How to Navigate an Information Media Environment Awash in Manipulation, Falsehood, Hysteria, Vitriol, Hyper-Partisan Deceit and Pernicious Algorithms

A Guide for the Conscientious Citizen

About the author

Christopher Dornan teaches at Carleton University, where he served for nine years as director of the School of Journalism and Communication and six years as director of the Arthur Kroeger College of Public Affairs. His academic work has appeared in venues from the *Media Studies Journal* to the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. He is the co-editor (with Jon Pammett) of *The Canadian Federal Election of 2015*, along with five previous volumes in this series. In 2017, he wrote the Canadian Commission for UNESCO reflection paper "*Dezinformatsiya*: The Past, Present and Future of 'Fake News'." He is chair of the board of Reader's Digest Magazines Canada, Inc.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In late March, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump took to Twitter to attack Amazon, the Internet retail giant owned by Jeff Bezos, also the owner of the *Washington Post*. Trump first accused Amazon of paying "little or no taxes to state & local governments," and claimed the company uses "our Postal System as their Delivery Boy (causing tremendous loss to the U.S.)."

Two days later, he insisted that the United States Postal Service was subsidizing Amazon's home delivery service, and in doing so losing money. "While we are on the subject, it is reported that the U.S. Post Office will lose $1.50 on average for each package it delivers for Amazon. That amounts to Billions of Dollars… If the P.O. 'increased its parcel rates, Amazon's shipping costs would rise by $2.6 Billion.' This Post Office scam must stop. Amazon must pay real costs (and taxes) now!"

At the same time, Trump accused Bezos of using the Washington Post as a lobbying instrument for Amazon. "The Failing N.Y. Times reports that 'the size of the company's lobbying staff has ballooned,' and that... does not include the Fake Washington Post, which is used as a 'lobbyist' and should so REGISTER."

Trump's media reach is without equal. There is no one on the planet who commands more attention, his every utterance chronicled and amplified by hundreds of millions of social media users and a global media apparatus. Immediately after his Twitter tirade against Amazon, the company's stock lost $53 billion in market value before recovering.

The incident was a distillation of government-by-Trump. The angry denunciation, shouted to the world via social media. The insistence that U.S. interests and coffers are being harmed. The barking of orders to right this wrong. The drive-by denigration of journalistic institutions as "fake" and "failing." The reaction of the stock market, giving weight to his words. And the fact that what he said is not true.

Under current U.S. law, states can charge businesses retail sales tax only if they maintain a physical presence in the state. This would allow an Internet retailer such as Amazon to avoid paying taxes, except that the company's brick-and-mortar warehouses are now so extensive that Amazon pays sales tax in every U.S. state that has a sales tax. At the same time, Amazon and the U.S. Postal Service negotiated a deal for doorstep package delivery that, by all accounts, is profitable for the Postal Service. "The whole post office thing, that's very much a perception [Trump] has," *Axios* reported. "It's been explained to him in multiple meetings that his perception is inaccurate and that the post office actually makes a ton of money from Amazon."

Meanwhile, his accusation that the Washington Post is a lobbying instrument is consistent with his conviction that any media outlet critical of him is a political weapon, its unflattering coverage deliberately contrived to harm him.

1

Although Trump mocks their claims to impartiality and their ethos of "objectivity," the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and every other standard bearer of responsible journalism operate according to protocols of inquiry and reportage designed to ensure that their accounts are as accurate as possible: that they reliably describe what actually occurred; that they can be trusted.

Here, their own professional discipline entangles them in the trafficking of falsehood. What Trump said was untrue, but the fact that he said it was news. Though quick to inform their audiences that Amazon does, in reality, pay taxes and that the U.S. Postal Service profits from its arrangements with the company, by dutifully documenting Trump's attack on Amazon the responsible news media accurately recounted something they knew to be wrong.

Throughout the Western democracies, there is legitimate alarm about how to counter falsehoods manufactured by our enemies in order to prey on social division, undermine trust in civic institutions, and delegitimize democratic norms. But what if there is an equal or greater threat closer to home? What if democratic politics itself becomes a spigot of manipulative dishonesties, in which our most responsible media are implicated? What if the calls are coming from inside the house?

Troll culture

On April 10, 2019, an international consortium of scientists unveiled the first photographic image of a black hole, 40 billion kilometers in diameter and 55 billion light years away. The picture was the result of a tremendous research effort, the

accomplishment of hundreds of people working in teams all over the world. Its release was a global media event – itself a triumph of a concerted publicity strategy intended to spark awe and wonder.
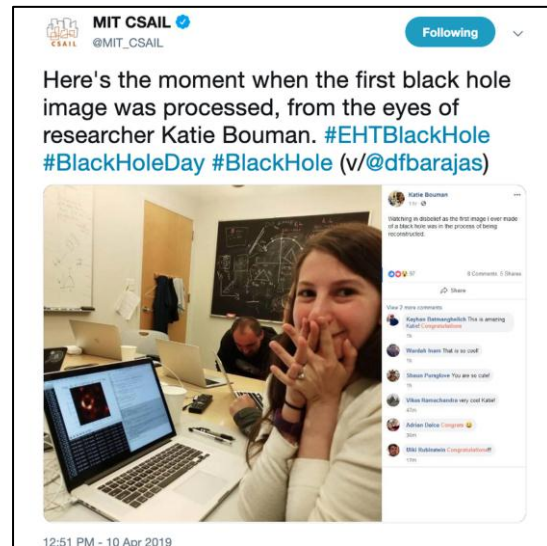
MIT tweets a photo of Katie Bouman on the release of the first image of a black hole.

Part of that media strategy involved putting a human face on the project. Along with the image of the black hole, the news media and social media circulated a photograph of Katie Bouman, an MIT postdoctoral fellow who was instrumental to the creation of the algorithm that produced the image. She is shown looking up from her computer and into the camera, her hands clasped in front of her mouth in delight, as though she is seeing the picture of the black hole emerge for the first time.

Almost immediately, Harvard scientist Andrew Chael, a colleague involved in the project, noticed that Bouman had drawn the attention of Internet trolls who claimed she was being unfairly elevated over her male colleagues in order to advance a feminist agenda. "Contrary to media propaganda," declared one subreddit post, "the first image of a black hole was not

even made with the algorithm credited to Katie Bouman." Others insisted that it was Chael, not Bouman, who wrote most of the pertinent code.

The places where the attacks on Bouman first circulated are the dank sub-basement of the Internet. Gamergate reddit threads, the imageboards 4chan and 8chan, the messaging program Discord – these are the haunts of a menagerie of anti-establishmentarians, ranging from benign pranksters to the venomously unhinged. Here dwell misanthropes, the conspiracy minded, ultra-libertarians, alt-right extremists, the profane and the puerile and the plain mischievous, who would upset the apple cart just to see which ways the apples bounce.

Not everything that emerges from these cyber-precincts is malign – 4chan gave birth to rickrolling, for example, a prank that fooled users into clicking on a link only to discover it plays the music video for Rick Astley's song "Never Going to Give You Up" – but a common goal of their denizens is to have their hoaxes and paranoid fantasies percolate into mainstream culture, just as rickrolling did. Especially sweet is to seize the focus of the legacy media, like a parasite able to control its host's behavior. Inadvertently, that is exactly what Andrew Chael made happen. The attacks on Katie Bouman were at first confined to subreddits and 4chan, where that sort of baseless, spiteful contrarianism is only to be expected. Even Chael recognized there were probably only a few trolls involved. But by taking to Twitter he caught the attention of the mainstream media, which then conferred global attention on slurs that otherwise almost no one would have noticed.
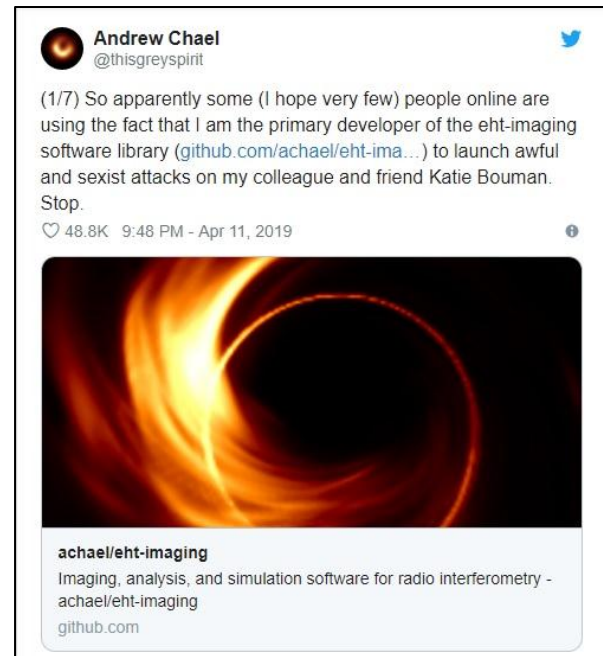
Harvard researcher Andrew Chael reacts to trolls attacking Katie Bouman.

The upshot was that the algorithms took notice. Within two days, a YouTube search for the name "Katie Bouman" yielded as its top result a video titled "Woman Does 6% of the Work but Gets 100% of the Credit: Black Hole Photo."

Chael was trying to do the right thing, to shame Bouman's detractors into silence. He only drew them into the spotlight. The attention of the news media did not douse the defamation. It was an accelerant.

The conscientious citizen

How, then, should we conduct ourselves in a media environment awash in outright fabrications, malicious half-truths, paranoid delusions and political duplicity – when even responsible journalism can be caught up in the confusion? What does it mean to be a conscientious citizen under these conditions?

The conscientious citizen – the citizen committed to one's own best interests but also to the best interests of one's fellow citizens – wishes to be reliably informed, to guard against being manipulated, and to be confident that their beliefs are founded in fact rather than shaped by deceit.

The conscientious citizen understands that political differences are inevitable, even healthy. At the same time, the conscientious citizen recognizes that virulent antagonism is no fit basis for a caring society. The conscientious citizen is alert to media content whose sole purpose is to inflame animosities.

The conscientious citizen must work to be a discerning consumer of media content as well as a defender of the principles that arbitrate honest – rather than corrupt – political disagreement.

It is not a matter of simply constructing a checklist of trustworthy media sources and walling off the rest, even if that were possible. YouTube and Google search algorithms, along with the preferences and interests of our social media friends and followers, will inevitably expose us to all manner of content we did not select ourselves. In any case, the conscientious citizen will want to keep abreast of the flow of contentious content. To be well-informed today is also to be aware of what falsehoods, prejudices and propaganda are churning through our information channels: the anti-facts.

What is required, first, is an understanding of the media environment we now inhabit. And second, habits of mind that can parse the content to which we are exposed – so as to have confidence in what to accept, what to dismiss, and what to question.

News and opinions

In the second half of the 20th century, the accepted facts of public life were put into circulation by a category of agencies that together were known as the news media. Political debate and public discourse played out in their pages and on their airwaves, and in large measure they fixed the boundaries of legitimate discussion. Members of the public were free to think and say what they liked, but the news media granted only certain facts and opinions the privilege of a public platform.

The media monopoly on public expression came to an end with the arrival of the Internet and especially with the rise of the social media platforms. The advertising revenue that once supported the editorial enterprise of the news media leached away, while the clamour made possible by social media made it more and more difficult for the news media to be heard above the din.

Although diminished in stature and authority, responsible journalism remains an essential source of reliable information on current affairs, from politics to commerce, from sports to science to the arts and entertainment. What distinguishes responsible journalism, and what makes it essential, is precisely its reliability – the pains it takes to ensure that its accounts describe things as they actually occurred, and that its commentaries are grounded in fact rather than fallacy.

And yet there remains a good deal of confusion in the minds of the public about how the work of responsible journalism is conducted, why it is so important, and why it should be trusted amid the maelstrom of media content.

The first thing to recognize is that journalism is not synonymous with news reporting. The latter is a subset of the former. Journalism includes a variety of forms of information content: news bulletins, running updates, investigative inquiries, explainers, exposés, personality profiles, social vignettes, human interest stories, consumer guides, political analysis, opinion columns, editorials, criticism, polemics, and outright advocacy. The work of a court reporter, for example, is quite different from the work of a drama critic. One stenographically recounts judicial proceedings, the other delivers judgment on theatrical performances. But both are species of journalism.

In the years following the Second World War, the broadsheet press in North America (the newspapers of the middle and upper classes) drew strict demarcations between news and opinion. News reports were expected to confine themselves to recitations of fact. A news report that did not was said to be biased. Opinion and analysis were properly reserved for critics, columnists and the editorial section, which would include commentary in the form of op-ed articles (so named because they were opposite the editorial page) commissioned from political actors, activists, or knowledgeable sources such as academics or subject area experts. The job of the reporter was to recount the facts of the matter. The job of the columnist was to interpret those facts, and the measure of a columnist was how perceptively they did so: whether and in what regard they invited us to consider things in ways that otherwise might not have occurred to us.

It is a common complaint that this distinction between news and opinion has collapsed; that our so-called news media do less and less actual news reporting, and are filled instead with know-it-alls who have a ready opinion on everything. And if our supposedly responsible news media are just vehicles for hot takes and heated opinion – in a word, bias – then why privilege them as authoritative sources of information?

The naïve distinction between news and opinion in media coverage was an artifact of a time, and a particular type of newspaper. North American newspaper journalism may have made a fetish of "objectivity" and the division between reporting and commentary, but news magazines never did. *Time* magazine, the *New Yorker,* the *Economist*, *Harper's*, the *Walrus* and *Maclean's* are forthrightly analytical. They marshal factual reporting in the service of explanations and arguments. A dry, chronological recitation of occurrences can be valuable, but it is rarely compelling to read. European newspapers, similarly, were never much troubled by the distinction between reporting and analysis. They always carried themselves as interpretive in their coverage. Even in North American broadsheets, one only had to turn to the sports section to see the distinction between news reporting and analysis exuberantly abandoned. The whole point of sports reporting was to describe the game with colour and verve, so as to reproduce the excitement of the spectator.

Any analysis can be contested. The pleasure in reading an opinion columnist can lie in the counter-arguments they compel us to construct in our own minds. But responsible journalism, in whatever form, strives for authenticity. No matter how colourful the sports report might be, it describes the game as it actually took place. This is a vital difference between *People* magazine and the *National Enquirer*. Both trade in celebrity gossip, the more scandalous the better, but one is governed by professional

standards designed to secure the veracity of its accounts of marital breakups and mental breakdowns, while the other is not.

The *Enquirer* and the other supermarket tabloids were the prototypes for the celebrity culture clickbait industry of today. A sliver of fact can be embroidered to contrive an irresistible yarn, no matter that it bears scant relation to reality.

This does not mean that even the most responsible journalism is "true." Something as straightforward as a news account of a speech by the mayor, for example, is a digest of what was actually said and the circumstances under which the speech was delivered. It is not a verbatim transcription. The news account emphasizes some things and omits others. The account may be accurate, but it may also differ from what the mayor's office would prefer had been reported.

Beyond that, most reporting does not consist of simply copying down remarks delivered from a podium. Journalism reveals things in the public interest that might never have been known except for the journalistic enterprise of finding it out. It documents things that some vested interest would prefer not to be cast in a particular light, or not to come to light at all. This often makes it halting, partial, approximate, subject to dispute. The facts emerge only piecemeal. Shards of information may be accurate in themselves but give an incomplete or erroneous impression of the overall picture. Sometimes sources are wrong, sometimes journalists overreach. But responsible journalism nonetheless proceeds according to methods that insist on substantiation.

Bias and its benefits

If there is a core bias to the news media, it is their fixation on bad news. Day in, day out, the headlines are a relentless catalogue of crime and catastrophe, disaster and despair, wrongdoing, injustice and outrage. Compare that to magazines such as *Popular Science* or *Reader's Digest*.

The monthly magazine of the basement inventor, *Popular Science* is positively entranced by the prospect of progress. Its contents are one good news story after another, each illustrating some manner of creative ingenuity. *Reader's Digest* and its French-language counterpart *Sélection* are similarly uplifting. They are about good feeling and good fellowship, and triumph over adversity. Dedicated to the idea that it is possible to cheer people even as you inform them, *Reader's Digest* is a newsstand counter-weight to the grim contents of the daily press.

All journalism inevitably exhibits some form of "bias." This does not mean coverage is deliberately distorted, or even inaccurate. Bias is commonly understood to mean "deviation from the truth," but it is more useful to think of it as the expression of attitude or perspective. Hence the "bias" of *Reader's Digest* is its fundamental optimism.

In the Canadian news media, different outlets bring different perspectives to bear in what they choose to highlight and the tone of their coverage. In Anglophone Canada, the *Sun* tabloids cater to a blue collar readership with a populist conservative point-of-view: a deep distrust of the nanny state, disdain for elites, and support for law and order and the police. The *Toronto Star* carries itself as a middle class newspaper with a social conscience (as

opposed to the business-oriented dailies) and its coverage is conducted according to a liberal ethos set out in the paper's Atkinson Principles. The *Globe and Mail* is a conservative publication in that it prioritizes affairs of commerce but can skew liberal on social issues (it long championed same-sex marriage and decriminalization of marijuana, for example). The *National Post* was created to champion a more strident stripe of conservatism.

The Tyee: progressive online news magazine founded in 2003.

Digital publications such as *The Tyee* and *rabble.ca* are unapologetically progressive in their outlook, pitching themselves as alternatives to the corporate media (*rabble*'s slogan is "news for the rest of us," while B.C.'s *The Tyee* bills itself as offering "fact-based" reporting and commentary "not typically covered by B.C. and Canada's mainstream media"). On the other side of the spectrum, *The Post Millennial* is forthrightly conservative, flagging in its mission statement a wariness of government "overreach," but vowing to "accurately and adequately report Canadian news events."
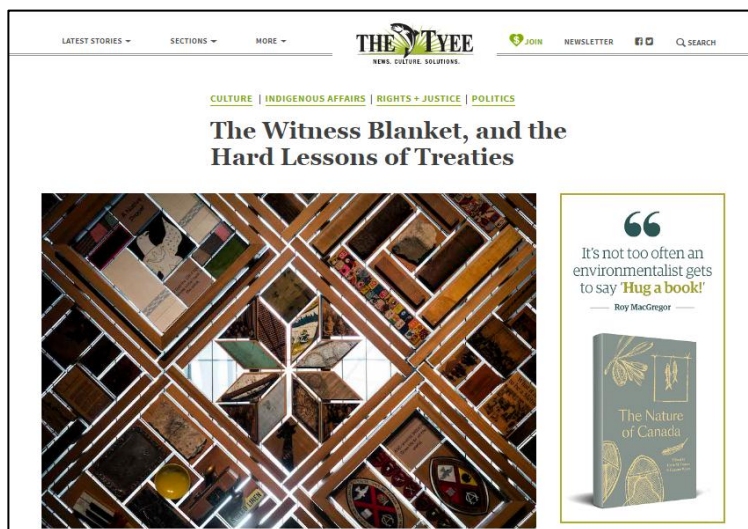
Someone on the political left would likely find *The Post Millennial* infuriating and wrong-headed. They might scoff at its claim that it aspires to be "verifiable and trustworthy, reputable, credible, informative and fair." But someone on the right would think the same of *rabble.ca*. Trustworthiness is often in the eye of the beholder. Even the CBC, which strives to be scrupulously non-partisan and to uphold the highest standards of professionalism in its news coverage, is seen by its detractors as promoting a soft left-of-centre perspective, while others view it more caustically as a propaganda arm of the Liberal party.

Whether these various outlets are to one's taste, none of them are fraudulent and they map a spectrum of perspectives. Diversity and multiplicity of viewpoints is a good thing in media coverage, and together the range of Canadian news media contributes to the chaotic conversation of democracy. It would be odd and worrisome if a specific waveband of legitimate political opinion were absent in media coverage: if, say, there were no outlets that looked at current events through a progressive lens, or none that championed free enterprise and individual liberty.

The conscientious citizen understands this, and welcomes a range of competing perspectives. The conscientious citizen is also aware that just because coverage issues from a perspective one does not share, this does not in itself make the coverage "fake" or deceitful, any more than a perspective one does not share is illegitimate on that basis alone.
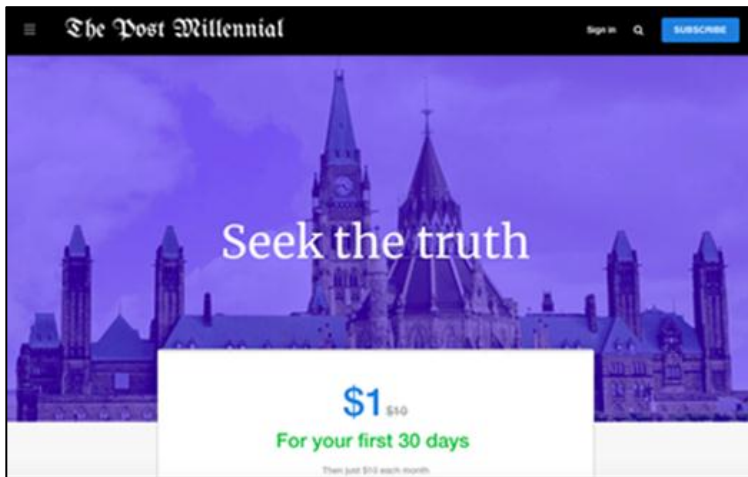
Fact checkers

Created in August 2017 on a seed investment by its founders, *The Post Millennial* is representative of a wave of niche digital current affairs publications. With negligible overhead and production costs, it has a small core staff and draws on a roster of other contributors.

The Post Millennial, right-of-centre publication launched in 2017.

Its revenue comes from advertising and "subscriptions" (contributions from readers). Despite billing itself as a source of "Breaking Canadian News and Headlines," it does very little original reporting and its news coverage largely consists of scouring other publications, wire services and social media for topical developments which it then runs through a right-of-centre prism to produce reports in accord with the mindset the publication exists to promote. It is really a single political viewpoint, continuously refreshed.

The conditions that allow for a political-opinion start-up like *The Post Millennial* also provide fertile soil for a thicket of digital outlets that deliberately retail lies in order to savage their political opponents, or fuel irrational hatred, or rally support for political action antithetical to the norms and values of liberal democracy, or are simply so distrustful of authority they revel in a riot of paranoia.

Thankfully, so far there are few such sites in Canada, and those that do exist remain on the outermost political fringes. But Canada is a free society, where people are at liberty to believe whatever nonsense they want to believe, as long as they do not hurt anyone in doing so. Canada is home to its share of flat-Earthers, chemtrail conspiracists, and those who believe the world is controlled by the Freemasons, the Illuminati, or the Trilateral Commission. And just as Canadians routinely access reputable foreign news sources, they are already exposed to foreign disinformation in full view.

An advertisement for RT, the Russian "news" network launched in 2005.

The Russian "news" channel RT is readily available via Canadian cable and satellite TV providers, along with Al Jazeera, BBC World News, and the CTV News Channel. But whereas these other news services are responsible efforts to chronicle a complex world, RT is a creation of the Kremlin,

devoted to corrosively pointing out the fractures and deficiencies of the Western nations to their own citizens, in order to exacerbate social division and stoke domestic antagonisms.

It is the United States, though, that has been the wellspring of agitprop masquerading as news and political commentary. There have been a number of recent attempts to catalogue these sources of disinformation – and to map the full spectrum of American information content from factual to fabricated. The efforts to do so reveal how contested this terrain has become.

Following the U.S. 2016 election, Melissa Zimdars, a communication professor at Merrimack College, compiled a list of "fake news" sites for her students. The list, she has said, was never intended to be comprehensive or to be widely circulated. It was just a guide to untrustworthy information sources. It characterized sites as either false, misleading, clickbait-y, or satirical. But when the list went viral she was threatened by enraged conservatives, because many of the sites it included were hard-right fulminators. At one point, her college took the precaution of posting campus security outside her office door. The Conservapedia website (which bills itself as "The Trustworthy Encyclopedia") noted that "her list attacks the credibility of well-established alternative online news sites such as Breitbart, Infowars and Project Veritas," and that Zimdars is a "leftist" and "feminist." Fox News personality Sean Hannity warned his viewers that Zimdars' list "is giving us insight into just what kind of websites the left plans on targeting for censorship."

The Poynter Institute, a Tampa-based journalism studies and training agency, compiled "UnNews: an index of unreliable news websites," drawing on Zimdars' work as well as lists from the independent fact-checking site Snopes, FactCheck (run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center), Politifact (acquired by Poynter) and Fake News Codex, the latter the personal project of web developer Chris Herbert.

The fact-checking site Snopes began in 1994 as a site that debunked urban legends.

The list of 515 sites was posted on April 30, 2019 and was immediately met with howls of complaint from sites that found themselves included. Katrina Trinko, editor-in-chief of *The Daily Signal*, accused the Poynter Institute of using the list to smear conservative publications. "Yes… we come from a conservative perspective," she wrote. "But we go to great trouble to be transparent and clear, including labeling all our stories as news, analysis, commentary, or feature, to make sure no one mistakes an op-ed for a news story."

Within two days, the list had been taken down. "While we feel that many of the sites did have a track record of publishing unreliable information, our review found weaknesses in the methodology," wrote

Accuracy in Media, an American conservative media monitoring agency, was founded in 1969.

Barbara Allen, managing editor of Poynter.org. "We regret that we failed to ensure that the data was rigorous before publication, and apologize for the confusion and agitation caused by its publication."

The right wing in the U.S. has its own reading of how untruths propagate in American political discourse. Accuracy in Media (whose appeal for support asks donors to "help us fight fake news") is a conservative media monitoring agency founded in 1969 and committed to exposing what it views as the biases and lies of a liberal media establishment. Dan Backer, a lawyer, political operative and a director of the organization, argued in 2018 that concern over falsity in online news amounted to a liberal smear campaign. "The more you unpack 'fake news' fearmongering, the more you realize it's just a left-wing 'political tactic' to demonize conservatives."

Accuracy in Media is half a century old. Check Your Fact is a conservative fact-checking operation created in 2018 as a subsidiary of the hard-right website the *Daily Caller*. In April 2019 Facebook named it as a partner to assist in assessing the validity of content on the world's largest social media site, to the astonishment of those who see the *Daily Caller* as an

unscrupulous, climate-change-denying propaganda mill.

Like Accuracy in Media, Check Your Fact has the backing of right-wing money that employs salaried staff. Media Bias/Fact Check (MB/FC) is an all-but-one-person operation created in 2015 by Dave Van Zandt and run with a small team of volunteers. MB/FC assesses the biases of more than 2,700 media sources. For example, *Infowars* – described by Conservapedia (above) as a "well-established alternative online news site" – is run by Alex Jones, who has insisted that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings were a fraud staged by government actors. MB/FC characterizes *Infowars* as "a crackpot, tin foil hat level conspiracy website that also strongly promotes pseudoscience. The amount of fake news and debunked conspiracy claims, as well as extreme right wing bias, renders Infowars a non-credible source on any level." By comparison, MB/FC assesses Canada's

Check Your Fact is a media monitoring site run by the right-wing U.S. digital publication The Daily Caller.

The Post Millennial as "moderately to strongly biased toward conservative causes through story selection," but ranks it High "for factual reporting due to proper sourcing and a clean fact check record." The CBC is ranked "left-centre biased based on editorial positions" and High for factual reporting.

Descent into mania

The methodologies of any such assessment are always problematic, but MB/FC is fair in how it reads the media sources it evaluates. Still another media assessment scheme run by all-but-one-person does the same, but visualizes its findings in a graphic.

Vanessa Otero is a Colorado lawyer who founded Ad Fontes Media in order to "make news consumers smarter and news media better." She has produced a chart (now in its fourth iteration) of where various U.S. media sources land on an X-axis (from politically left to right) and a Y-axis (from original, factual reporting to inaccurate, fabricated information).

The chart identifies media outlets that report the news accurately (even though they may hew left or right), such as the left-leaning *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, and the right-leaning *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Economist*; those that offer fair interpretations of the news

US Media Chart, by Vanessa Otero, Ad Fontes Media, 2018
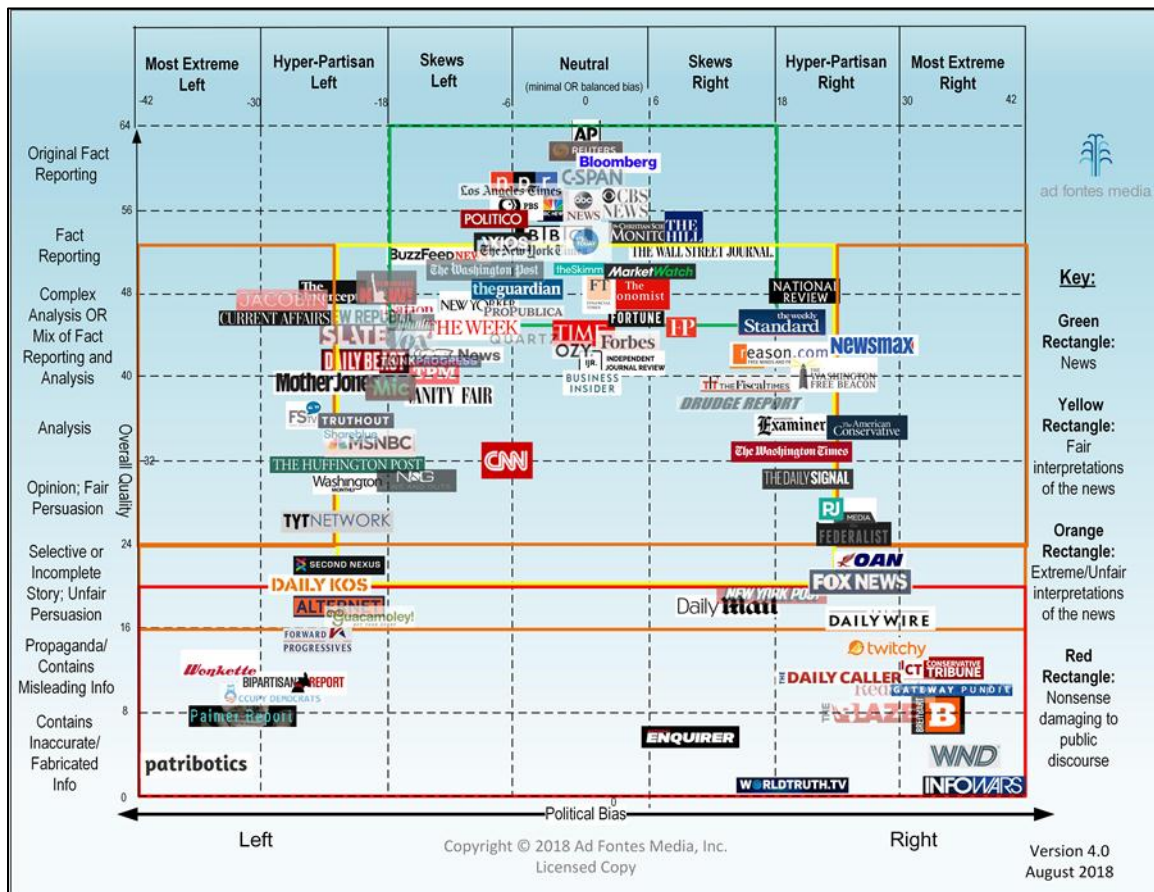
(whether left or right), such as the *New Yorker* or the *National Review*; those that offer extreme or unfair interpretations of the news, such as Fox News on the right and *Daily Kos* on the left; and those that promote nonsense damaging to public discourse, such as the *Palmer Report* and *Patribotics* on the left and the *Gateway Pundit*, the *Daily Caller*, *Breitbart* and *Infowars* on the right.

The chart describes an Inuksuk of information, with the deadpan wire services and business news services at the apex (Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg), broad shoulders of reliability (the *Washington Post*, *Axios*, *Fortune*, the *Wall Street Journal*), a pillar of responsible journalism on the left (the *Daily Beast, Mother Jones,* the *Huffington Post*) and the equivalent on the right (the *Weekly Standard, Reason.com,* the *Drudge Report*), and then each leg of the Inuksuk descends into mania and falsehood.

Again, the methodology of any such assessment grid is contestable. *Wonkette*, for example, was aggrieved to find itself portrayed as the left-wing equivalent of the *Gateway Pundit* on the right – a source of harmful hysteria. While decidedly left-of-centre, *Wonkette* chronicles U.S. politics with a sharp tongue and a satirist's eye, but it does not promote outright falsehoods, as the *Gateway Pundit* has done. (The *Gateway Pundit* claimed that David Hogg, a survivor of the Stoneman Douglas High School shootings who has emerged as a prominent and articulate anti-gun activist, is a deep state pawn.) It appears *Wonkette* received its ranking because of the loaded language it uses in its acerbic commentary. The *Gateway Pundit*, for its part, proclaims it is "More Accurate than The New York Times, Washington Post, CNN and MSNBC for Two Years and Counting!"

It is often the most tendentious extreme-right media outlets that bray the loudest about being truthful and factual. Left-wing publications are more likely to advertise themselves as offering a perspective otherwise overshadowed by the corporate media. Hence *rabble.ca* says it provides "a counterbalance to corporate-owned media"; *PressProgress*, launched by the Broadbent Institute in 2013, focuses on "stories that Canada's big news outlets miss"; and *This Magazine* declares it is "dedicated to exposing under-the-radar stories."

Even the Ad Fontes Media characterization of Reuters and Bloomberg as neutral and unbiased is correct only in a certain respect. Yes, these news services adhere to a discipline that insists on strictly factual reporting and prohibits editorializing. They are thoroughly professional and eminently trustworthy. But in making economics and commerce the focus of their regard, they exhibit a bias. Reuters and Bloomberg chronicle corporate performance and financial affairs for a readership of executives, managers, investors and entrepreneurs. This is news for the boardroom and the trading desk. They pay scant attention to the priorities of workers, the unemployed, or the dispossessed.

True or false?

How difficult is it to distinguish deceitful information from responsible reporting, or analytical coverage from information so distorted for partisan motives that it bears only tortured relation to the truth? According to the Pew Research Center, some 64 per cent of Americans report that fake news has left them feeling confused about what to trust. A survey conducted by Ipsos MORI revealed that 77 per cent of

Americans familiar with a fake news headline believed the story was accurate. The 2018 British all-party *Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills* found that when presented with six news stories – four of which were real and two fabricated – less than two per cent of British youth could correctly identify which stories were true and which were false. A 2018 survey by the California-based Institute for the Future found that 80 per cent of journalists admitted being taken in by false information online. And a 2019 survey by the Earnscliffe Group, conducted for the Canadian Journalism Foundation, found that 40 per cent of Canadians are not confident in their ability to distinguish between real news stories and misinformation.

Still, some of these findings may be presented to us with excitable intent. It is not that the news they report is fake, but that what they imply is overblown. Take the startling conclusion of the British all-party commission that "**only 2% of children and young people in the UK have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake** "(emphasis in the original). The results of the British survey are no doubt correct, but just asking people to distinguish fake news from real, shorn of context, may reveal little about the larger problem.

Try it yourself. In a 2018 segment on fake news, the CBC radio program *Quirks and Quarks* presented a quiz on its website, asking its audience to identify whether news stories were real or made up. Here are six of the questions.
What do you think your chances are of getting every one right?

- *True or False*: Farting passenger forces plane to make an emergency landing.

- *True or False*: Missouri third-graders selling AR-15 raffle tickets for their baseball team.
- *True or False*: Cops realize tiger is stuffed animal after 45-minute standoff.
- *True or False*: Drinking alcohol better than exercise for living past 90, study claims.
- *True or False*: Pope Francis likens fake news to the devil's work, suggests Satan created it.
- *True or False*: Headless body found in topless bar.

For each of the six questions, there are two possible outcomes. In total there are 2^{x6} = 64 ways to answer the six questions. If you choose randomly (i.e., you just guess) your chances of getting all six right are one in 64, or 1.56 per cent – just as less than two per cent of British youth were unable to identify which of six news stories were true and which were fake.

In this case, not a single one of the news items is false. They are all true.

(Although it should be noted that the way *Quirks and Quarks* phrased some of the questions is slightly misleading. It is true that a Dutch Transvania flight was forced to land in Vienna in February 2018 because of flatulence, but not because the smell made the cabin noxious. It was because a fight broke out when two men accused another of repeatedly passing gas; it was the fight, not the farting, that prompted the pilot to land. The question about the tiger makes it seem as though police stared down a stuffed animal for 45 minutes. In fact, a Scottish farmer reported the tiger to police when he spotted it in his cow shed. It was the farmer who realized, after he had called police, that the tiger had not moved in three-quarters of an hour. The final question, by the way, references the most

famous tabloid headline in the history of North American journalism, from the front page of the *New York Post* on April 15, 1983: "Headless body in topless bar.")

There are three key points to take from this.

First, oddities like these are exactly the sort of thing that wind up in the news media and populate social media feeds, because they sound as though they can't be true even though they are. That is their appeal. There is nothing of consequence about them; they are just curiosities in the endless flow of information. And when strange-but-true stories are a staple of even the responsible media, how surprised should we be that it is difficult to distinguish them from strange-but-untrue stories?

Second, it is almost impossible, out of context, to evaluate whether something like "Cops realize tiger is stuffed animal after 45-minute standoff" is real or not. The same is true of nearly any news item about which we have no knowledge beyond the report itself. Imagine coming across an article in your social media feed on a political controversy in a place you know nothing about – Estonia, perhaps, or Cameroon, or a suburb of Montreal. On what basis would you be able to tell whether the article is true or fabricated? How could you detect whether the story had been torqued for political effect?

Third, even if a fake news item fools you into believing that Donald Trump ordered the execution of Thanksgiving turkeys that had been pardoned by Barack Obama, or that fans at a Radiohead concert applauded the band tuning their instruments, thinking it was a song – where is the harm? The joke is that such claims are so outré they might just be true. Once a year, as an April fool's prank, reputable news organizations from the *Times of London* to the CBC run deliberately fake stories. (The 1957 BBC *Panorama* documentary on the bumper crop of spaghetti harvested from trees in the Ticino region of Switzerland and Italy remains an exquisite parody of the conventions of television news reporting.)

The upshot is that quizzing people on whether they can distinguish a benign fake news item from a quirky true item reveals little about the larger problem. When misdirection and deception are used to surprise and amuse us – to get us to momentarily accept something we know cannot be true – we find it entertaining and we call it stage magic. When misdirection and deception are used to steal purses or scam the elderly, we call it criminal.

It may be a good thing that so many of us report uneasiness about what to trust in our information content. It means we know that some information vying for our attention is untrustworthy, and dangerously so. It means we are alert to attempts to manipulate us. It means we are wary.

The seductions of falsehood

In a massive 2018 study of Twitter published in *Science*, MIT researchers examined some 126,000 stories, tweeted by 3 million users, over more than 10 years. The study looked at six fact-checking sites, and from these culled a list of tens of thousands of online rumours that circulated on Twitter over a decade. They compared the popularity of falsehoods associated with these rumours to the popularity of accurate information on the subjects.

The study found that falsehood eclipsed genuine news by any metric. Falsehood spread faster, reached more people, and was more deeply implicated in the chains of connection that characterize a social media platform such as Twitter. "A false story is much more likely to go viral than a real story," the *Atlantic* reported. "A false story reaches 1,500 people six times quicker, on average, than a true story does. And while false stories outperform the truth on every subject – including business, terrorism and war, science and technology, and entertainment – fake news about politics regularly does best. Twitter users seem almost to *prefer* sharing falsehoods."

In 2015, for example, a rumour circulated that Donald Trump had allowed a sick child to use his plane to receive urgent medical care. This was true, but the study found that only about 1,300 people shared the story. Meanwhile, a false story that boxer Floyd Merriweather had worn a Muslim head scarf to a Trump rally was retweeted at 10 times the rate of the sick child story. The researchers expected to find that fake news was being spread by a set of obsessive users tweeting with determined sensationalist or partisan intent, and with much larger followings than those who share accurate information. Curiously, they

found the opposite. Those with the largest followings tend to share accurate information and to tweet more often than those who post falsehoods. And yet falsehood *still* outstrips truthful content.

Why does falsehood do so well? The researchers argued that fake news is more "novel" than the truth, but the news values of the mainstream media have always emphasized the shocking, the unusual, the violation of expectation (man bites dog). More telling may be that fake news triggered a more emotional response than accurate news, or at least a different emotional response. False news seemed calculated to evoke anger and disgust, whereas real news – the steady toll of crisis and catastrophe – was more likely to trigger sadness.

And who is susceptible to the seductions of falsehood? Craig Silverman of *BuzzFeed* has made disinformation his beat. Although older people tend to be more politically attentive to the news media, he points out that "older Americans are more likely to consume and share false online news than those in other age groups, even when controlling for factors such as partisanship. Other research has found that older Americans have a poor or inaccurate grasp of how algorithms play a role in selecting what information is shown to them on social media, are worse than younger people at differentiating between reported news and opinion, and are less likely to register the brand of a news site they consume information from." A study published in *Science Advances* found that people over 65 are seven times more likely to share fake news over social media than youth.

In April 2019, the *Guardian* ran an article with the headline "Why smart people are

more likely to believe fake news" – clickbait for smart and not-so-smart people alike, and just slightly misleading. It is not that the more intelligent are more likely to swallow disinformation. It has to do with how invested individuals might be in a given issue. Someone who is politically disinterested may not care where Barack Obama was born. Someone who detests Obama may *want* to believe he was born in Kenya and came by the U.S. presidency illegitimately.

False information is most strongly accepted by people who are motivated to integrate it into what they already believe. Those most sceptical of Obama's birthplace, according to a study in the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics,* were white Republicans who were racially conservative *and* politically aware. It was not the ignorant who bought the lies but the politically engaged.

Nor does bringing more facts to the argument do much to dissuade anyone firmly committed to their beliefs. Sometimes political convictions just make for convicts. In her opposition to the Obama Affordable Care Act, Sarah Palin insisted that the policy would lead to "death panels," whereby the state would decide who would live and who should die. This was false. It was more than false. It was hysterical – an untruth affirmed, proclaimed and repeated in order to incense opposition to Obamacare. How to counter something like that, a political fury unleashed on the basis of a falsehood?

Researchers found that tackling the root falsehood – debunking the death panels – was effective among those who viewed Palin unfavourably or had little political knowledge, but backfired among ardent Palin supporters. For them, arguments from the facts only strengthened their belief in

the non-existent death panels and their opposition to the legislation.

The same has been shown with regard to the Iraq War: die-hard conservatives were *more* likely to believe that Saddam Hussein harboured weapons of mass destruction after being confronted with evidence that no such weapons existed. Fierce proponents of unregulated markets become *less* accepting of global warming after being shown evidence of the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change.

In short, if prior convictions are entrenched, and reinforced by a community of like-minded faithful, no amount of evidence or counter-argument is likely to dislodge them. But that communal reaffirmation of existing convictions is precisely what social media are engineered to do. "Algorithm designers want to keep us on the platforms for as long as possible," observe Dipayan Ghosh and Vijeth Iyengar in *Scientific American*, "and they know that to do that they have to show us the content we are likeliest to agree with."

We construct for ourselves concentric circles of social media friends, followers, and people we follow who reflect back to us the things that matter to us. Our mere presence on social media, our preferences and our activities, inform machines that crunch all that data in order to proffer suggestions about other content we might like.

Inoculation

The latest thinking on how to combat the hold of disinformation draws on metaphors of inoculation – oddly appropriate, given that the anti-vaccination movement is such a prominent example of a misguided belief fiercely held and widely circulated. Rather

than barrage someone in the thrall of a false belief with counter-evidence they will likely reject, the idea is that we might inure the susceptible in advance.

This is known as *prebunking*, and works in two stages. First, alert the population to a strain of disinformation before they actually encounter it, thus introducing the falsity in an attenuated, or weakened, form. Second, expose the mendacious reasoning or deceptive logic that advocates of the specious information will try to use as tactics of persuasion. People will therefore be primed to resist the seductions of falsehood.

In one study reported in *Plos.org*, subjects were shown advertisements the tobacco industry used to reassure the public that smoking was not harmful, that there was no link between tobacco and cancer, heart disease or emphysema. The logic of the campaign, and the use of physicians as authority figures to endorse cigarettes, was revealed. Then the subjects were shown climate change disinformation in which fake "experts" argued against global warming. The technique was effective in reducing the appeal of climate change denial.

Even more intriguing is a multi-player game designed by Cambridge University researchers in collaboration with DROG, a Dutch-based group of journalists and academics committed to fighting disinformation. The goal of the game is not to spot the difference between fake news and reliable content but to work collaboratively to create a compelling false news narrative. The game invites players to consider the ways the artisans of disinformation work to persuade people to believe untruths. It is a form of "active inoculation," in which players have to construct pro- and counter-arguments

themselves, rather than being hectored by a fusillade of facts."

Small groups of players are assigned one of four roles. They can be a *Denier*, whose aim is to minimize a story. Or an *Alarmist*, whose aim is to make the story as problematic as possible. Or a *Clickbait-Monger*, whose goal is to generate as much attention for the story as possible for the views and ad revenue. Or a *Conspiracy Theorist*, who distrusts any officially sanctioned information and encourages everyone else to do the same.

Each group is provided with background information on a specific topic, in this case a report that incidents involving the police in the vicinity of Dutch refugee asylum centres increased between 2015 and 2016. A fact sheet provides information on the various cases, along with a menu of possible reasons for the rise in the number of incidents. The players then set about devising a fake news story in order to advance the goals of their assigned character. They are given hints, terms, and a rubric by which to do so.

"The article itself has a systematic structure. In order: a) an image, b) title, c) header, d) paragraph 1: numbers and facts, e) paragraph 2: interpretation and presentation of numbers and facts, f) paragraph 3: the cause of the problem, g) paragraph 4: consequences of the problem, h) paragraph 5: expert opinion, and i) conclusion. "

At each decision juncture, the players are dealt four cards which interpret the "facts" differently. The goal is to select the interpretations that most closely align with the aims of your team's assigned character. The game is a flow chart of manipulative opportunism.

An online version invites solo players to try their hands at building a social media following by employing the techniques of digital deceit in order to foment outrage. As players progress, they earn badges marking stages of accomplishment: *Impersonation* (build a site that masquerades as a news source – "Honest Truth Online," perhaps – and claim to be the editor-in-chief); *Emotion* (emotional content resonates in a way that factual claims do not); *Polarization* (players are rewarded for inciting division); *Conspiracy* ("A well-crafted lie published at the right time makes people lose trust in institutions"); *Discredit* ("You've defended yourself against attacks from outside by going on a ruthless counteroffensive"); and finally *Trolling* ("You've deliberately caused societal distrust and chaos.")

The very idea of such a game is a form of inoculation. Just by inviting players to adopt the mindset and tactics of those who peddle falsity out of malice, delusion or political mendacity, the exercise nudges us toward a renewed vigilance with regard to real life online content.

Prudent measures

The Earnscliffe 2019 News Consumption Survey found that one-third of Canadians try to confirm the accuracy of the information they encounter either all or most of the time. Interestingly, the group most active in compiling and promoting measures people can take to protect themselves against the depredations of falsehood is not the news media companies. It is librarians. All over North America, university and school libraries

have joined in campaigns of media literacy intended to arm their students with techniques to guard against being duped. These techniques are all perfectly sound, though they should all be considered in context.
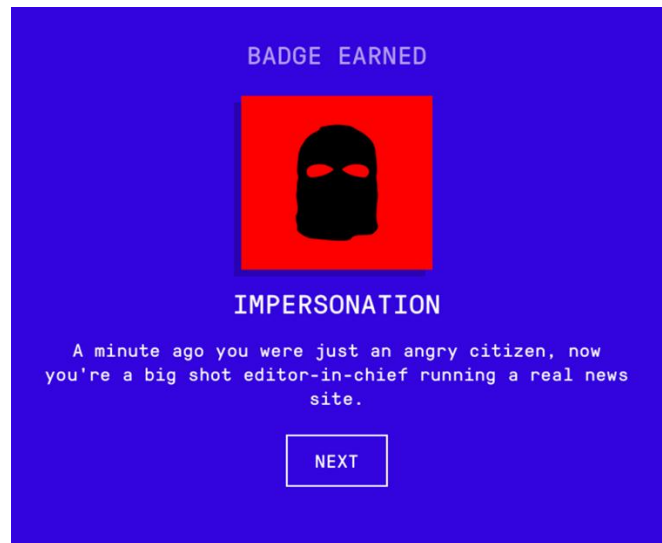
In Cambridge University's online Bad News Game, players earn badges as they spread disinformation.

Media literacy advocates recommend that news consumers should:

Add a reputable fact-checking site to their media diet, so as to keep abreast of falsehoods. In addition to Snopes, Politifact and FactCheck.org in the U.S. there are also Fact Checker (run by the *Washington Post*) and AP Fact Check (run by Associated Press). Canada has two fact checking operations: Canada Fact Check (the project of public policy consultant Ethan Phillips) and FactsCan (the 2015 creation of five young people with an interest in federal politics and policy), though neither of these has the resources of the major U.S. fact checkers, nor do they publish with the regularity of the American sites.

However, as we have seen, beliefs can be so ingrained that the "facts" become mutable. What is an obvious falsehood to Fact Checker may be hailed by Accuracy in Media as a truth the liberal media are bent on denying. And if a Trumpian conservative is already convinced that the *Washington Post* is a liberal propaganda engine, why would they trust its fact checking?

Read beyond the headline. This is generally good advice since many headlines, even on legitimate stories, can be misleading. The purpose of headlines is to seize attention. Sometimes they do so in ways that are not supported by the body of the story. (It was the fighting, remember, not the farting, that caused the Transvania plane to land.)

Canada Fact Check is a media monitoring site run by public policy and government relations consultant Ethan Phillips.

FactsCan, founded in 2015, focuses on news about Canadian federal politics.

Consider the source. News consumers should do this as a matter of course, particularly since it is so easy to construct a false or hyper-partisan site that mimics a legitimate news source.

The *Buffalo Chronicle*, for example, looks like a local news site serving the city of Buffalo, N.Y. It features "news" about its Canadian neighbour, almost all of which is designed to tar the current Liberal government. As *Canadaland* has pointed out, these stories have been repeated by prominent figures on the right such as former Rob Ford chief of staff Mark Towhey, Senator Nicole Eaton, and former *Dragon's Den* personality W. Brett Wilson. Why an obscure American regional publication detests the party in power in Canada in 2019 remains a mystery, but the *Buffalo Chronicle* follows the pattern set out by the Cambridge University/DROG game: invent a digital site, make it look legitimate, use that as cover to spew falsehoods that play on prejudice, enlist the attention of opinionated personalities with large social media followings, amplify these complaints to sow confusion and demean one's enemies.

The conscientious citizen should be familiar with the leanings of different information sources so as to weigh the import and intent of their content. The office of the Premier of Ontario, for example, runs *Ontario News Now*, an outlet that looks like a news site but which is part of the Premier's publicity apparatus. It is selling a point of view, a sense of belonging, a joint purpose to a loyal community of supporters.

The *University of Toronto Magazine* does exactly the same thing. It is a thoroughly professional publication: thoughtful, engaging, enlightening and trustworthy. But it is at root a promotional vehicle, designed to portray the university in the best possible light. It is not a muckraking forum to air or to inquire into the institution's administrative politics.

The same is true of *Ontario News Now*. This does not necessarily mean the site is untruthful. If nothing else it reveals the government's priorities and intentions. But it should be read with the understanding that it exists to promote a political agenda, and its impersonation of news journalism is a trick to gain the confidence of its audience.

Check the author. This may be too much to ask of the news consumer in a hurry. Journalists take note of one another's bylines, but apart from a few stars and prominent opinion columnists, most members of the public do not much notice the names of reporters – though this may be changing now that readers can choose to follow journalists by name on social media. Sometimes the lack of a byline is itself suspicious – the stories on Canada in the *Buffalo Chronicle* are unsigned – but then again, most newspaper editorials in North America are unsigned and as reputable a publication as the *Economist* carries no bylines on its stories.

But one should also pause to consider the "authors" of how information content comes to our attention – not just the original source but the vector by which we encounter it. Why did this item appear in my timeline? Did someone send it to me? If so, who, and why? Did it arise because of my social media settings, those I count as friends and followers, and those I follow in turn? Did it appear as the result of an algorithm? What is it about my online identity that made the algorithm select this item for my attention?

Check the date. Sometimes media content that was originally accurate is repurposed later for duplicitous effect. In April 2019 a video clip circulated that appeared to show Donald Trump describing asylum seekers at the U.S. southern border as "animals," enraging many social media users. In fact, the clip was a year old and Trump was referring to members of the Central American gang MS13. One might argue that no human being, not even a member of a criminal organization, should be called an animal, but the fact remains that the clip was purposely used out of context to portray Trump as saying something he had not said.

Ask: is this a joke? Social media feeds are full of content slyly rendered to fool readers for comic effect. If something sounds howlingly outrageous, check to see whether it issues from a satirical or parody account. Although given the weirdness of the world, not only can it be difficult to spot parody, sometimes yesterday's satire is today's genuine news item. In 2015, the *Onion*, the splendid satirical news site that boldly bills itself as "America's Finest News Source," ran a piece titled "Guantanamo Bay Begins Construction on Senior Care Wing" – the joke being that the inmates had been incarcerated for so long they were now geriatric and needed "easy-access ramps from the confinement block to the exercise yard as well as wall-mounted grab bars and no-slip mats in the shower area." In April 2019, it was accurately reported that "Guantanamo is Becoming a Nursing Home for its Aging Terror Suspects," who "need hip replacements, eye surgeries, treatment for sleep apnea, mental health disorders and, one day, probably cancer and dementia."

In 2015, the satirical news site The Onion announced that the Guantanamo Bay prison was building a senior care wing for its elderly inmates.
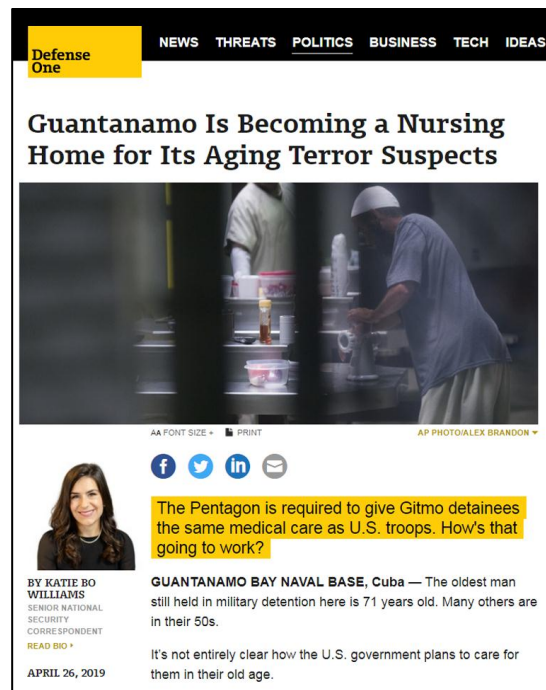
In 2019, it was revealed that the Guantanamo Bay prison was indeed introducing facilities to care for its aging population of inmates.

Be suspicious of conveniently compelling images. In May 2019, Katrina Pierson, a senior advisor to Donald Trump's 2020 re-election team, tweeted footage of scores of rockets being fired "into Israel from Gaza in an attempt to overwhelm Israels [*sic*] Iron Dome" missile defence system. The footage

was actually from 2015 and from Ukraine. Caught in the deception, Pierson shrugged it off, insisting it did not matter that this was not actual footage of Palestinian rockets. She merely used it as a gif, she said, "to underscore what hundreds of rockets would look like to Americans."

Trump advocate Katrina Pierson tweets about rockets being fired into Israel from Gaza. The footage was actually from Ukraine.

But sometimes the fraudulent use of images can have horrific consequences. In 2018, online rumours that gangs in India were abducting children to harvest their organs were accompanied by grainy video that went viral. More than 20 people died in vigilante mob violence as a result. The grisly footage was actually of Syrian infants who had been killed in a gas attack in 2013.

Media literacy programs recommend using Google Reverse Image Search or TinEye to verify the origin of photographs and footage, and these are certainly useful tools. But a quizzical eye and the right instincts may be just as useful, along with

attention to the wiki mind. The time that elapsed from Pierson tweeting her rocket-launch video to the first person who identified the footage as four years old and Ukrainian was less than three hours.

Check to see if other news sources are reporting the same story. Substantiation is essential to the work of responsible journalism. Does the testimony of one source cross-check and correlate with the testimony of others? Similarly, if one comes across a startling bulletin in one's social media feed that no other media outlets are reporting, it may be that this report cannot be trusted. That said, people who are already convinced that the mainstream media are part of a deep state apparatus may, perversely, see the absence of coverage as evidence of a conspiracy to supress discomfiting truths. By the same token, the fact that multiple outlets are all reporting the same news is not in itself a guarantee that this information is valid. It is a technique of fraudulent, conspiracy or hyper-partisan sites to cycle content through a network of allies to make it appear as though the information is being confirmed by multiple sources, when in fact it is the same disinformation being repeated. The myth that Barack Obama was born in Kenya was a continual refrain across American alt-right sites, but that did not make it true. And it is not just fringe sites that can reaffirm untruths. In the run-up to the Iraq war, almost all the major U.S. news media accepted that Saddam Hussein harboured weapons of mass destruction. It turned out they were all repeating the same false intelligence fed to them by the Bush administration.

Stop before you share. This may be the most prudent measure of all. It is an invitation to self-reflect, to consider one's own online habits and behaviour. It

prompts us to think twice about the content at hand, as well as to scrutinize our own motives as digital actors. That is the conscientious way to conduct oneself in the current media environment – mindfully.

Habits of mind

No toolkit of measures, however prudent, can protect us from online falsity and twisted facts and specious arguments. We require habits of mind by which we reflexively bring a judicious (rather than jaundiced) scepticism to bear on the flow of information content. No one has the time to assay every news item that flashes past our eyes, verifying the source, cross-checking against other accounts, investigating the credibility of the author, and so on. We need to cultivate instincts by which we can sense when someone is trying to convince us of something that does not seem quite right or is pandering to what we might want to believe.

Fortunately, these are instincts we likely already possess. What we are worried about in the new media and political environment of the 21st century, after all, is the prevalence of concerted media information campaigns peddling half-truths and outright falsehoods, manipulating our emotions and inflaming irrational impulses for ulterior motives, all trying to *persuade us* of something, to get us to believe certain things, to adopt specific attitudes, to act in a particular way. Well, we in the West already have long experience with exactly that. It is called advertising.

Advertising is the media content that permeates all the other media content, from sports broadcasts to news journalism. Advertising is the media content that traditionally *paid* for all the other media content.

Advertising is also absurd, irrational, and often hurtful. It makes promises. It preys on insecurity. It flatters the egos of the vain. And it courses through our lives. And yet we do not see this as an especially worrisome problem. Why not? Because *we are used to it*. We know how to handle advertising. We treat advertising differently from other forms of media content. We know advertising is an attempt to manipulate us, even if only over something as trivial as which toothpaste to buy, and so we treat it differently from other genres of media content. We are critical of movies and TV series, we have all sorts of opinions about music, we yell at the screen during sports broadcasts and while playing *Fortnite*. But confronted with advertising, other instincts of healthy scepticism trigger automatically.

This does not mean advertising is ineffective anymore than it means we are brainwashed by it. It simply means that we recognize it when we see it, we assess it, and for the most part we know when we should discount it. That is precisely the facility we need to adopt as we navigate the rapids of digital information content.

To be conscientious begins with being conscious of our own online behavior. Ask yourself: What does my media diet consist of? What sources do I favour? What platforms do I frequent, and why? What and whom do I follow? Who follows me? What pleasures and utilities do I derive from being online? What content do I share and amplify? How much do I share and why? Are there patterns to what I share? Do I conduct myself differently online in a professional setting – at work or in school – as opposed to in leisure hours?

Does it matter to you if content is accurate or not? Is it enough that the content resonates in some way? That it is funny, or touching, or shocking? That it reminds you there is good in the world, or affirms something you believe in, or confirms your worst suspicions, or portrays a political enemy in unflattering terms? To what extent are you receptive to the *affect* of content rather than whether it is true or not?

From there, we might gauge our reactions to the content we encounter. Did this item make me angry, sad, wistful? Why? How strong a reaction is the content trying to ignite? Was it designed to enrage me? Am I inclined to believe it? Am I intensely hoping it is true? And if I accept that it is true, what are the implications? What am I expected to do as a result? And what about other people? Information that wants to capture my attention and make me angry — is it directed at anyone, any group or community? Is this "news" designed to hurt someone?

Vanessa Otero of Ad Fontes Media draws an analogy with diet, and encourages people to adopt lifestyles of "information fitness." Reliable, factual content is like fruit and vegetables. Informed analysis is like high quality carbohydrates. Cable news shouting matches and hyper-partisan polemics masquerading as news journalism are like doughnuts and French fries and candy – fine and even enjoyable in small amounts, but disastrous as one's only diet.

In that vein, the first step a conscientious citizen should take in managing their media diet is to curate the information sources to which they regularly turn, selecting a smorgasbord of content they know to be trustworthy. This does not mean blindly accepting everything one is told, even by

credible information sources. But it does mean choosing information sources that will do more than simply reaffirm what one already believes. Persuading people to pay to hear what they want to hear has proven to be a sound business model for partisan sites, but to be truly informed one needs to keep abreast of things as they actually are, not simply as we might wish them to be.

And so the truly conscientious citizen will not only be attentive to reliable news sources but committed to their support, in one's own best interests and for the common good. In a public sphere rife with publications pushing anti-facts for partisan ends, and in which politicians shamelessly distort the truth for self-serving gain, professional reportage is all the more essential, not least as a means to expose falsehoods and reveal when and how we are being manipulated. And yet the circumstances that have allowed for the proliferation of guileful information content also imperil the responsible news media. If they were to disappear, media content would become the exclusive preserve of propagandists and sectarians.

There is therefore a larger existential issue at stake than just the ability to distinguish fake news from facticity. It has to do with whether sources of trustworthy, professionally reported journalism can endure. If they are to do so, it will require a public aware of how valuable these sources are, and how damaging it would be to lose them. Support for responsible journalism not only helps to ensure that it remains viable, but is an investment in the informational health of our local community and larger society. It is the act of a conscientious citizen.

Resources

Play *Bad News*, the fake news game designed by Cambridge University researchers in collaboration with Dutch journalists and academics: https://getbadnews.com/#intro

There is also *Factitious*, a game developed by American University that asks players to swipe right or left to see if they can distinguish between fake or real news: http://factitious.augamestudio.com/#/. But it reveals little beyond the fact that it is difficult to tell fake news that sounds real from real news that sounds fake.

There are at least two U.S. websites that array how the right and the left look at the same issues, in an attempt to bridge polarization: *The Perspective.com* ("There are at least two sides to every story") and *Allsides* ("Don't be fooled by media bias and fake news"):
➢ https://www.theperspective.com
➢ https://www.allsides.com/unbiased-balanced-news

The BBC iReporter game places players in the role of a BBC social media reporter chasing a story: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-8760dd58-84f9-4c98-ade2-590562670096

BBC Academy includes Young Reporter – tools and resources for young people, including how to spot a bot, recognizing fake news, knowing who to trust, etc.: https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/collections/youngreporter#

Fact-checking websites:

Media Bias/Fact Check: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com

Politifact: https://www.politifact.com

AP Fact Check: https://www.apnews.com/APFactCheck

Snopes: https://www.snopes.com

FactCheck.org: https://www.factcheck.org

Lead Stories: https://leadstories.com

Science Feedback: sciencefeedback.co

Canada Fact Check: canadafactcheck.ca

FactsCan: http://factscan.ca

Accuracy in Media: https://www.aim.org

Check Your Fact: https://checkyourfact.com

Try this interactive tool to experiment with how false messages can spread.

Check out MediaSmarts' Digital Literacy 101.

Learn how videos and entire newspapers can be faked.

Check out UNESCO's different publications on media literacy.

Fighting "fake news": How youth are navigating modern misinformation and propaganda online: https://en.ccunesco.ca/blog/2018/11/fighting-fake-news.

In French

Read 30 Seconds Before You Believe It.

Visit Agence Science-Presse's website.

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