberalism and instrumental to bringing the peace, prosperity, and freedom which liberal societies uniquely enjoy."[139]

Both the left-wing and right-wing ideological silos in the U.S. have their problems. I am not arguing that they are equally flawed, but I am also not arguing that one is worse than the other. It could certainly be the case that one is more detached from reality, but I've yet to figure out how to reliably and objectively determine that. This may seem like a cop out, but I honestly do not know how to quantify which silo is causing more damage to our society. What I do know is that both rely on information of very questionable veracity, and both are contributing to our societal dysfunction. Regardless of which is "worse," they both have problems that must be fixed for the good of our country.

I will discuss some of the problems that exist within both silos, beginning with the right-wing.

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[136] Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."
[137] Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy,* 113.
[138] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 9.
[139] Ibid, 17.

PROBLEMS IN RIGHT-WING SILOS

While there are many problems in right-wing ideological silos, the most pressing seems to be too heavy a reliance among American conservatives on low-quality partisan sources of information like Fox News.

Fox News bills itself as a news organization, but it is hardly that, as its sole aim seems to have little to do with journalism. To repeat a Mona Charen quote, "Fox is not a news channel—it is the right's *Pravda*."[140] Instead of operating like a legitimate news organization, Fox focuses most of its efforts on promoting the Republican agenda and diminishing progressivism:

> "The late conservative Roger Ailes (funded by conservative Rupert Murdoch) created Fox News, a channel that carried, and still carries, mostly talk radio-style right-wing commentary. Like talk radio, it is of the conservative movement, in a way that no mainstream media outlet would ever think of itself as of the left. . . Fox plopped down on cable and dared the mainstream media to say anything about it. It never saw itself as better mainstream media—it saw itself as a conservative competitor to a liberal incumbent. It started mainstreaming conservative talking points and conspiracies, quickly gained a huge (mostly white, mostly old) audience, and, through sheer chutzpah, was accepted as a legitimate news outlet. It's not that Fox News hasn't produced some good journalism and good journalists. It's that the ultimate axis around which the enterprise revolves is partisan. It is an instrument to advance the interests of the conservative movement."[141]

Fox cherry-picks stories that conservatives care about (especially ones that make them angry/scared/resentful), frames them in the most conservative-friendly manner possible, and either ignores stories that are uninteresting/unfavorable to conservatives or reports these stories but frames them in a partisan manner. A regular Fox News viewer will be overwhelmed with messages that make "others" look bad/dishonest/incompetent/dangerous/evil/un-American, along with stories that promote the Republican agenda. This is of course incredibly socially corrosive, as Mona Charen explains:

> "All of us indulge the urge, at least sometimes, to hear news that confirms our own views. What Fox's audience must grapple with is that choosing news is not like other consumer choices. It's not like choosing country music in preference to hip hop or preferring Android over iOS. Getting the truth from a news source is more analogous to getting the straight story from your doctor or financial adviser or home inspector. If your financial adviser told you what you wanted to hear rather than the truth, you'd have a legal case. He or she has a professional responsibility not to mislead you. If your doctor assured you that your skin lesion was benign because he thought this would be more welcome than the news that

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[140] Charen, "Please Lie to Me."

[141] David Roberts, "Donald Trump and the Rise of Tribal Epistemology," *Vox*, May 19, 2017, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology.

it was melanoma requiring immediate treatment, the doctor would be guilty of malpractice and you wouldn't thank him. When Fox News and its competitors lie to viewers, they are endangering not their physical health but their civic health and the good of the nation."[142]

The U.S. has been experiencing major changes in recent decades, including globalization, demographic changes, shifting gender roles, and increasing progressivism in institutions and the culture at large—and many conservatives are reacting negatively to these developments:

"The United States is undergoing a transition perhaps no rich and stable democracy has ever experienced: Its historically dominant group is on its way to becoming a political minority—and its minority groups are asserting their co-equal rights and interests. If there are precedents for such a transition, they lie here in the United States, where white Englishmen initially predominated, and the boundaries of the dominant group have been under negotiation ever since. Yet those precedents are hardly comforting. Many of these renegotiations sparked political conflict or open violence, and few were as profound as the one now under way."[143]

As Tom Nichols writes:

"Cultural change is inevitable and sometimes invigorating, but it is also terrifying to those who feel themselves on the wrong side of it. One of the main drivers of authoritarian attacks on democracy is the sense among privileged groups that their grip on politics and the national culture is slipping away; the internet is their window on that process, distorted and amplified by clever entrepreneurs who know how to play on feelings of inferiority and fears of threats and injuries, real or imagined."[144]

Nichols goes on to say that "When the citizens of a dominant culture come to believe that the end is near for their way of life, they search for scapegoats."[145]

The rise of partisan talk radio (with popular personalities like Rush Limbaugh), partisan cable news (such as Fox News, Newsmax, and OAN), and partisan websites (like the Drudge Report, Daily Wire, Gateway Pundit, Breitbart, and InfoWars) gave American conservatives a new, self-contained media ecosystem focused on their specific concerns, including the aforementioned societal changes—they subsequently fell in love with these new sources of information and became increasingly distrustful of traditional ones outside of their silo:

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[142] Charen, "Please Lie To Me."
[143] Appelbaum, "How America Ends."
[144] Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy,* 168.
[145] Ibid, 189.

"Although each party's elites, activists and voters now depend on different sources of knowledge and selectively interpret the messages they receive, the source of this information polarization is the American conservative movement's decades-long battle against institutions that it has deemed irredeemably liberal."[146]

Unfortunately, many of these new outlets had much lower journalistic standards than traditional media of the past, and spread misleading information (ideology presented as fact, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation) specifically designed to confirm the conservative agenda and stoke conservatives' uneasiness, fear, anger, and resentment around these issues. The right-wing media ecosystem became "an internally coherent, relatively insulated knowledge community, reinforcing the shared worldview of readers and shielding them from journalism that challenge[s] it."[147] This is driving conservatives further and further from reality: "[C]onservatives are pulled with increasing gravity into an information vortex that simply has no analogue elsewhere in American politics."[148] As David Roberts argues:

"The right hypes its base up with bullshit—it has for decades—until an already tribally inclined audience has now descended into near-total epistemic closure. It is contemptuous of outside fact-checking, no matter how assiduous, but endlessly gullible toward information shared on the inside. Consequently, it is an easy target."[149]

And as Harvard Law School's Yochai Benkler and his colleagues explain:

"What we find in our data is a network of mutually-reinforcing hyper-partisan sites that revive what Richard Hofstadter called 'the paranoid style in American politics,' combining decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world. . . By repetition, variation, and circulation through many associated sites, the network of sites make their claims familiar to readers, and this fluency with the core narrative gives credence to the incredible."[150]

They go on: "It is a mistake to dismiss these stories as 'fake news'; their power stems from a potent mix of verifiable facts. . . familiar repeated falsehoods, paranoid logic, and consistent political orientation within a mutually-reinforcing network of like-minded sites."

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[146] Roberts, "Donald Trump."
[147] Yochai Benkler et. al., "Study: Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem Altered Broader Media Agenda," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 3, 2017, https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php.
[148] Roberts, "Donald Trump."
[149] Ibid.
[150] Benkler et. al., "Study: Breitbart."

Conservatives believe this information because it confirms their sacred beliefs,[151] makes them feel good, comes from people in their "tribe" who appear to be trustworthy (carrying credentials that *should* signify credibility), is oppositional to what liberals believe (Trigger the libs! Liberal tears!), portrays out-groups (such as Democrats) in a bad light, and is repeated many times by many different trusted sources within their ideological silo. When a trusted authority from your "team" crafts a convincing message specifically designed to confirm your preexisting beliefs while also activating your biggest fears and insecurities, your cognitive security systems are undermined and you become less skeptical of the message than you might normally be.

In right-wing ideological silos, you will hear many alarming things from news and information sources. It is not uncommon to hear unvarnished bigotry. You might hear that Western civilization is failing or that democracy is not all it is cracked up to be. You will hear that the other side is the enemy, a threat to you/your way of life/your family and children, as well as messages that dehumanize your opponents (such as the "groomer" rhetoric). You will also hear the outright rejection of objective truths, such as claims that climate change is not real (it is),[152] Donald Trump really won the 2020 presidential election (he didn't),[153] or immigrants are unusually violent (they aren't),[154] among other claims.

The extent to which many Republicans see their political opponents as an existential threat to civilization is alarming. The following are excerpts from Michael Anton's "The Flight 93 Election"[155] from the *Claremont Review of Books*, which received a lot of attention from the American right when it was published in September of 2016 (Rush Limbaugh even discussed it on his program):

> "2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway. You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees. Except one: if you don't try, death is certain. To compound the metaphor: a Hillary Clinton presidency is Russian Roulette with a semi-auto. With Trump, at least you can spin the cylinder and take your chances."

The essay goes on to say that:

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[151] As Lee McIntyre explains: "If we are already motivated to *want* to believe certain things, it doesn't take much to tip us over to believing them, especially if others we care about already do so. Our inherent cognitive biases make us ripe for manipulation and exploitation by those who have an agenda to push, especially if they can discredit all other sources of information. But we are especially vulnerable when they tell us exactly what we want to hear." Lee McIntyre, "How Cognitive Bias Can Explain Post-Truth," *Salon.com*, January 23, 2021, https://www.salon.com/2021/01/23/how-cognitive-bias-can-explain-post-truth_partner/.

[152] American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), "What We Know," https://whatweknow.aaas.org/.

[153] Saul, "Not Rigged!"

[154] Lawrence M. Eppard, "Do Unauthorized Immigrants Commit a Lot of Crime?", *Connors Newsletter*, March 6, 2022, https://connorsforum.substack.com/p/do-unauthorized-immigrants-commit.

[155] Michael Anton, "The Flight 93 Election," *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/.

- If conservatives are right, America is "headed off a cliff."
- "[T]he opinion-making elements—the universities and the media above all—are wholly corrupt and wholly opposed to everything we want, and increasingly even to [conservatives'] existence."
- "[M]ost important, the ceaseless importation of Third World foreigners with no tradition of, taste for, or experience in liberty means that the electorate grows more left, more Democratic, less Republican, less republican, and less traditionally American with every cycle. As does, of course, the U.S. population. . . This is the core reason why the Left, the Democrats, and the bipartisan junta (categories distinct but very much overlapping) think they are on the cusp of a permanent victory that will forever obviate the need to pretend to respect democratic and constitutional niceties."
- "The Left and the Democrats seek ringers to form a permanent electoral majority."
- "This is insane. This is the mark of a party, a society, a country, a people, a civilization that wants to die."

Such ideas were espoused by other commentators as well. Eric Metaxas, a prominent evangelical author and talk radio host, argued in 2016 that the presidential election that year was an "existential struggle" for the U.S., and that a Clinton victory would indeed be the end of the republic itself.[156] Fox News personality Laura Ingraham has stated on her show that all of Western civilization is "tipping over the cliff."[157]

It is hard to know what politicians truly believe based upon what they say in public,[158] which makes leaked private correspondence, where they are presumably saying things much more closely aligned with what they truly believe, all the more interesting. Here is just a small sample from a batch of numerous text messages exchanged between then White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and Republican members of Congress in which they discuss attempts to overturn Joe Biden's legitimate victory in the 2020 presidential election:[159]

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[156] Peter Wehner, "Christian Doomsayers Have Lost It," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/opinion/sunday/trump-christian-conservatives.html.

[157] Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy,* 166.

[158] At CPAC in March 2023, for instance, former President Donald Trump stated: "[T]he greatest in our history, most important battle in our lives is taking place right now as we speak. For seven years, you and I have been engaged in an epic struggle to rescue our country from the people who hate it and want to absolutely destroy it. The sinister forces trying to kill America have done everything they can to stop me, to silence you, and to turn this nation into a socialist dumping ground for criminals, junkies, Marxists, thugs, radicals, and dangerous refugees that no other country wants. No other country wants them. If those opposing us succeed, our once beautiful USA will be a failed country that no one will even recognize. A lawless, open borders, crime-ridden, filthy, communist nightmare." He went on to say that: "[W]e have no choice. If we don't do this, our country will be lost forever. . . This is the final battle. They know it, I know it, you know it, everybody knows it. This is it. Either they win or we win. And if they win, we no longer have a country." Source: Rev, "Trump Speaks at CPAC 2023 Transcript," March 6, 2023, https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/trump-speaks-at-cpac-2023-transcript.

[159] Jamie Gangel, Jeremy Herb, and Elizabeth Stuart, "CNN Exclusive: Mark Meadows' 2,319 Text Messages Reveal Trump's Inner Circle Communications Before and After January 6," *CNN*, April 25, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/25/politics/mark-meadows-texts-2319/index.html.

Brian Babin (Republican House Member/TX): "Mark, When we lose Trump we lose our Republic. Fight like hell and find a way. We're with you down here in Texas and refuse to live under a corrupt Marxist dictatorship. Liberty!"

—*Sent November 6, 2020.*

Rick Allen (Republican House Member/GA): "Mark, please know that I have prayed for President Trump, his family, for you and the entire Administration. Our Nation is at war, it is a Spiritual War at the highest level. This is not a war that can be fought conventionally, this is God's battle and He has used President Trump in a powerful way to expose the deceit, lies and hypocrisy of the enemy. The Trump family and all of us have paid a heavy price to be used by the Father but the War is just beginning. We have had a major set back and people are taking sides, and my plea to my fellow believers who want to cut and run is judge not less you be judged, we have all fallen short of the Glory of Almighty God. What I heard during my prayers is the Trump family and the Administration need to be surrounded by those great Pastors and Evangelicals who have and continue to love and support them. President Trump needs to be ministered to, he needs the love that only Jesus Christ offers! This is his opportunity to confess that he can no longer fight this battle alone, he must give it to Christ and God almighty will show him the way to victory. I will continue to pray for all of you, please let me know how I can help??"

—*Sent January 8, 2021 (two days after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol).*

Ralph Norman (Republican House Member/SC): "Mark, in seeing what's happening so quickly, and reading about the Dominion law suits attempting to stop any meaningful investigation we are at a point of � no return � in saving our Republic !! Our LAST HOPE is invoking Marshall Law!! PLEASE URGE TO PRESIDENT TO DO SO!!"

—*Sent January 17, 2021 (just three days before Joe Biden was to take office).*[160]

Marjorie Taylor Greene (Republican House Member/GA): "In our private chat with only Members, several are saying the only way to save our Republic is for Trump to call for Marshall law. I don't know on those things. I just wanted you to tell him. They stole this election. We all know. They will destroy our country next."

—*Sent January 17, 2021.*

In another text, House Representative Mark Green (R-TN) argued that Republican state legislatures could simply "declare" Trump the winner of the presidential election—and his

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[160] *Talking Points Memo*, "The Meadows Texts," December 12-13, 2022, https://talkingpointsmemo.com/meadows-texts.

argument relied on a segment he had seen on Newsmax,[161] a far-right cable network and dangerous purveyor of misinformation/disinformation.[162]

Commenting on these texts, *The Bulwark's* Jonathan Last observed that, "What struck me is that they don't sound like elected officials. They sound like commenters on Breitbart."[163] These politicians are clearly victims of misinformation/disinformation. They are also clearly gripped by the widespread idea among conservatives that they are locked in an existential battle that, if they were to lose, would result in the end of their country forever. Commenting on the January 6, 2021 insurrection in December of 2022, Marjorie Taylor Green said, "I want to tell you something, if Steve Bannon and I had organized that, we would have won. Not to mention, we would've been armed."[164]

The fact that conservatives feel they are losing their grip on the country helps explain their weakening commitment to democracy and the growing appeal of authoritarianism for some. If you feel that you can no longer win a majority of the votes in a presidential election, you may turn to alternative means to stay in power and preserve your preferred way of life:

> "[M]any conservatives, surveying demographic trends, have concluded that Teixeira wasn't wrong—merely premature. They can see the GOP's sinking fortunes among younger voters, and feel the culture turning against them, condemning them today for views that were commonplace only yesterday. They are losing faith that they can win elections in the future. With this come dark possibilities."[165]

Yoni Appelbaum goes on:

> "[Trump's] defeat would likely only deepen the despair that fueled his rise, confirming his supporters' fear that the demographic tide has turned against them. That fear is the single greatest threat facing American democracy, the force that is already battering down precedents, leveling norms, and demolishing guardrails. When a group that has traditionally exercised power comes to believe

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[161] Tom Nichols notes that, "[W]hen a layperson's riposte to an expert consists of 'I read it in the paper' or 'I saw it on the news,' it may not mean very much. Indeed, the information may not have come from the 'news' or 'the paper' at all, but from something that only looks like a news source. More likely, such an answer means 'I saw something from a source I happen to like and it told me something I wanted to hear.' At that point, the discussion has nowhere to go; the original issue is submerged or lost in the effort to untangle which piece of misinformation is driving the conversation in the first place." Nichols, *The Death of Expertise,* 138.

[162] *Talking Points Memo*, "The Meadows Texts."

[163] Jonathan V. Last, "Elaina Plott Calabro: MTG Is More Cunning than You Think," *The Bulwark Podcast*, December 13, 2022, https://www.thebulwark.com/podcast-episode/elaina-plott-calabro-mtg-is-more-cunning-than-you-think/.

[164] Eugene Scott, "White House Condemns Greene Over Claim She Would Have 'Won' Jan. 6 Insurrection," *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/12/greene-jan6-white-house-armed-insurrection/.

[165] Appelbaum, "How America Ends."

that its eclipse is inevitable, and that the destruction of all it holds dear will follow, it will fight to preserve what it has—whatever the cost."[166]

I should note the influence of bad faith knowledge *producers* in right-wing silos, not just bad faith *disseminators* like Fox News. There is a long history of industry-backed researchers and partisan think tanks injecting misleading information into the public discourse in support of conservative priorities. Big Tobacco was perhaps most notorious, as David Michaels notes in *Doubt Is Their Product*:

"Without a doubt, Big Tobacco has manufactured more uncertainty over a longer period and more effectively than any other industry. The title of this book comes from a phrase unwisely committed to paper by a cigarette executive: 'Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy'. . . Whatever the story—global warming, sugar and obesity, secondhand smoke—scientists in what I call the 'product defense industry' prepare for the release of unfavorable studies even before the studies are published. Public relations experts feed these for-hire scientists contrarian sound bites that play well with reporters, who are mired in the trap of believing there must be two sides to every story. Maybe there are two sides—and maybe one has been bought and paid for."[167]

He goes on to note that: "[P]roduct defense consultants have shaped and skewed the scientific literature, manufactured and magnified scientific uncertainty, and influenced policy decisions to the advantage of polluters and the manufacturers of dangerous products."[168] Like Michaels, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway catalogue such industry tactics in their book, *Merchants of Doubt*:

"For half a century the tobacco industry, the defenders of SDI, and the skeptics about acid rain, the ozone hole, and global warming strove to 'maintain the controversy' and 'keep the debate alive' by fostering claims that were contrary to the mainstream of scientific evidence and expert judgement. They promoted claims that had already been refuted in the scientific literature, and the media became complicit as they reported these claims as if they were a part of an ongoing scientific debate. Often the media did so without informing readers, viewers, and listeners that the 'experts' being quoted had links to the tobacco industry, were affiliated with ideologically motivated think tanks that received

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[166] Appelbaum, "How America Ends."
[167] David Michaels, *Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry's Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), x.
[168] Michaels, *Doubt Is Their Product*, xiii.

money from the tobacco industry (or in later years the fossil fuel industry), or were simply habitual contrarians."[169]

Industry-backed researchers and partisan think tanks have historically used a number of tactics to try to sway public opinion, including:

- Funding and then using front groups and third parties as public messengers (sometimes called "information laundering") so that the interests of those spreading partisan and/or misleading information aren't obvious (such as ExxonMobil funding the climate change denying Heartland Institute),
- Funding front groups and third parties to manufacture scientific debate by carrying out methodologically flawed studies designed to confirm a partisan conclusion,
- Flooding the public discourse with flawed but seemingly legitimate contrarian opinions to mischaracterize the weight of the scientific evidence,
- Demanding balance, even when an issue does not have two equally valid arguments (as my colleague Lee McIntyre likes to say, the midpoint between the truth and a lie is still a lie),
- Exaggerating the level of uncertainty and controversy within the scientific community around particular issues,
- Impugning the motives of scientists and/or creating the impression that all science is biased and agenda-driven, thus eroding trust in *all* sources of information,
- Framing the implications of scientific findings in ways that violate core American values, align with other issues, and/or create false dichotomies (such as the idea that addressing climate change would require unacceptable regulation of our capitalist economy),
- Using colorful imagery to suggest that the solution to the problem is worse than the problem itself,
- Diminishing the severity of the problem,
- Attacking the messengers instead of the messages,
- Shifting blame (such as arguing that it's flammable furniture that is the problem in house fires, not cigarettes),
- Repeating flawed claims over and over and over again,
- Intimidating scientists,
- Investing in lobbyists and donating to politicians,
- Keeping the debate alive by any means necessary for as long as possible,
- Delaying action by any means for as long as possible.[170]

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[169] Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 241. As an example: "[Researchers] examined newspaper and magazine coverage of research on passive smoking and found that 62 percent of all articles published between 1992 and 1994 concluded that the research was 'controversial.' Yet. . . the scientific community had by that point reached consensus, and the tobacco industry had known the degree of danger even before that" (p. 242).

[170] Rob Moodie, "The Seven Tactics Unhealthy Industries Use to Undermine Public Health Policies," *The Conversation*, August 17, 2017, https://theconversation.com/the-seven-tactics-unhealthy-industries-use-to-undermine-public-health-policies-81137.

PROBLEMS IN LEFT-WING SILOS

Like conservatives, liberals also frequent questionable sources of information, such as CNN and MSNBC. Compared with conservatives, however, liberals are more likely to include other higher-quality sources in their media diets as well (such as trustworthy newspapers or the network news).[171] So why do so many American liberals believe so many questionable things? There are many plausible contributing factors, but there is one in particular that I think deserves a lot of attention: the ideological capture of some segments of the American research community.

As I have argued, the size and quality of our epistemic system would be hard to imagine even just a few decades ago, with major advances in science, medicine, and technology happening with an astonishing frequency. The problem is not with the system as a whole—it remains impressive and unparalleled and should be allowed to continue to grow and better our world. The problem is that in *certain areas* of this epistemic system—perhaps most notably in the academic social sciences—some researchers and institutions have allowed their methods and analyses to be undermined by ideology. Addressing the failings of these bad actors so that they conform to the high standards of the rest of our epistemic system should be a top priority moving forward—because, as Jonathan Rauch argues, "[Academia] may well be the most important of the institutions that comprise the constitution of knowledge."[172]

Many liberals like to criticize conservatives for denying established evidence, and there is no doubt that many conservatives deny facts. A recent Gallup poll, for instance, found that while 92% of liberals and 76% of moderates believed that global warming was primarily caused by human activities—which is what the current weight of the scientific evidence suggests[173]—only 35% of conservatives agreed.[174] But there is plenty of evidence that liberals believe questionable things about a variety of issues as well—they are just different issues than the ones they criticize conservatives for.[175] Both groups, when discussing issues that are sacred to their side, will often bend reality to their beliefs.

I have personally witnessed numerous conservatives push back against criticism that they reject reality—like their refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election—by highlighting that liberals do the same thing on different issues. One of the most common retorts I hear relates to sex and gender. I've heard some version of this statement countless times: "Why should I believe what liberals say about [whatever issue is being debated] when they cannot even tell me what a woman is?" They argue that liberals' rejection of biological contributions to differences between men and women, and their advocacy for overly social constructionist explanations, is far from settled fact. Yet liberals often weaponize selective evidence in debates in order to claim it is settled objective truth (and label those who disagree as sexists or misogynists).

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[171] Philip Bump, "The Unique, Damaging Role Fox News Plays in American Media," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/04/unique-damaging-role-fox-news-plays-american-media/.

[172] Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

[173] AAAS, "What We Know."

[174] Lydia Saad, "Global Warming Attitudes Frozen Since 2016," *Gallup*, April 5, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/343025/global-warming-attitudes-frozen-2016.aspx.

[175] Mooney, "Liberals Deny Science, Too."

As an example, GLAAD recently tweeted the following: "A reminder that healthcare for transgender people is settled science."[176] This is demonstrably false, as there is significant controversy and scientific debate about gender identity as well as gender-affirming care (such as the use of puberty blockers and hormones). But liberals can find plenty of scholars who will affirm this statement and can thus weaponize ideology masquerading as settled science against their opponents.

None of this should be much of a surprise, as Jonathan Haidt explains: "On the left, including the academic left, the most sacred issues involve race and gender. So that's where you find the most direct and I'd say flagrant denial of evidence."[177]

On the left, academics, partisan media personalities, and activists are guilty of frequently spreading "virtuous lies"[178]—that is, many on the left make claims (that they insist are scientifically authoritative) that further a social justice agenda without realizing/acknowledging the preliminary, weak, or nonexistent empirical support behind their assertions. Many liberals who hear/read these claims will believe them because they see them repeated often by various credentialed sources who they trust, they assume the claims are backed by credible evidence, and they fit their worldview/make them feel good.

Additionally, for a liberal to oppose a virtuous lie would be to align oneself with "bad" people on the other side (supposed bigots, know-nothings, etc.). Occidental College's Jacob Mackey argues that to correct a virtuous lie is to oppose the noble goals of one's tribe and/or to signal that one does not take the problem seriously.

As Dorian Abbot and his colleagues argue, "[I]n the 'right' circles, one can make almost any ridiculous claim, as long as one frames it as advancing 'Social Justice.'"[179]

Many virtuous lies come from academia. Some of the research behind these flawed assertions is just the result of sloppiness (in research design and/or the interpretation of results), some the result of confirmation bias, and some the result of researchers intentionally designing and/or interpreting studies so that they reach a specific desired conclusion (and some a combination of these):

> "In complex areas like the study of racial inequality, a fundamentalism has taken hold that discourages sound methodology and the use of reliable evidence about the roots of social problems. We are not talking about mere differences in interpretation of results, which are common. We are talking about mistakes so clear that they should cause research to be seriously questioned or even disregarded. A great deal of research. . . rigs its statistical methods in order to arrive at ideologically preferred conclusions."[180]

Michael Jindra and Arthur Sakamoto go on:

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[176] From May 19, 2023: https://twitter.com/glaad/status/1659552178720178179.

[177] Mooney, "Liberals Deny Science, Too."

[178] This concept comes from my colleague Jacob Mackey at Occidental College.

[179] Abbot et. al., "In Defense of Merit," 14.

[180] Michael Jindra and Arthur Sakamoto, "When Ideology Drives Social Science: Statistical Malfeasance and Cherry-Picking Are Rife," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 6, 2023, https://www.chronicle.com/article/when-ideology-drives-social-science.

"[I]deologically driven abuse of statistics happens all across the social sciences. Why? In left-leaning academic discourse, there are strong biases toward 'structural' causes, in part because scholars face strong pressures to avoid 'blaming' people and cultures for social problems. But social theory must recognize both structure and agency, alongside intermediary forces of social influence such as culture. . . Again, we are not talking about normal differences in the interpretation of results. We are talking about clear errors, or at least very poor scholarship that should not have passed peer review. It is easy to question some of these results because they often don't make intuitive sense. . . Research simply shouldn't be directed by a priori ideological commitments. It should follow the evidence. Often, that evidence won't lead to clear-cut or definitive results. Some of these articles should be candidates for retraction, but retraction is rare. . . Some scholars even received major promotions, perhaps partly because their findings fit favored narratives. Instead, papers that violate ideological beliefs, more than those with errors of fact, receive pressure for cancellation, often from Twitter activists."

The authors note that in the social sciences, the entire system of research, funding, publication, and promotion strongly values findings that support current social justice goals. Because so many of the career rewards (and sanctions) are aligned with these goals, "people will go to extraordinary lengths to achieve them."

If virtuous lies were simply confined to academia, it would be worrisome enough. But as Dorian Abbot and his colleagues argue, these flawed claims have escaped the lab: "For decades, Critical Theories had been confined to humanities and Studies departments of universities. But the ideas have spread to other disciplines and the outside world, where they have been picked up by activists and the press."[181]

The left tells many virtuous lies, particularly about issues related to race and gender, including claims regarding the gender pay gap, gender identity, microaggressions, implicit bias, police shootings, and genetic fallacies, to name a few. While the larger epistemic system is working well, in some fields—like psychology and sociology—current social justice goals are blinding far too many researchers to (and scaring others from speaking up about) the flaws in many studies.

I suspect that part of the problem is that many social scientists are simply ill-equipped to identify flaws in major academic studies. In my own field of sociology, for instance, you can earn a Ph.D. and spend an entire career teaching and publishing in a tenured university position without ever developing even a rudimentary grasp of quantitative research methods. Many sociologists do so. At many universities across the U.S., sociology professors are presenting information to their students that they incorrectly assume is strongly supported by empirical evidence because, while the professors themselves may not understand the research behind the claims, *the authorities in their field have assured them it is sound*. This information passed peer review, was published by leading journals/book presses, was accepted by the larger field,

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[181] Abbot et. al., "In Defense of Merit," 12.

made its way into textbooks, etc. Most sociology professors have not seen the empirical research behind much of the information they present in class, likely would not fully understand it if they did, and are unlikely to question it anyway because it aligns with current left-wing social justice assumptions.

I'm not picking on sociology—I assume a number of academic disciplines face this same problem—it's just that I can speak confidently about my own discipline because I have seen all of this firsthand.

Another possible (and likely even more important) culprit in all of this is a glaring lack of intellectual diversity within many academic fields and institutions. Liberal professors and researchers far outnumber conservative ones at American universities (where much of our knowledge is produced), an imbalance that has grown in recent decades.

The ratio of Democrats to Republicans in disciplines like math and chemistry has been reported to be around 5:1, while estimates are much higher in the social sciences and humanities.[182] In the field of psychology the ratio was estimated to be as low as 2:1 earlier in the 20th century but around 17:1 in recent years (and even worse at more prestigious universities and in New England).[183] In my own discipline of sociology, one estimate puts the ratio at 40:1.[184] The imbalance is likely worse at elite institutions, as Jonathan Rauch explains:

> "A recent study of top-ranked liberal-arts colleges by the National Association of Scholars found that 39% had zero Republican professors, and that almost 80% of the academic departments had 'either zero Republicans, or so few as to make no difference.'"[185]

Increasing progressivism is no doubt limiting the quality of both the scholarship produced by academics as well as the education their students receive: some research questions get investigated and others are avoided, some methods utilized and others ignored, information gets interpreted in biased ways, and some legitimate viewpoints are marginalized while others are amplified:

> "[W]hen the majority of scientists in a discipline share the same sacred values, then the checks and balances of peer review and peer skepticism that science relies upon can fail. Peer review, critical engagement, skepticism, and the other virtues of science. . . become tyrants that promote and protect the sacred values of the scientific community."[186]

This leads to a left-biased understanding of many issues, especially in places like the social sciences: "[S]tudents in politically homogenous departments will mostly be exposed to books and research studies drawn from the left half of the range, so they are likely to come down to

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[182] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 224.
[183] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 111.
[184] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 224.
[185] Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."
[186] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 227.

the 'left' of the truth, on average."[187] Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt go on to note that: "[V]iewpoint diversity is necessary for the development of critical thinking, while viewpoint homogeneity (whether on the left or the right) leaves a community vulnerable to groupthink and orthodoxy."[188] All of this, of course, helps to further erode conservatives' faith in higher education and science in general:

> "Conservative voters are not going to consent forever to sending tax dollars to support institutions at odds with their values. They are losing confidence in higher education's benefits for the country. And, in the past few years, Republican states have increasingly been legislating against left-wing indoctrination in colleges."[189]

If there is enough intellectual diversity in academia, flawed partisan ideas will have a difficult time gaining traction without being revised in a more nuanced direction. But while the academy has long had problems with the conservative/liberal ratio, it is much more imbalanced today than in the past, increasing the number of ideological blind spots among its members. As Jonathan Haidt argues, "[W]e can't count on 'institutionalized disconfirmation' anymore because there are hardly any more conservatives or libertarians in the humanities and social sciences."[190] This extreme imbalance in academia today has seriously eroded empirical standards of evidence for truth claims in some fields. There just aren't enough skeptical voices pushing back, and the very real possibility of severe career and personal consequences one could face for saying the wrong thing makes those few who might speak up think twice.[191]

That leads me to other related problems in the left-wing silo: growing dogmatism/purity tests, mischaracterizing good faith disagreements as bigotry,[192] and cancel culture: "[Wokeism] fosters a kind of leftist illiberalism that is almost religious in nature, in that it brooks no dissent—the sort of ideology that center-left liberals have historically opposed."[193] Thomas Chatterton Williams goes on: "Cancel culture is quite real in the U.S., and its effects have been toxic to debate and, in many cases, to institutional decision making."

Nicholas Christakis defines cancel culture as (1) forming a mob, to (2) seek to get someone fired or disproportionately punished, for (3) statements within the Overton window

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[187] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 112.

[188] Ibid, 113.

[189] Ramesh Ponnuru, "How to Restore Intellectual Diversity on College Campuses," *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/27/nurturing-conservative-ideas-on-campus/.

[190] Jonathan Haidt, "Why Universities Must Choose One Telos: Truth or Social Justice," Heterodox Academy, October 21, 2016, https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/one-telos-truth-or-social-justice-2/.

[191] "Many professors now say that they are 'teaching on tenterhooks' or 'walking on eggshells,' which means that fewer of them are willing to try anything provocative in the classroom—or cover important but difficult course material." Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 205.

[192] To voice a good faith and reasonable critique of somebody's argument about race or gender identity, for instance, may get you labeled as somebody who is committing "violence" against marginalized groups or who "denies their right to exist."

[193] Thomas Chatterton Williams, "The French Are in a Panic Over *Le Wokisme*," *The Atlantic*, February 4, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/03/france-tocqueville-democracy-race-le-wokisme/672775/.

(or within the spectrum of ideas considered reasonable/acceptable/mainstream by the general public at a given time).[194] David French argues that:

> "The appeal of Christakis's formulation was that it concisely captured the precise public fear—that a person can be cast out of polite society for saying something completely conventional, normal and in good faith. But there's a problem—the more that America polarizes, the more it contains not one but two Overton windows, the 'red' window and the 'blue' window. Speech that is squarely mainstream in Red America is completely out of bounds in Blue America, and vice versa."[195]

When those within the left-wing tribe attempt to question specific orthodoxies of their side, they run the risk of being publicly smeared in a manner that unjustifiably ruins their reputation (being called a racist, sexist, transphobe, etc.): "Many professors say they now teach and speak more cautiously, because one slip or one simple misunderstanding could lead to vilification and even threat from any number of sources."[196] There is reason for somebody to experience reputational harm if they are intentionally making obvious, overtly racist or sexist statements. Increasingly, however, people are getting into trouble for asking reasonable, good faith questions about issues that, despite the claims of some on the left, are far from being empirically settled. As David French notes:

> "Americans have read story after story (from across the political spectrum) of activists, corporations and colleges targeting individuals for speech that is squarely within the mainstream of either progressive or conservative thought. In other words, dissent—even thoughtful dissent—has become dangerous, in both right- and left-leaning America. Private organizations are acting punitively when the government cannot. This is the essence of cancel culture, the widespread use of private power to punish allegedly offensive speech."[197]

Throughout my career at various academic institutions, I have routinely felt pressure—from both students and colleagues—to self-censor in the classroom and in my research. This was especially true *before* I had tenure (there is zero chance I would have published this before tenure given the risk that doing so could have posed to my career and my family's financial security). Even though most of my students and colleagues would probably never attempt to hurt my career, even a small minority have the power to cause professional, financial, and reputational ruin for me with a single tweet.

As an example of the pressure I have personally faced, I recently shared a draft of an article with a colleague for feedback while I was fine-tuning it before submitting it to an

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[194] He posted this on Twitter on July 12, 2020:
https://web.archive.org/web/20230310124335/https://twitter.com/NAChristakis/status/1282143257309450240?s=20.

[195] French, "Two Different Versions."

[196] Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 138.

[197] French, "Two Different Versions."

academic journal. I had included a paragraph in the draft arguing that professors should be clear when they are discussing certain issues in the classroom—issues where there is no objective and empirically demonstrable "right" or "wrong" answer—that the debates around those issues involve subjective value judgements, not objective truths. In this example, I specifically cited the abortion debate in America. I wrote that, while there are many facts one could use to support a variety of positions, abortion policy ultimately reflects the subjective manner in which we prioritize those facts based upon our values and preferences. I do not know of an objective way to settle the question of whether the life of the unborn child or the rights of the mother should take precedence—it comes down to values. While giving me feedback on my draft, my colleague zeroed in on the abortion paragraph and said the following to me in a tense exchange:

> "Pro-lifers hold their views for only *one* reason: they want to control women. Period. If I had read your article in a journal, I would have stopped reading when I saw the line about the abortion debate being about subjective values and would never have read any of your work in the future—and encouraged others not to, either."

Upon hearing this and other related criticisms from my colleague—and knowing that many sociologists think this way and could severely damage my career if they desired—I regret to say that I caved. I removed that line from the article before submitting it to the journal (where it was eventually published).

"Pro-lifers hold their views for only *one* reason: they want to control women. Period." This was not just some one-off personal belief shared with me by a colleague in private—I have heard professors present this empirically questionable claim to college students as objective fact on numerous occasions. This is an example of the highly questionable claims frequently presented as settled fact not only in college classrooms but in major academic journals, books from prestigious presses, at major academic conferences, and elsewhere. Radical and empirically shaky claims about not only abortion but capitalism, gender identity, racial/gender/economic inequalities, and many other topics are misleadingly presented as empirically settled and those who dare step outside of the acceptable range of liberal thought on such topics face very serious personal and professional risks.

I do not always cave when pressured to conform—and I am feeling much more comfortable challenging the orthodoxies of academia now that I have tenure—but the pressure is always present. For instance, I once submitted an article—about community-level factors which impact children's success—to a peer-reviewed academic journal. My findings were rather uncontroversial and aligned with what a number of other scholars have found: that community-level factors—including a community's social capital, rate of single parenthood, school quality, and degree of racial segregation, among others—are associated with children's likelihood of success later on in life as adults (independent of individual- and family-level factors). Echoing an anonymous reviewer's comments, the editor of the journal was concerned about the inclusion of one variable in particular: community single parenthood rates. The editor was worried that its inclusion would suggest that single parents contribute to the poor outcomes of their

children. They did not ask me to remove that finding from the study, but they did ask me to include commentary that I felt I could not support with my data.

In the case of the aforementioned article that discussed abortion, I was able to replace the abortion example with a different one without changing any of the substance of my argument. To cave here, however, would have been unethical—single parenthood was one of the strongest variables in my study, and to downplay or ignore that altogether would mean altering my findings to say something that they didn't really say in order to appease the personal beliefs of an anonymous reviewer.

For obvious reasons, I could not agree to this. I decided to stand firm, explain my reasoning for doing so, and simply submit the article to another journal if the editor was displeased. Luckily, the editor published my article without any changes to or distortions of my findings, but it was a delicate and unnecessary negotiation due to the inappropriate influence of a reviewer's personal beliefs.

Regarding the manner in which the social sciences have been captured by ideologues, Lee McIntyre argues: "It is unfortunately true that a good deal of social science today is unreliable, due to its infection by political ideology. Even in universities, in some fields there is no clear line between 'research' and political advocacy."[198] From personal experience I can report that I believe McIntyre is correct. I have numerous examples from my own career in addition to what I have discussed here—many of them much more serious—that I'd rather not mention publicly.

Because of growing progressivism in the academy and the rise of cancel culture, professors are increasingly self-censoring: avoiding posing questions in the classroom and in their research that might get them called out publicly by liberal students, colleagues, administrators, and DEI[199] staff. This is especially true when it comes to classroom discussions and research questions related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. As Rebecca Tuvel—a Rhodes College professor and victim of a social media pile-on related to an academic article she published defending transracialism—noted:

> "I know professors who will not touch certain topics with a ten-foot pole in the classroom for fear of getting a report filed against them. Self-censorship is everywhere. It's a serious problem that makes me concerned for the future of academia."[200]

Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis, who faced protests from students and a Title IX investigation over an article she wrote about consensual-relations codes governing professor-student dating,[201] argued that on today's college campuses:

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[198] Lee McIntyre, *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age* (New York: Routledge), 135.
[199] DEI stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion.
[200] Tuvel had published a journal article defending transracialism. Her article was claimed to have "enact[ed] violence" by critics, hundreds of academics called for her article to be retracted, and in a resulting social media pile-on some of her critics advocated that she be fired. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 211-212.
[201] For the article in question, see: Laura Kipnis, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2015, https://www.chronicle.com/article/sexual-paranoia-strikes-academe/.

"Most academics I know—this includes feminists, progressives, minorities, and those who identify as gay or queer—now live in fear of some classroom incident spiraling into professional disaster. After [my] essay appeared, I was deluged with emails from professors applauding what I'd written because they were too frightened to say such things publicly themselves. . . I learned that professors around the country now routinely avoid discussing subjects in classes that might raise hackles. A well-known sociologist wrote that he no longer lectures on abortion. . . A tenured professor on my campus wrote about lying awake at night worrying that some stray remark of hers might lead to student complaints, social-media campaigns, eventual job loss, and her being unable to support her child. I'd thought she was exaggerating, but that was before I learned about the Title IX complaints against me."

She went on:

"What's being lost, along with job security, is the liberty to publish ideas that might go against the grain or to take on risky subjects in the first place. With students increasingly regarded as customers and consumer satisfaction paramount, it's imperative to avoid creating potential classroom friction with unpopular ideas. . . [P]retty much everyone now self-censors."

I'll end this section with a long but I believe important quote from the "Harper's Letter":

"The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. More troubling still, institutional leaders, in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms. Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes. Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement. This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. . . As writers we need a culture that leaves us room

for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes. We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences. If we won't defend the very thing on which our work depends, we shouldn't expect the public or the state to defend it for us."[202]

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

I do not pretend to know how to solve the epistemic crisis we are mired in. I feel as lost as anybody else.

At the macro-level, organizations that promote themselves as "news organizations" should not be allowed to spread obvious misinformation and disinformation. I am hoping that somebody much smarter than me will find a reasonable way to regulate these organizations without running afoul of the law, the Constitution, or the wishes of the general public (whether such regulation comes in the form of mandatory public retraction of misleading stories, heavy fines, suspension of a news organization's ability to operate, and/or something else).

I realize that, in our current highly polarized political environment, such an idea might be dead on arrival. I am also well aware of how such power could be abused by partisans who choose to incorrectly label legitimate information as misinformation/disinformation simply because it is unfavorable to their side. Developing meaningful regulation of news organizations would take a considerable amount of time and very careful deliberation—and even then, it may not be feasible. But I believe we should make a good faith effort.

I have one possible idea. For organizations who market themselves as news organizations, the government could require them to display their trustworthiness rating—such as the ratings produced by NewsGuard (newsguardtech.com)—prominently in their content (much like television shows carry ratings like "TV-MA"). Whether it's a Fox News television broadcast or CNN website article or some other news content, the rating could appear prominently in one of the corners of the screen/page.

Social media platforms have made efforts to stop the spread of misleading information—we should encourage the continuation and strengthening of these efforts.

While segments of academia have done a poor job of regulating themselves, it is not clear to me that outside actors would do a better job. In fact, I suspect that people like Ron DeSantis and Christopher Rufo would not only simply reverse the ideological bias in the other direction, they would probably do considerable damage to the large areas of our epistemic system (constituting a majority of that system) that are not in crisis and in fact are working very well. But if academia does not fix itself, the Rufos and DeSantises of the world will step in with a sledgehammer and begin indiscriminately smashing away. As Jonathan Rauch writes: "[I]t's reasonable to worry about. . . bias in traditional media and a replication crisis in establishment science. The answer, however, is to remediate the defects, not to trash the institutions."[203] And as Michael Jindra and Arthur Sakamoto argue:

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[202] Elliot Ackerman et. al., "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," *Harper's Magazine*, July 7, 2020, https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/.
[203] Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge."

"'Progressive activists,' only 8 percent of the population, now dominate much of the social sciences and humanities. There should be a way to check institutions whose groupthink produces flawed research, though that of course has its dangers. The activists' enemies on the hard right control many state legislatures and, as in Florida, are attempting to legislate speech in higher ed. This is a recipe for continued polarization and conflict, not for truth."[204]

To avoid incompetent, irresponsible, and/or bad faith actors from coming in and destroying the epistemic system because of the sins of a minority of its members, we must fix ourselves.

We need to make peer review more rigorous. We need to find a way to systematically attempt replications of major research findings. It is vitally important that we increase intellectual diversity in terms of who is teaching in the classroom, who is conducting research, and who is making decisions about knowledge production (such as who we select as journal editors and anonymous peer reviewers). We can also create new university centers and institutes specifically designed to foster intellectual diversity and open scholarly debate.[205]

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At the individual level, I have a few suggestions that each of us might find useful. First and foremost, consume information from credible sources. There are a variety of online news literacy courses available from reputable places like the Poynter Institute and Stony Brook University. There are also several fact-checking websites, including *Snopes*, *PolitiFact*, *FactCheck.org*, *AP Fact Check*, and the *Washington Post Fact Checker*.

While all of this is valuable, it is unreasonable to expect most people to have the time, skills, and desire to fact check every piece of information they see or hear. Therefore, I believe the most important strategy is to only consume information from sources whose content has recently been scrutinized by independent, professional analysts using rigorous, objective, and rule-based methodologies—and been deemed high-quality. At the Connors Forum (ConnorsForum.org) we have identified several trustworthy news and information sources that have been shown to provide accurate information with limited bias.

Here is our rubric for classifying news and information outlets as trustworthy. We disqualify an outlet from receiving our trustworthy classification if it fails in *any* of the following areas:

- All outlets must receive high scores from NewsGuard (newsguardtech.com) on all five of their credibility measures:
  o Not publishing false content
  o Demonstrating responsible news gathering/presentation
  o Making corrections/clarifications
  o Demonstrating responsible news/opinion differentiation
 o Avoiding deceptive headlines

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[204] Jindra and Sakamoto, "When Ideology Drives Social Science."
[205] Ponnuru, "How To Restore Intellectual Diversity."

- Outlets cannot fall outside of Ad Fontes Media's (adfontesmedia.com) most reliable zone.
- Outlets cannot be rated lower than high quality by The Factual (thefactual.com).
- Outlets cannot be rated as hyperpartisan by either Ad Fontes Media or AllSides (allsides.com/media-bias).

Using all four of these tools (NewsGuard, Ad Fontes Media, The Factual, and AllSides) in conjunction is akin to a "Swiss cheese defense**.**"[206] While it is possible that one of these organizations could make a mistake in their analysis of a particular outlet, it is highly unlikely that *all four* would give an unreliable outlet high marks (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1. The Connors "Swiss Cheese" Defense Against Misleading Information
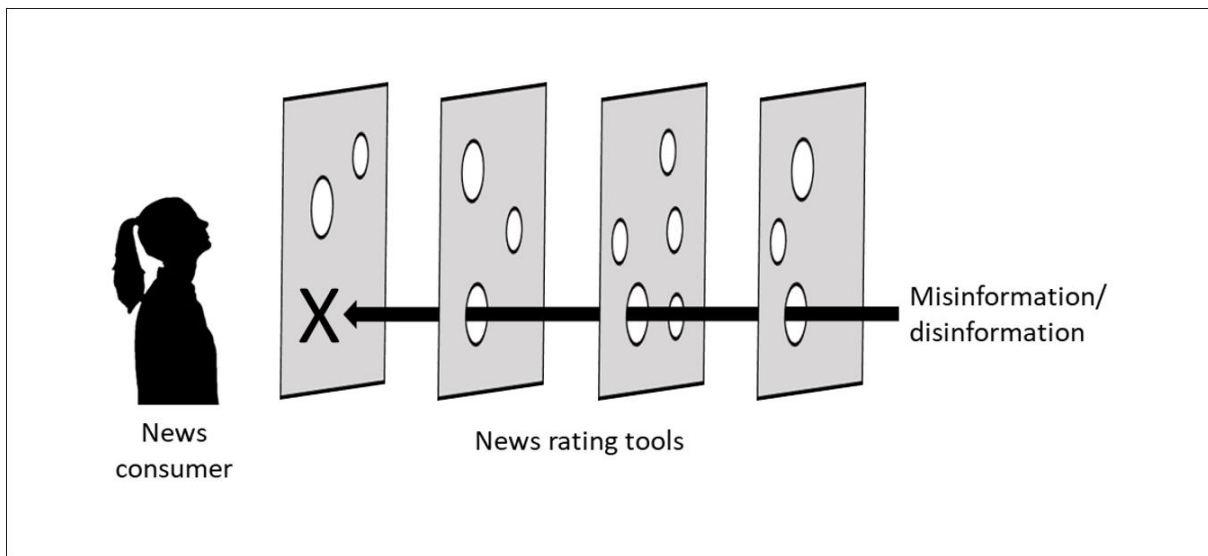
Source: Adapted by the author from Ian Mackay's Swiss cheese virology infographic.[207] Female silhouette from pexels.com.

You can read about the methodologies of these organizations at their websites. But in a nutshell, these organizations employ multiple analysts to rate the content that individual outlets produce. These ratings are rigorous, objective, and rule-based.

As one example, NewsGuard employs analysts like James Warren, who amassed a wealth of journalistic experience and knowledge in his five decades in the news industry. This experience included working as managing editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, chief media writer at the Poynter Institute, and Washington bureau chief for the *New York Daily News*.

When NewsGuard analysts rate an outlet, they first rigorously assess the outlet's content against nine objective criteria related to credibility and transparency. During this process, they draft a "Nutrition Label" for the outlet consisting of a grid showing its performance on each of the nine criteria and a written explanation of the rating. If it is believed

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[206] Adapted from Ian M. Mackay, "The Swiss Cheese Infographic That Went Viral," *Virology Down Under*, December 26, 2020, https://virologydownunder.com/the-swiss-cheese-infographic-that-went-viral/.
[207] Mackay, "The Swiss Cheese Infographic."

that the outlet fell short of NewsGuard's credibility or transparency standards, then the analyst will call the outlet for comment.

The analyst's work is then reviewed and fact-checked by at least one senior editor, and then reviewed and fact-checked *again* by both of NewsGuard's CEOs to ensure that the rating is as fair and accurate as possible. The outlet is then given a rating and the analysis is posted online for transparency purposes.

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Beyond relying on sources that have been rigorously evaluated for their trustworthiness, individuals can guard against consuming misleading information in a variety of other ways:[208]

- Be curious.
- Value getting to the truth more highly than winning the argument or affirming your beliefs.
- Know what you don't know and the limits of your understanding.
- Avoid being tribal—no side has a monopoly on truth. Commit yourself to being aggressively nonpartisan and objective.
- Value changing your mind when the evidence warrants it. Constantly check your beliefs against evidence and update your views/pivot to a new understanding when new information is available.
- Practice intellectual humility.
- The best writing goes through many drafts, each time getting better. Even after a piece is published, writers know they could keep making it better with endless subsequent drafts. Treat your opinions, assumptions, and beliefs like drafts—keep revising them, over and over and over again, throughout your life. They will only get better and better with each try.
- All of your ideas and beliefs at any given moment should be provisional—simply a reflection of where you stand at a given moment with the information you have available to you at that point—because you know with time and more information your view of the world will inevitably change for the better.
- Refuse to let your beliefs become ideologies.
- When you find yourself about to respond emotionally to new information—pause, deliberate, and reflect.
- Try to be emotionally invested in the smallest number of beliefs as possible (we should of course be emotionally invested in *some* beliefs, but ask yourself which ones deserve it). It is hard to change beliefs that we've become emotionally attached to and/or incorporated into our identity, even when we find out they are flawed.

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[208] These suggestions based on the work of many scholars, including Ali Dagnes, Michael A. Deas, Adam Grant, Tom Nichols, Lee McIntyre, Jonathan Rauch, Jonathan Haidt, Steven Sloman, Philip Fernbach, and Bruce Bartlett, among others.

- Always ask yourself: What new information would be necessary to make me change this deeply held belief? If I *were* to be wrong about this, what would the most likely reason be? Then be on the lookout for such disconfirming evidence.[209]
- Do as my colleague and former *Chicago Tribune* editor Michael A. Deas does: Try to cross-examine the information you are consuming like a prosecuting attorney by actively and rigorously *trying* to discredit it. Only when information can stand up to such scrutiny should it be considered reliable.
- Don't overconsume the news.
- Build a media diet that includes a center-left source (like the *Washington Post*), a center-right source (like the *Wall Street Journal*), and a centrist source (like the Associated Press or Reuters).
- Don't lock yourself in an ideological silo, surrounded only by people and sources of information you agree with. Everybody has blind spots in their knowledge (none of us are perfect!) and we are most likely to find flaws in our beliefs when they are challenged.
- Practice viewpoint diversity everywhere (in your personal life, professional life, media diet, and beyond). Being confronted with opposing views won't necessarily change all of your beliefs—it shouldn't, many of them are correct—but it will help you identify weaknesses in your preexisting assumptions.
- Jonathan Rauch argues that, "[W]hen we encounter an unwelcome and even repugnant new idea, the right question to ask is 'What can I learn from this?' rather than 'How can I get rid of this?'"[210] When confronted with a different point of view, *listen*, and find at least some kernel of truth in what is being claimed—and then identify which *strong evidence* tells you the rest of the claim is wrong.
- Always play devil's advocate and try your hardest to find information that contradicts your beliefs. Don't avoid opposing arguments—seek out the strongest and most reasonable counterarguments (not the weakest straw men). If you end up revising your beliefs *that's a good thing*—you've just grown smarter. As Ray Dalio argues, "If you don't look back at yourself and think, 'Wow, how stupid I was a year ago,' then you must not have learned much in the last year."[211] Growing smarter is awesome, I try to do it every day if I can. If you test your beliefs and they remain unchanged *you're also better off* because you're more confident in the strength of your position.
- One way to understand flaws in your beliefs and gaps in your knowledge is to practice explaining a firmly held belief in great detail as if you were talking to an expert on the subject. If you cannot do so thoroughly and without your argument breaking down, more knowledge is necessary.

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[209] "It is the hallmark of science that beliefs should be based on evidence, and that people should be willing to change their beliefs based on new evidence. This means that people should be able to specify in advance what evidence, if it existed, would be sufficient to get them to change their minds." Lee McIntyre, "5 Ways Trump and His Supporters Are Using the Same Strategies as Science Deniers," *The Conversation*, November 27, 2019, https://theconversation.com/5-ways-trump-and-his-supporters-are-using-the-same-strategies-as-science-deniers-127076.

[210] Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, 198.

[211] Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (New York: Viking, 2021), 63.

- Avoid cable news, partisan websites, and personality- or pundit-driven shows (whether on television, radio, or online).
- Be wary of news that comes via social media unless you click on the story and it brings you to a known credible news outlet.
- Compare any piece of news or information you consume to other sources reporting the same thing—what does the weight of the evidence say *together*, not simply the one piece of evidence that you most agree with?
- When you see a particularly important news story, a controversial story, and/or a hard-to-believe story, see if it is being covered by multiple credible outlets and covered in the same manner. If not, ask why.
- Always identify whether you are reading a story that is labeled as news or as opinion/commentary. This is an extremely important distinction, and trustworthy news outlets will label stories appropriately for you.
- When you notice opinion statements, attempts at persuasion, language meant to trigger an emotional reaction, and/or selective or misleading info in a hard news story, this should alert you that the news source is of poor quality.
- Headlines meant to trigger strong emotions should raise a red flag.
- If a story makes you feel particularly good or particularly angry, you should ask yourself why. Be particularly skeptical of stories that make you feel this way.
- Don't let lies go unchallenged—but challenge them gently, with respect, and with questions instead of certainty.
- Challenge the message, not the messenger.
- Don't assume people you disagree with are lying—assume they believe what they are saying until clearly proven otherwise.
- Debate in good faith.
- Do not paint those you disagree with as monsters (unless of course they undeniably are). Assume they have at least a somewhat valid (if flawed) and good faith reason to believe what they believe, not that they have dark motivations or that they are brainwashed or stupid. If you are arguing in good faith about something you believe to be true, assume the same of other people until clearly proven otherwise.
- Identify the *many* areas you are *not* an expert in and be able to identify who the appropriate experts are in these areas.
- Avoid beginning to read a news story or seeking information with the answers or solutions already in your mind.
- Constantly doubt what you know, rethink your beliefs, and remain curious about what you don't know.
- Evolve rather than affirm your beliefs.
- Test your hypotheses and then test alternative hypotheses.
- Support trustworthy news sources (financially if you are able) so they continue to exist.

CONCLUSION

There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to many of the biggest challenges facing our country. There are facts and data that support a variety of positions, but how this information

should be prioritized is subjective. But whatever we decide to do, we should insist that the information we use to make our decisions is factual and of the highest possible quality.

Ideology presented as fact, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are demonstrably dangerous and are poisoning the American mind. They help diseases once thought to be a thing of the past to rear their ugly heads again. They destabilize our democracy:

> "Americans like to think our country is immune to authoritarianism. We have a culture of freedom, a tradition of elected government, and a Bill of Rights. We're not like those European countries that fell into fascism. We'd never willingly abandon democracy, liberty, or the rule of law. But that's not how authoritarianism would come to America. In fact, it's not how authoritarianism has come to America. The movement to dismantle our democracy is thriving and growing, even after the failure of the Jan. 6th coup attempt, because it isn't spreading through overt rejection of our system of government. It's spreading through lies."[212]

The Bulwark's Will Saletan goes on to argue that, "We're in a battle to save democracy, but the battleground isn't values. It's facts." He would write in another piece:

> "In a traditional anti-democratic coup, the military or the armed opposition seizes power in overt defiance of a previous election. But that isn't what happened in the United States two years ago. Donald Trump summoned a mob to Washington and unleashed it on the U.S. Capitol not by calling for the overthrow of the government but by claiming, falsely, that he was the duly elected head of the government. He used fictitious allegations of election fraud to manipulate his followers. They stormed the Capitol believing that they were defending, not deposing, the winner of the election. . . [W]e don't need to persuade most people that democracy should be respected. They already understand that. What we need to do is persuade them that the person who was certified as the winner of the election actually won it. This isn't a fight over ideology. It's a fight over information."[213]

Jonathan Haidt warns that: "American democracy is now operating outside the bounds of sustainability. If we do not make major changes soon, then our institutions, our political system, and our society may collapse."[214] Yochai Benkler and his colleagues explain that, "Rebuilding a basis on which Americans can form a shared belief about what is going on is a precondition of democracy."[215] *How Democracies Die* authors Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note that:

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[212] William Saletan, "Lies Are the Building Blocks of Trumpian Authoritarianism," *The Bulwark*, February 7, 2020, https://www.thebulwark.com/lies-are-the-building-blocks-of-trumpian-authoritarianism/.

[213] William Saletan, "Don't Call the Brazil Insurrection 'Anti-Democratic'," *The Bulwark*, January 12, 2023, https://www.thebulwark.com/dont-call-the-brazil-insurrection-anti-democratic/.

[214] Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years."

[215] Benkler et. al., "Study: Breitbart."

"Blatant dictatorship—in the form of fascism, communism, or military rule—has disappeared across much of the world. . . Democracies still die, but by different means. Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves. . . Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box."[216]

On Tyranny author Timothy Snyder writes that:

"[A] belief in truth is what makes trust in authority possible. Without trust, without respect for journalists or doctors or politicians, a society can't hang together. Nobody trusts anyone, which leaves society open to resentment and propaganda, and of course to demagogues."[217]

And as Tom Nichols cautions:

"The citizens of the world's democracies now must live with the undeniable knowledge that they are capable of embracing illiberal movements and attacking their own liberties as a matter of their own free will rather than as the result of disaster or foreign conquest. Worse, the budding authoritarians who live among us now know it too. They have seen a demonstrated market for what they are selling."[218]

He goes on to note that, in America, people involved in illiberal movements:

"see their own actions not as a problem but as a solution. Illiberal citizens do not think of themselves as illiberal; they think of themselves as populist or ultra-democratic (at least where their own preferred groups are concerned). When the rest of us are vigilantly scanning the horizon for the 'man on horseback' or for the shock troops of a mass movement, it is easy to underestimate the impact of millions of people exchanging paranoid memes on Facebook who are already immune both to reason and to the basic requirements of anything like informed participation in democratic politics."[219]

None of us—left, right, or center—want to live in a world where this situation continues to spin out of control. We *must* solve this epistemic crisis.

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[216] Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018), 5.

[217] Sean Illing, "Post-truth Is Pre-fascism": A Holocaust Historian on the Trump Era," *Vox*, March 8, 2017, https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/3/9/14838088/donald-trump-fascism-europe-history-totalitarianism-post-truth.

[218] Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy,* xxiii.

[219] Nichols, *Our Own Worst Enemy*, 19. He goes on to argue that: "[T]he threat to democracy now in America and elsewhere comes from the working and middle classes. . . whose rage come overwhelmingly from cultural insecurity, inflated expectations, tribal partisan alliances, obsessions about ethnicity and identity, blunted ambition, and a childlike understanding of the limits of government" (p. 21).

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