

The Role of Media in the Acceptance of Real News or Fake News



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Overview

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- My current research has been interested in authoritative information and disinformation
 - How genuine information is created, authorized and disseminated
 - How disinformation is created, authorized and disseminated and how disinformation succeeds in light of or despite the content of the message
- I will compare and contrast specific examples of cognitive authorities of the *New York Times* and *Fox News*
- You may not agree with everything that I detail here, but it is a synthesis of my research from a variety of fields, psychology, philosophy, communication studies, information studies, journalism, etc.
- I back my claims by extensive research, based on evidence, facts, logic and reasoning. You can dispute my findings, but they can only be challenged with evidence, facts, logic and reasoning. Sometimes one may be able to develop an alternative interpretation of data, facts or evidence. If so, I would encourage your sharing such interpretations with me.

Outline

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- Cognitive Authorities
- Knowledge, beliefs, second-hand knowledge
- Mass Media as Cognitive Authorities
- New York Times versus Fox News
- Persistence of Fox News
- Psychological Factors, Cognitive Bias, Trump Supporters
- Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority
- Unbalanced Analysis?
- Social Media as Cognitive Authorities
- Unregulated Platforms and Fairness Doctrine
- Conclusion: The Age of Inflamed Grievances

Cognitive Authorities

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- What is a cognitive authority?
- When one lacks experience, education, or knowledge, or does not have the time or inclination to acquire such, a cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as second-hand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. One can be mistaken about whether the authority is sound or not.
- As we grow up and as we live, we cannot experience everything and so some of what we know is taken from individuals (e.g. father, mother, friends, leader), groups (e.g., classmates), or institutions (e.g., schools, books).
- For this paper, the focus is on news sources including social media, political leaders, political parties, and religious leaders).

Patrick Wilson and Cognitive Authority

- Patrick Wilson wrote a work called *Second-hand knowledge - an inquiry into cognitive authority* in 1983 which promoted a variety of notions.
- He argues that we can construct knowledge in one of two ways:
 - (1) We can construct first-hand knowledge based on our experience. Unfortunately, our experience is limited.
 - (2) We can construct knowledge from or through others, second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others
- Question: taking an inventory of the information in your mind, how much do you really know? How much is derived from the knowledge of others?
- Second-hand knowledge comes in various degrees – some people know what they are talking about, and others can be self-inflated liars
- If we have questions about political issues and are not well versed in the area, we are inclined to ask a friend, associate, or other person who is knowledgeable in that area – they become our cognitive authority on that topic, assuming that they are trustworthy, credible and have a level of expertise.
- We can have many cognitive authorities based on various topics of concern
- My use of cognitive authority expands Patrick Wilson's original description.

Cognitive Authorities

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- Cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness.
- Cognitive authority exists on a continuum, exists in relation to a sphere of interest, and involves at least two people.
- Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, Twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites, etc.
- Examples of cognitive authorities are news sites representing different points of a political spectrum: e.g., Fox News or MSNBC.
- For news sites, the measure of their credibility or trustworthiness is related to consumer loyalty. This observation is true for both authentic and pseudo-cognitive authorities.

Credibility

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Credibility is not a simple judgment, though it is claimed to be “intuitive.” According to Rieh (2010)

- “Most credibility researchers agree that credibility assessment results from simultaneously evaluating multiple dimensions.
- “Among these, two key dimensions are identified: *trustworthiness and expertise*.
- “Trustworthiness is a core dimension in credibility assessment that captures *the perceived goodness and morality of the source*.
- “The perception that a source is fair, unbiased, and truthful contributes to the trustworthiness of information. Trustworthiness is, however, not a synonym for credibility because *people also must recognize expertise* in order to deem information credible.” (Rieh, 2010, 1337).
- It is a key point that trustworthiness is not equivalent to credibility because expertise is also required.

Credibility

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- “Expertise reflects perceived knowledge, skill, and experience of the source.
- “Expertise is likewise an important factor given its close relationship to people’s perceptions of a source’s ability to provide information that is *both accurate and valid*.”(Rieh, 2010, 1137-1138).
- Before the era of fake news, trustworthiness and expertise had clear positive conceptualizations.
- But we see that instances of doxing and fake news pose interesting distortions of these words.
- Many listeners of Fox News believe that it is trustworthy and even that expertise resides in the assertions of its political commentators, which are often inconsistent over time and which are often lies or reflect partisan beliefs, without evidence.

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge

- Two questions that are of interest is:
- (1) What is the cognitive state of the creators or transmitters of information on news media
- (2) What is the cognitive state of the receivers of such information?
- Is it knowledge, belief (true belief, false belief, and beliefs that are neither true or false)? How do they differ among senders and receivers?
- Senders and receivers have related and different motivations:
 - Senders: power, money, advancing a political agenda
 - Receivers: information, confirmation bias, supporting a political agenda

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge

- I expand on the notion of belief by arguing that beliefs come in three general types: (1) true beliefs; (2) beliefs that are preferences, being neither true or false; and (3) false beliefs.
- “True belief” is a belief that could be turned into knowledge (or which can be justified) through experience, education or research, such as seeking evidence from reliable sources. If one did not know that the hypotenuse of a right triangle is the square root of the sum of its sides squared, I could take a course in geometry to learn it. If one believes that Pizzagate is a fake news story, one can do the research using reliable sources for confirming that assessment.
- If I think that Adele is a better singer than Lady Gaga, that may be true for one person and not another. Matters of taste, for which one can make arguments, are never true per se. They are matters of preferential beliefs that will vary among individuals or groups, even though one can advance arguments for why one would prefer one over the other.
- There are “false beliefs,” e.g., climate change denial, which cannot be converted into truth. Some false beliefs are often tried to be portrayed as true through appeals to false or selective expertise, faulty data collection or manipulation, or false evidence.

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge

- During the current coronavirus pandemic, Trump has made claims for his managing the pandemic in the best possible way, that he had anticipated the pandemic, that there were enough tests and ventilators
- All of these claims are verifiably false (by citing scientific evidence, referring to bona fide experts or showing audiovisual recordings about his claims), but that does not seem to deter Fox viewers either to endorse his leadership or to ignore, dismiss or rationalize (e.g., he really did not mean what he said) some of his claims (e.g., to internally use bleach or disinfectant to cure the coronavirus, that he was *cured* with regeneron).
- A somewhat confusing scenario needs to be sorted out: consumers receive information that pretends to be knowledge and that may be claimed to be knowledge by the consumer, based on their belief in a cognitive authority (such as a political leader, religious leader or news organization) and yet which is at best in the consumer's mind second-hand knowledge that may be in actuality belief and even false belief.
- Various psychological factors predispose or motivate both creators/senders of disinformation as well as receivers and we will look at some of these later.

Media as Cognitive Authorities

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- Various media for different age groups may act as cognitive authorities, measured in terms of using particular sources and the level of loyalty to those sources.
- One can argue that loyalty is a measure of expertise, credibility and trustworthiness for a cognitive authority, whether positively or ill-placed.
- We will next look at the result of a Pew Research Center study on sources of information and loyalty to them based on a variety of factors.
- The study took place in 2016/2017, but it still represents trends.

Pew Research: Loyalty and Source Attention (2016, updated 2017)

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- About half (51%) of Americans say that they are loyal to their news sources, while 48% say they are not particularly loyal.
- At the same time though, 76% of Americans say they usually turn to the same sources for news.
- Taken together, nearly half (46%) of Americans both describe themselves as loyal and also go to the same sources repeatedly (the “very loyal”). Just 18% are neither attitudinally nor behaviorally loyal (the “non-loyal”).
- Older adults are more likely to be in this group: 58% of those ages 65+ are “very loyal,” whereas only 28% of those ages 18-29 are. And women are more likely to be very loyal (49%) than men (43%).
- Very loyal news consumers follow news at a much higher rate. They are also more likely to think media organizations do a good job informing people and to trust the info they provide

<http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/loyalty-and-source-attention/>

Pew Research: Loyalty and Source Attention (2016, updated 2017)

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- TV dominates as preferred news platform among very loyal news consumers; wider mix among the non-loyal
- Despite digital advances, most still share news by word of mouth
- In a real time analysis, speaking with others is the most common way to respond to getting news online
- Those who prefer to get news online have more negative attitudes toward the news media. Online, however, they're much more likely to intentionally seek news out
- Young adults no more likely to engage with news on social media
- Democrats are more trusting of information from the national news media, but liberal Democrats are about as likely to see bias as moderate/liberal Republicans
- Liberal Dems, conservative Reps more likely to get one-sided news from family and friends online, but conservative Republicans are most likely to think that's OK
- <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/loyalty-and-source-attention/>

Source Loyalty, Cognitive Authority

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So far we have made 3 key points:

1. We all have cognitive authorities
2. News media in whatever format can be considered cognitive authorities based on the degree of source loyalty of the consumer.
3. Both right and left news sources believe that their sources are credible, trustworthy and have expertise.

To provide a focus we will compare Fox News and New York Times. Although they are different in the way the news is presented, they are good examples of different political views and exercise a great deal of influence on their constituencies.

What Readers/Viewers *Believe*

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New York Times

Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.

Trustworthy “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).

Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid

Real News

Fox News

Strongly right bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.

Trustworthy “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).

Possesses expertise; they provide information that is accurate and valid

Real News (others are Fake News)

New York Times: Actuality

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New York Times	Basis for their Authority
Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com)	Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion
Trustworthy “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Long history (1851) as a respected publication. Articles are well-researched and verified. Opinion is identified as opinion (editorials).
Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid	Produces (1) second-hand knowledge, (2) well-informed opinion (with which other may disagree: e.g., Trickle-down economics is not successful), and (3) preferences (best movies to watch)
	Has a cadre of respected and experienced experts. When they become aware of false or problematic statements or reporting, they issue retractions
	Believe in fact-finding and verification by

New York Times: Actuality

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New York Times	Basis for their Authority
Adhere to the Principles of Good Journalism (https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/)	The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)
NY Times follow these principles	Its first loyalty is to citizens, not to partisan politics
For a measured assessment, see: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/	Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover – when covering anything connected to the NY Times, they note it
	Serve as an independent monitor of power
	Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise
	Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant
	Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignoring others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.
	Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Fox News: Actuality

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Fox News

Basis for their Authority

Strong right bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com). For a measured assessment see:

<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fox-news/>

They claim that they are trustworthy implying that they stand for “the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).

Possesses expertise: they purport to provide information that is accurate and valid

Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion

It has a long history associated with right and conservative causes, a history which has been often shaky and scandalous, with commentators leaving (e.g., Bill O’Reilly) for various reasons, often sexual harassment. (Stelter, 2020; Smith, 2019). Many of their sources are conspiracy theories from alt-right web sites.

They have various pundits, Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al., who claim to be experts, but they are mostly apologists for ring-wing viewpoints. Its second-hand knowledge, on political matters, is often at best opinion or opinion based on alternative “facts” or misconstrued data. Example of Lou Dobbs and “Noble” Prize

Fox News: Actuality

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Principles of Good Journalism

Basis for their Authority

The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)

For four straight months, they pushed misinformation every single day (Sullivan, 2019). Trump's failure or incompetence in dealing with the coronavirus epidemic is never mentioned, and in fact he is praised for his superior leadership.

Its first loyalty is to citizens

Their loyalty is toward its partisan viewers, not to all citizens, though they hope to convert them

Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover

The most obvious case is that of Donald Trump. They never criticize his speech or behavior and claim the he is the best president that the US has ever had. He frequently is invited or invites himself for interviews. Their relationship is so close that Fox News is often referred to as "Trump TV."

Serve as an independent monitor of power

See the above; most commentary and commentators support right-wing causes: unfettered capitalism, oligarchy, pro-business, anti-labor agenda, etc. They endorse the Republican party and the Trump agenda, often ignoring previous principles of conservatism (e.g., anti-communism, fiscal responsibility).

Fox News: Actuality

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Principles of Good Journalism

Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise

Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant

Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignoring others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.

Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Basis for their Authority

They rarely invite speakers, politicians or commentators from the Democrats or the left. They also refuse to run advertisements that are critical of the president or right-wing agenda

They are committed to reporting or making narratives that support the biases of their viewers, a right-wing or conservative viewpoint (which has been muddled).

They are often committed to sensationalism, such as fear of migrants, fear of communism and socialism, turning peaceful protests into riots against law and order, etc. For an overview of a variety of issues see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_News_controversies

When reporting, one should include their viewpoint reflecting their own moral conscience. Certainly, many of Fox News pundits do so: Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al. take that view, but there are serious questions about a moral compass that approves of children in cages, that support a continuous liar (20,000+ lies or misleading information until July 13, 2020 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-20000-false-or-misleading-claims/>)) or ignore, hide or manipulate relevant information.

The Persistence of Fox News

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A study Pew undertook in the fall of 2019 gives a more up-to-date understanding of Fox News viewers. It concluded:

1. Around four-in-ten Americans trust Fox News. Nearly the same share distrust it.
2. Republicans [(2/3) and Republican-leaning independents (65%)] trust Fox News more than any other outlet. Democrats distrust it more than any other outlet.
3. On an ideological scale, the average Fox News consumer is to the right of the average U.S. adult, but not as far to the right as the audiences of some other outlets [Such as Rush Limbaugh and Alex Jones.]
4. People who cite Fox News as their main source of political news are older and more likely to be white than U.S. adults overall.
 1. Americans ages 65 and older account for around four-in-ten of those who say their main source is Fox News (37%), compared with 21% of all adults.
 2. Around nine-in-ten who turn to Fox News (87%) identify their race and ethnicity as non-Hispanic white, compared with 65% of all adults. (Gramlich, 2020)

The Persistence of Fox News

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5. Those who name Fox News as their main source of political news stand out from the general public in their views on key issues and people, including President Donald Trump. (Gramlich, 2020)

- People who get their news from outlets other than Fox generally said, even as early as March 2020, that Trump was not responding to the COVID-19 pandemic well, but 63% of Fox News viewers said that Trump was doing an “excellent job” responding to the outbreak (Gramlich, 2020).
- Fox News viewership was more predictive than party affiliation; as Pew noted, “Fox News regulars were considerably more likely than Republicans overall to describe Trump’s handling of the outbreak as excellent (63% vs. 47%) (Gramlich, 2020).
- These observations serve to show the extent of the power of Fox News to influence its consumers.
- According to Eric Wemple, the influence of Fox News cannot be underestimated:
There’s simply no outlet that dominates any other part of the political spectrum in the way Fox News dominates the right. With that dominance, Fox News has done great damage. It’s not as if Fox News’s influence extends to only however many millions may be viewing in prime time. There’s what experts call a “media ecosystem” out there, where people take nonsense uttered on Fox News, then share it on Twitter, on Facebook, with their neighbor. Nonsense has a high pass around rate (Wemple, 2019).

These observations serve to show the extent of the power of Fox News to influence its consumers.

- How can they be a cognitive authority while extensively misinforming their viewers? We have to look at psychology for a clue.

A Sample of Psychological Factors

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- Information avoidance is information is actively avoided for fear that it would complicate or nullify currently held strong beliefs.
- Gullibility is “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).
- Gullibility can occur in one of two situations: “Either an individual’s beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual’s beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality” (p. 2).
- The psychological foundation of gullibility “appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality” (p. 5).
- For more detail on psychological issues and other psychological factors, see my recent publication on “Ten Lessons for the Age of Disinformation” at my website:
<http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/>

Cognitive Bias

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- Cherry (2020) defines cognitive bias as “a systematic error in thinking that occurs when people are processing and interpreting information in the world around them.”
- The vast research on cognitive bias has identified several aspects that foster disinformation campaigns, some of which are particularly salient in the political domain.
- When people exhibit cognitive bias, they take particular, flawed mental shortcuts regularly.
- In the face of too much information, people typically allow their cognitive biases to dictate their thinking, opinions, and actions *when they must make quick assessments*.
- Other factors that invoke cognitive biases include *a person’s emotions or motivations, the limits on the mind’s ability to process information, and social pressures* (Cherry, 2020).
- All of these causes seem to be relevant to such groups as Trump supporters, who make errors in judgment about actual facts, who often are engaged in anger and resentment about current events, who are seduced by the social pressures coming from their ingroup (social self-deception and collective self-deception), and who have less flexibility in processing information than non-Trump supporters.

Cognitive Bias

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- There are hundreds of cognitive biases that have particular relevance for disinformation adherents
- There is an obvious example: confirmation bias.
- Confirmation bias involves interpreting information that supports our existing beliefs, even when presented with conflicting evidence. Trump supporters hold all sorts of improbable beliefs because they concord with their pre-existing beliefs: e.g., that Trump is a great president, was successful in curbing the coronavirus and its infection and death rate, cares about poor people, is draining the Washington swamp, is a great businessman, that his tax cuts helped all Americans, and that he has a great plan for healthcare, all of which are false (at this point).
- For an extended treatment of 13 of them relevant to disinformation campaigns, see my paper: <http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/fox.pdf>

Psychological Factors: Pettigrew

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Thomas Pettigrew (2017) in, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," identifies factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters' devotion:

- (1) Tolerance for authoritarianism. Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian figures. Authoritarians see the world as dangerous, and fear guides their response to it.
- (2) A preference for associating with socially dominant groups (social dominance orientation, SDO). It is an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" (p. 108). People who want to maintain the current social hierarchy have an SDO. They believe members of other groups are inferior to members of their own.
- (3) Prejudiced. Trump supporters are prejudiced, which is manifest in their support for anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy. In the 2016 election, Trump launched rhetorical attacks on immigrants, Mexicans, and Muslims. His actions in office have reinforced that stance:
- (4) Low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves). They have less experience with minorities such as Muslims, Mexicans, or even Black Americans, than other Americans. Low intergroup contact makes it easier to dismiss members of other groups as foreign, un-American, and/or inferior.
- (5) Relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are). Relative deprivation may be the most powerful and troubling problem to enable Trump's rise. While Trump's supporters are not disproportionately economically disadvantaged—they are disproportionately employed full time and unlikely to live in districts that depend on manufacturing—they *perceive* themselves as deprived.

Psychological Factors

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- Hours of Fox News and right-wing social media sites denigrating "welfare queens," welfare programs, the more frequent appearance of minorities, mixed and gay marriages, on media, and the media's and advertising's version of what an ordinary American home is supposed to be like strengthen the sense of deprivation. Trump offered supporters an opportunity to reverse the trend. They feel that they are victims of the forces of politics, corporations, education, and demographic shifts, and the president's focus on those themes makes them feel empowered.
- Emotion, not critical thought, drives the behavior of Trump supporters and Fox viewers. The disinformation campaigns that support Trump appear to be based on cognitive biases, as is evidenced by many Trump supporters screaming at any opposition to him as "fake news," or calling police for imagined intrusions on their rights by Black people.

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

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- It starts with or instills a maelstrom of grievances, resentments, a sense of invisibility or a lack of importance of its viewers, where the wider culture often challenges many of their core values (e.g., white dominance)
- Fox News then tells those viewers what they want to hear, consciously or unconsciously, with claims that support and fulfill their cognitive biases and real, instilled or professed ideology. For example, they may think of themselves as conservatives, without having much depth about its meaning, except maintaining things as they were (e.g., male white dominance in society). Fox News will then shape and enlarge that image with anti-liberal, anti-labor, pro-business, pro-average-joe narratives.
- These messages are myths, tropes, and narratives, often detailed through the shows of their various pundits. They include persistent myths about antifa conspiracies, fast fixes or lies about the coronavirus epidemic or the extraordinary leadership of Trump. They echo the view that God rewards those who work hard and other variations of the Protestant work ethic, implying that those who are poor or disadvantaged have not worked hard enough and are deserving of their circumstances.

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

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- It presents white privilege as the natural way of things and racism as a thing of the past. Kneeling during the national anthem is an insult to the flag or the country. It satirizes the mass media as pushing values that are un-American. It claims that restrictions on gun ownership are an assault on basic human rights and the Constitution. It mirrors and accentuates the lies on radical right-wing websites, such as Breitbart (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14). The emotional triggers that it fosters are legion, not to say they are true, only that they work.
- They engage in “motivated reasoning,” especially when the topic at hand is something that we promotes or inflames their cause. It is the effect of emotions that we associate with a given topic at a primal level. It is not really reasoning but rationalization, making our arguments fit a pre-determined end. Not only does it involve a confirmation bias but also a “disconfirmation bias” “in which we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial.” (Mooney, 2011). When they grab onto what appears to be scientific evidence that supports their bias, they pounce on it. When one “scientist” proclaims that climate change is a hoax, they are featured on Fox News and the overwhelming majority of scientists are ignored, if not mocked.

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

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- These arguments from motivated reasoning or memes, myth, tropes and narratives are reinforced and repeated throughout the disinformation-misinformation ecosystem to the point of addiction where viewers' self-deception dialectically reinforces and is reinforced by the social and collective self-deception of others and selective events in the disinformation-misinformation ecosystem. This disinformation-misinformation ecosystem is a filter bubble or "propaganda feedback loop." (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 33). Morrison (2018) suggests that right-wing media keep over a quarter of Americans siloed in this "propaganda feedback loop."
- Because Fox News promotes relentless moral outrage, viewers are prone to believe irrational or unfounded claims or assertions, and to regard all other venues as fake news. This moral outrage is reflected in the actions of the viewers taken into the market place, such as the refusal to wear masks for the coronavirus pandemic or to call the police on any Black person they imagine is threatening them.
- It is not that Fox News alone does this – so do some social media sites – but it is a major factor given its degree of influence.

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

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Regardless of topic, Fox News commentators are supposed to stoke rage and push the emotional buttons of their viewers. Tobin Smith, a former Fox News commentator, suggests that their programming fosters an addictive and resentment-based process to:

[1] Understand the elderly white conservative viewer's pre-tribal mindset, which is a compilation of their resentments, indignations, cultural values, religious values, political values, racial perspectives, regional outlooks, and worldviews.

[2] Scare or outrage the crap out of viewers by boring down on a recently exposed tribal nerve like a psychic dentist with a drill, presenting a heresy or an innately scary image of non-white/non-Christian foreigners, immigrants, or terrorists doing horrible things.

[3] Produce each seven-minute rigged outcome opinion-debate segment around the carefully selected partisan heresy such that the "fair and balanced" debate is massively rigged for the conservative pundits on the program to . . .

[4] Deliver the climactic and righteous rhetorical victory for the partisan right-wing viewer to trigger the jolt of dopamine and serotonin that the addict anticipated and knew was coming. (Smith, 2019, pp. 485-486).

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

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- Fox News claims to base its stories on evidence and facts. At best, when they actually use facts, their interpretation of these facts is often distorted, manipulated, misleading or missing.
- It claims to be trustworthy – it is only trustworthy in that it reinforces and stokes bias.
- It claims to have journalistic integrity. It is not journalistic integrity when you make the narrative about the facts or the omission of facts fit your political bias or when you originate a narrative based on a conspiracy theory of a radical right-wing social media site. (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14).
- It claims to have expertise, but its expertise is sophistry, because they are interested in political power and influence and economic rewards. The repetition of Fox's messages through social media and other personal interactions reinforces and socializes the self-deception.
- Fox News exists as a significant component of a disinformation-misinformation ecology composed of like-minded peers, friends, associates, religious leaders, politicians, and pundits which foster, nurture and reinforce one's grievances through memes, narratives, tropes and stories. It is a major component of a "propaganda feedback loop," where each part reinforces (and often inflames) the others, through multiple channels (Cable news, social media, group associations, party rallies, word-of-mouth, etc.) are echoing each other.
- Fox relies for its authority on a self-reinforcing dialectical process where each part reinforces the other and rejects discordant information. The result is Fox's robust approval rating at 43% and a steady 63% among Republicans and Republican leaning independents (Gramlich, 2020).
- The conclusion is Fox News is a *pseudo-cognitive authority*, one that pretends, fosters and succeeds in being a faux authority, but one that lacks a legitimate foundation.

Unbalanced Analysis?

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Is this fair? Are there not cases on the left that replicate what is going on in the right wing media?

There are two responses: this assumes the notion of the false equivalences and ignores the obsessiveness of right wing media

- The notion of false equivalences asserts that for any issue there are two equally valid opinions.
- Everyone is entitled to an opinion but not all opinions are founded, justified or justifiable.
- Some opinions are formed from false information or selective information (that distorts the context and meaning), and such opinions do not have the same standing as ones that are well-formed: that is, ones based on rational arguments, evidence, and logic.
- To insist that they are equivalent is a mistake in reasoning. In the current environment, we have wars where your opinions or moral indignation trump facts or your civil liberties trump science.

No Symmetry Between Right and Left

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Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts published *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, which shows that right and other media differ significantly in dealing with network information. By doing a rigorous analysis of online stories, tweets, and Facebook-shares data points, the authors conclude that “something very different was happening in right-wing media than in centrist, center-left and left-wing media.” (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14). They observe that

the behavior of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system. We use the term “radicalization” advisedly in two senses. First, to speak of “polarization” is to assume symmetry. No fact emerges more clearly from our analysis of how four million political stories were linked, tweeted, and shared over a three-year period than that there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communications within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it. Second, throughout this period we have observed repeated public humiliation and vicious disinformation campaigns mounted by the leading sites in this sphere against individuals who were the core pillars of Republican identity a mere decade earlier. (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14).

Benkler et al. believe that the research they performed generally indicated that the left were less susceptible to their biases and that the right sought confirmation bias to their preexisting beliefs. They conclude that “the right-wing media ecosystem differs categorically from the rest of the media environment,” and has been much more susceptible to “disinformation, lies and half-truths.” As for Fox News’ role in this, “we found Fox News accrediting and amplifying the excesses of the radical sites.” (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14).

Social Media

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- Social media sites can also act as cognitive authorities or pseudo-cognitive authorities
- The problem with the internet is that it is a self-serve “information” bank. Using Google or some social media sites like mediabiasfactcheck.com, one can often find legitimate information.
- For many on the right, right-wing social media (e.g., Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, Zero Hedge) is a self-serve disinformation or misinformation bank. Right-wing ideologues, foreign agents and click-bait entrepreneurs produce a deluge of disinformation of memes and narratives to solicit (at a minimum) and inflame (at a maximum) the disinformation seeker at these sites.
- Self-serve engagement is mediated by cognitive bias, confirmation bias, and steering to selective sources. Generally, there are little restrictions on the kind of content that is made available.
- Conservatives are more susceptible to clickbait than liberals, more likely to fall for fake news. (Ingraham, 2019).

Social Media Summary

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- Social media sites can act as cognitive authorities
- Social media has become the information marketplace. 45% of Americans rely on social media, reaching 66 million viewers (Fox 3 M – NYT -4.7 M)
- News21 Initiative tracked far-right users, for a 2 wk period – 2500 vile posts got .5 M likes and 200,000 shares
- Disinformation spreads more quickly and broadly than truthful information
- YouTube algorithm (rabbit hole) drives users to worse and worse sites
- Issue of free speech on the internet is exploited by disinformation trolls
- Zuckerberg and Facebook hide behind First Amendment, don't take responsibility for its content – based on a misinterpretation
- Facebook is NOT balanced and does have a bias toward the right. Looking at top 35 sites with a political bias, there were 8.7 M engagements (views, shares, comments, etc.) on average for each in August whereas Fox had 56.4 M engagements, MSNBC had 9.7 M
- The Fairness Doctrine dissolved control over the networks by relaxing the requirement that news had to present balanced views, with the belief that average citizens could sort out the truth for themselves.
- In the current environment, this belief is hopelessly naïve – most people do not sort out the truth and most likely they seek information that confirm their biases.
- Robert Reich asserts that the big sites (Facebook, Twitter) need to be broken up and that they cannot pretend to be neutral information providers, but must regulate their content, else democracy will not survive.
- To slide 45

Social Media

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Beyond specific right-wing media sources, as political commentator and professor Robert Reich argued in the *Guardian*, Facebook and Twitter are alarmingly influential. As he wrote:

- The reason 45% of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump's tweets reach 66 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close. Fox News' viewership rarely exceeds 3 million. The New York Times has 4.7 million subscribers.
- Facebook and Twitter aren't just participants in the information marketplace. They're quickly *becoming the information marketplace*. (Reich, 2019).

One of the most problematic aspects of social media are the number of hate groups and the far-right partisans that use it to attract followers and disseminate their propaganda.

Social Media

- A report of “Hate in America,” a project produced by the Carnegie-Knight News21 initiative, did a study of far-right users of Facebook, Twitter, Gab, VK, and others during a two-week period in June 2018. They tracked more than 3 million followers and compiled more than 2,500 posts from these platforms that threatened harm against Black Americans, Latinos, Jews, and LGBTQ+ people. These posts got over a half-million likes and were shared 200,000 times. This evidence shows the strength and breadth of these groups, who gain power by assembling a collective voice, despite some restrictions by some platforms (Gardner, 2018).
- What poses additional threat is the spread and speed of disinformation, and in the inflammation of emotional triggers (memes, tropes). MIT researchers Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018) find in a study of rumor cascades from 2006 to 2017 that false information spreads more quickly and broadly than truthful information and that those on the right are more susceptible and more prone to disseminate false information than those on the left.

Social Media

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- YouTube in particular engages a rabbit hole phenomenon that increases right-wing radical viewership.
- When perusing YouTube videos for particular content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the site's algorithm suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn suggest more provocative videos to view.
- The impact is to advance Google's profits, with dire political consequences. Sociologist and information and library science professor Zeynep Tufekci declared YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" because of these mechanisms (Tufekci, 2018). According to the analysis of *New York Times* columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, Brazil's ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro owes his electoral success primarily to YouTube videos (Fisher & Taub, 2019).

Social Media and Free Speech

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- While there are concerns for groups like 8chan and other alt-right sites, Facebook illustrates a broader problem of regulating speech on the internet, particularly hate speech or conspiracy theories.
- Perhaps the major problem with social media is the fact that anyone can use or create or propagate social media to disseminate clear lies and falsehoods on the internet in the name of intellectual freedom or freedom of expression.
- Mark Zuckerberg perhaps best exemplified this in a speech at Georgetown University where he argued that Facebook should be unfettered in intellectual freedom, including political advertisements of outright lies (e.g., pro-Trump reelection campaign advertisements that include lies about his opponents).
- He takes the view that the marketplace will work it out – the lies will be discovered, eventually rejected or ignored. He bases his argument, as do other free speech advocates, on the First Amendment.

Unregulated Platforms

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- Harvard legal expert Yochai Benkler argues that Zuckerberg's interpretation of the First Amendment as preventing his company from suppressing false or dangerous speech is erroneous. He argues that the First Amendment is only about government involvement in speech; it does not apply to private speech or private parties, of which Twitter and Facebook are examples (Morrison, 2018).
- Evidence shows that untruths are not sorting themselves out in the disinformation-misinformation marketplace. Disinformation spreads unchecked by any retractions (and if even they occur, the first impression is what is originally remembered) across the internet. Fox News, for example, echoes Trump's and his supporters' talking points, which are often patently false, but that is what is remembered (Affect Cognitive Bias)

Unregulated Platforms

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It is simply wrong to believe that Facebook as a whole is balanced or neutral and has no particular bias. The *Economist* did a study on Facebook using CrowdTangle, a Facebook tool that tracks how web material is shared across social media. They discovered that in August, 2020, the two most popular sites were Fox News and Breitbart measured by user engagements – shares, views, comments and other activities. They concluded that

whatever Facebook's intentions, the social-networking site has more of a political slant than Mr. Zuckerberg lets on. Using CrowdTangle, we compiled a list of the media outlets that received the most Facebook engagement in August. We then examined the top 35 for which data on their political biases were available from Ad Fontes Media, a media-watchdog organisation. All told, these sites received an average of 8.7m engagements in August. Fox News topped the list with 56.4m interactions in the month; MSNBC, a rival cable-news network, received just 9.7m (Facebook. . ., 2020).

Fairness Doctrine and Unregulated Platforms

- The belief that individuals are capable of sorting out the truth for themselves in such an environment is problematic to say the least. For example, in 1987 the Reagan administration revoked the fairness doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which since 1949 had required broadcast license holders to present both sides of issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced. In eliminating it, FCC decision makers claimed that it “restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters ...” (FCC Fairness Doctrine). NBCUniversal lauded the decision, saying, “Today we reaffirm our faith in the American people. Our faith in their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction without any help from government” (FCC Fairness Doctrine, footnote 18 of Wikipedia entry).
- The emergence of right-wing media closely followed on the decision; the Rush Limbaugh Show premiered in 1988.
- Obviously, it is nice to think that the truth will always win out. But in the Age of Disinformation, this approach seems too simplistic. Thus, we must ask, is there a limit to free expression when that expression leads to harmful acts to demonized populations, the destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions, the loss of expertise, and the denigration of science and evidence?
- Robert Reich (Reich, 2019) argues that two actions need to occur to bring rational control back to the internet. First, there should be some anti-trust action that would break up the large providers, such as Facebook and Twitter. He argues that they have a too broad and monolithic influence. Second, we must prevent such providers from pretending to be neutral providers of information for which they have no responsibility.

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- In sum, we have a diversity of sites on the internet and there are places where one can obtain reliable information.
- There are many sites where the opposite is true. Fox News and alt-right social media sites are two of the major factors that have contributed to the uncivil discourse in American society, the undermining of American democracy and democratic institutions, the decline in law and order, an anti-science, anti-humanistic agenda, and the hypersensitivity to presumed threats to one's rights and ideology.
- It is naive to think that users can sort out misinformation/disinformation by themselves: they lack the skills to critically evaluate information or to assess who are proper cognitive authorities. Heavy doses of information, media and digital literacies are required.
- While we are engaged in disinformation wars in the Age of Disinformation (wars which have attacked democracies in vulnerable ways), we also have entered the Age of Inflamed Grievances, given the in-your-face stoked grievances by the alt-right in cable news and social media and the Trump administration. Not that there is not some of that behavior on the left, e.g., attacking those who support racial division or police brutality.

Summing Up

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- We have entered a brave new world, where, as Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, 2019) said, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."
- The more one leans to the right, the more true this seems to be. If one's sources of information are Fox News or like-minded news sites and alt-right social media sites, not only are you asked to perpetuate these impossible things, but also you are asked to promote these things with a sense of self-entitled moral outrage throughout your disinformation ecology.
- In the age of distraction, truth is "whatever makes you click" (Wijnberg, 2020).
- In the age of inflamed grievances, truth is whatever you are predisposed and inflamed to click.

Resources

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Please reference my home page for more details about my work

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See especially the most recent papers:

"A disinformation-misinformation ecology: the case of Trump." October 1, 2020. Book chapter out for review for *Fake News Is Bad News - Hoaxes, Half-truths and the Nature of Today's Journalism*. Draft at:

<http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/fox.pdf>

"10 Lessons for the Age of Disinformation," Navigating *Fake News, Alternative Facts and Misinformation in a Post-Truth World*, edited by Professor Kamiz Dalkir, University of Montreal, February, 2020. <https://www.igi-global.com/gateway/chapter/full-text-pdf/249503>.

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