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A Disinformation-Misinformation Ecology: The Case of Trump

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Abstract

This paper lays out many of the factors that make disinformation or misinformation campaigns of Trump successful. By all rational standards, he is unfit for office, a compulsive liar, incompetent, arrogant, ignorant, mean, petty, and narcissistic. Yet his approval rating tends to remain at 40%. Why do rational assessments of his presidency fail to have any traction? This paper looks at the conflation of knowledge and beliefs in partisan minds, how beliefs lead to self-deception and social self-deception and how they reinforce one another. It then looks at psychological factors, conscious and unconscious, that predispose partisans to pursue partisan sources of information and reject non-partisan sources. It then explains how these factors sustain the variety and motivations of Trump supporters' commitment to Trump. The role of cognitive authorities like *Fox News* and right-wing social media sites are examined to show how the power of these media sources escalates and reinforces partisan views and the rejection of other cognitive authorities. These cognitive authorities also use emotional triggers to inflame Trump supporters, keeping them addicted by feeding their anger, resentment, or self-righteousness. The paper concludes by discussing the dynamics of the Trump disinformation-misinformation ecology, creating an Age of Inflamed Grievances.

Keywords: Trumpism, disinformation, cognitive authority, *Fox News*, social media, propaganda, inflamed grievances, psychology of disinformation, Donald Trump, media, self-deception, social self-deception

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how disinformation-misinformation campaigns, particularly in the political arena, succeed and why they are so hard to challenge, defeat, or deflect. In order to address this topic, the research here draws on many fields: information studies, psychology, philosophy, communication studies, and media studies, among others. The examples studied here are the disinformation campaigns that made Donald Trump the United States president, sustain his continuation in office, and promote his reelection.

Disinformation occurs when the originator of the information intends to deceive. Misinformation need not involve intent; it is merely false. The problem is that in many cases it is not clear whether it is one or the other because of an ambiguous context or questions as to whether misinformation is being used in the service of disinformation (e.g., fake cures for the coronavirus). The use of the hyphenated terms underscores their interaction for this paper. By any measure, much of the rhetoric supporting Donald Trump is disinformation. By any moral

or political standard, he is unfit for office, a compulsive liar, incompetent, arrogant, corrupt, ignorant, criminal, mean, petty, and narcissistic. Trump and his enablers, the Republican Party, his administration, his news channels and media, and his supporters are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Americans due to incompetent management of the coronavirus pandemic, the collapse of American democratic norms and the rule of law, and the cruel treatment of immigrants, just to name some of the most prominent failures. In an academic paper, the author is typically enjoined from making such an assessment, but rational people, scientists, political leaders, psychologists, and experts of many shades (many from the president's own party) concur with this evaluation. Trustworthy, evidence-based sources establish broad consensus among all but Republican officials and the president's electoral base. For example, there are articles that discuss Trump's character and authoritarian tendencies [1, 2], his continuous lying [3], his unaccomplished promises [4, 5], his impeachment (almost all Democrats and some Republicans believed that he was guilty), and his use of the Federal government to cover his crimes [6], to name a few.

The QAnon conspiracy theory is perhaps the most extreme disinformation campaign supporting Donald Trump's reelection. The theory claims that Democrats, all of Hollywood, and other liberal elites are involved in the sex-trafficking of children and murder of children to extend the life of the elites, who have found a way to brew the fountain of youth from the blood of innocents. Trump is the Messiah who fights the so-called "deep state" (a clandestine network entrenched inside the government, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies, and other governmental entities, who secretly manipulate government and government policy). He alone can be trusted. All of his opponents, Democrats and Republicans, are complicit in years of wrongdoing. Redemption will come with a military takeover and mass arrests of the guilty parties. According to the theory, Donald Trump is defending the country from these elites and non-Christians (America is a Christian nation) from this deep-state conspiracy. The director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, is a deep state plant, and hydroxychloroquine, which the president hyped as a treatment and preventative of COVID-19, a claim that scientists have debunked, is the key to addressing the pandemic [7]. When Trump made an error in one of his tweets, by typing 'covfefe' instead of 'coverage,' his fans thought it was a secret Arabic message [8]. One researcher believes that the codes that QAnon sees in Trump's tweets are just random typing [9]. Anyone capable of critical thought would realize that such notions are riddled with inconsistencies and unrealistic and impossible goals. Yet a Republican candidate for Congress, Margorie Greene, who espouses the conspiracy theories, won her primary and, given the gerrymandering of her district, is likely to become a member of Congress [10]. There is evidence that adherents of QAnon theory are rapidly increasing around the world [11].

How did we arrive at this state of affairs, where the most outrageous notions are not only entertained but flaunted in the public sphere? Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" [12], 514a-520d, (and "Metaphor of the Line" [12], 509d-511e) come to mind. In it, Socrates describes prisoners who have lived in a dark cave since birth, never seeing the light of day. They are physically constrained in such a way that they cannot look to either side or behind them. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a low wall. Various objects are lifted into the air, manipulated by another group of people who are out of sight behind the wall. The fire casts shadows of the objects across the wall facing the prisoners. The prisoners watch the sequences that the shadows play out and play games predicting the sequences and sounds that reverberate in the cave. When they refer to one of the shadows as a "cup," for example, they do not actually see a cup, but rather the shadow of a cup, confusing its shadowy

appearance with actual reality. The prisoners are coached (by someone like a Socrates) to leave the cave because they believe that their imaginary reality is true reality, and any alternate reality must be false. Trump's supporters seem to reside in a cave of disinformation, and even if they are challenged to move to the outside (by someone like a Socrates), they want to return and mock those who left, insisting that their fake world is the only true one. Their cognitive state is that of imagining (in Greek, *eikasia*), a state in which what they believe is reality, and contrary views are "fake news." In Plato's view, this state is inferior to that of belief or opinion where perception reflects the actual sensible world.

Why do we have such willing contemporary cave-dwellers? Why are disinformation campaigns successful? The evidence against them is available at our fingertips on the internet, if we search to find reliable resources. Yet just as accessible is the content for defenders, rationalizers, and promoters of lies. How can people not only swallow an outrageous version of reality but also endorse it, propagate it, and refuse to acknowledge any intervening evidence, no matter its source, its credibility, or wide acceptance, and find evidence for their claims in the most tenuous of biased sources?

In order to develop a complete picture of this disinformation-misinformation ecology, the next sections review previous research and publications that will provide a foundation for this paper's exploration of the success of disinformation in Trump's America [13–15].

2. Knowledge, beliefs and second-hand knowledge

Any discussion of disinformation must acknowledge the distinction between knowledge and beliefs, between what we can know for sure, either based on direct experience or solid research, and beliefs, which may be turned into truth, shown to be false, or are matters of individual preferences [16]. Because we do not and cannot have knowledge about everything, we often rely on secondhand knowledge that we acquire from others to help us navigate life, such as advice from parents, teachers, and experienced persons about what sources to use to solve a problem or how to sort out political opinions. This secondhand knowledge is derived from persons that we come to regard as cognitive authorities. A cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as secondhand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise. Persons and news institutions can act as cognitive authorities. The opinions cognitive authorities espouse can be true, false, or a matter of taste: true, if verifiable; false, if falsifiable or unverifiable; or a matter of taste, if based on one's tastes or preferences, being neither true nor false. Secondhand knowledge that is derived from cognitive authority, thus, for the advice seekers, is an opinion, and certainty varies based on the degree to which they trust their cognitive authorities. This trust grows as the secondhand knowledge is confirmed. It converts from pure opinion to knowledge as the holder gains experience with the topic and with the trustworthiness of the cognitive authority. One can have high certainty about their cognitive authorities, and yet it may be misplaced if the "knowledge" they pass on is not founded on reason, evidence, logic, or facts, or does not cohere with what one knows about the issue at hand.

Consumers of information sources may tend to assume that their opinions are knowledge when they are, at best, secondhand knowledge or, at worst, false opinion(s). For example, consumers of partisan news coverage may believe the claimed authority of the source indicates they have received knowledge and may thus act or talk in such a way that purports what they hear or see is deemed

knowledge. Unfortunately, such “knowledge” is unstable if the consumers cannot provide a rationale for what they believe. Many people are mistaken about whether they have knowledge at all and may believe that opinion or disinformation is knowledge. Sources the hearer takes for cognitive authorities can be mistaken or deceitful. At the same time, life would be impossible if we could not act on information we were unable to verify. We proceed in our lives with lots of secondhand knowledge, relying on others, whose advice most often is justified but sometimes is not. To make this difficult issue more manageable, we trust in cognitive authorities.

Deception by cognitive authorities can take various forms. Drawing on Chisholm and Feehan’s “The Intent to Deceive” [17] (1977, pp. 144–145), Don Fallis’s “The Varieties of Disinformation” (2014) [18] describes four major types. The first two are achieved by positive deception (causing a false belief). They include (1) creating a new false belief (e.g., Trump claims that absentee balloting is prone to electoral fraud) and (2) maintaining an existing false belief (e.g., if Joe Biden becomes president, he would take away all guns from citizens). The other two use negative deception. They are (1) causing the loss of a true belief (e.g., that mail-in or absentee ballot voting is a reliable way to vote) and (2) preventing the acquisition of a true belief (e.g., preventing accurate information about the COVID-19 pandemic; ([18], p. 140). (For a more detailed explanation, see [13–15].)

3. Self-deception, social self-deception and collective self-deception

Deception is most effective when it fosters self-deception. Sartre observed that bad faith is believing what you do not believe: holding or living a contradiction at one and the same time [16]. He describes a mode of living inauthentically, where people may deceive themselves into thinking that they do not have the freedom to make choices for fear of their potential consequences, e.g., that they would have to be responsible for themselves. The psychological position of “willful ignorance” may be related to this condition, knowing something to be true but consciously choosing ignorance, e.g., choosing to believe that the Confederate statues are not symbols of racism.

Self-deception may be a way to embrace forms of ignorance or false information, including lies, paltering, fake news, or doxing. Self-deception makes it possible to maintain our beliefs in the face of contravening evidence. Von Hippel and Trivers [19] describes five varieties of self-deception: (a) biased information search (i.e., only consulting sources that validate our biases or a priori beliefs); (b) biased interpretation (i.e., ignoring parts of a story that do not fit our views); (c) misremembering (e.g., as some Trump supporters who voted for and approved of Barack Obama have come to rationalize Trump’s depiction of him as incompetent); (d) rationalization (i.e., making our arguments fit our biases, such as accepting that immigrants are largely criminals because Trump says so); and (e) convincing oneself that a lie is true (e.g., that Barack Obama had spied on the Trump campaign in 2016).

Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs in the process of persuading others, and if and when they are convinced it confirms and sustains our false beliefs. Roy Dings [20], pp. 17–18, points out that this social self-deception may be “situating” or “persuasive.” The first, “situating,” includes the positive, in which we seek likeminded people with whom to associate, and the second is the negative, in which we avoid people who disagree with our views. The second, “persuasive,” includes the positive, trying to convince people to adopt our views, and negative, withholding information that would deter a person from such adoptions [20], pp. 17–18. These strategies are common

among political supporters of various stripes, but appear to be particularly common among Trump supporters, who reject any talking points except those in their disinformation ecosystem. Social, or reciprocal, self-deception leads to collective self-deception where a whole group feeds and is fed self-deception. The individual, the group, and the collective dialectically reinforce each other. For example, Trump supporters who are not necessarily homogeneous in how or why they arrived in support of Trump (as we will see later) embrace the common end—that Trumps represents their anger, resentments, a source of power, economic advantage, self-righteousness, or their cause, whatever it may be. (For a more detailed explanation, see [16]).

4. Psychological dimensions

There are psychological factors and motivations that set and enforce self-deception [16]. The elements may be conscious or unconscious. Conscious self-deception strategies include willful ignorance mentioned above or the avoidance of information. Willful ignorance is different from self-deception because willful ignorance is always intentional, whereas self-deception is not: the willfully ignorant can recognize that they are ignorant, whereas the self-deceived are typically not fully aware that they are self-deceived [21], p. 521. Willful ignorance (being more conscious) is, therefore, more culpable than self-deception. Information avoidance is not thought to be the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception. According to Lynch [22], information avoidance is “any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” [22], p. 341. Reasons for information avoidance include the information may demand a change in one’s beliefs, an undesired action, or the information itself, or the decision to learn information may cause unpleasant emotions or diminish pleasant emotions [22], p. 342. Information avoidance can be a strategy for abiding and remaining in a disinformation or misinformation ecology.

Part of the problem of dealing with persons imbued with espousing or promoting fake news is that if one tries to approach them rationally with evidence, facts, and logic, one will fail (though there are many cases, as we will note later, in which what they may count as evidence, facts, or logic do not fit orthodox norms). In addition to the relatively conscious factors listed above, there are unconscious ones as well. There are many psychological factors at play that enable the success of various forms of self-deception, where rational arguments do not work.

We may be prone to think that what we pay attention to is neutral, as if no bias dictates how we bestow our attention. We are predisposed to hear, see, absorb, and interpret particular things that fit with our biases. In phenomenological terms, our unconscious biases might be understood as a “pre-understanding.” Key concepts that flesh out this notion are gullibility and cognitive bias.

J.P. Forgas and R.F. Baumeister [23] summarize the growing literature on the social psychology of gullibility, going back as far as 1947. They define gullibility as “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” [23], p. 2. Gullibility occurs when “an individual’s beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or [they] are at variance with social norms about reality” [23], 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” [23], p. 5.

They identify six psychological mechanisms of gullibility: (1) The search for patterns and meaning: because human beings want to make sense of reality, they

often find patterns and causation where there is none. This may partially explain how conspiracy theories emerge [23], p. 8. (2) Acceptance bias: “the near-universal tendency for human beings to accept rather than reject information” [23], p. 9. (3) The power of heuristics: “Human beings are more prone to believe interesting, captivating stories and narratives that are salient and easy to imagine” [23], p. 9. The narrative that Trump was a successful businessman may be compelling in this manner. (4) Overbelief in the self: we are prone to “self-serving biases and distortions” [23], p. 10. Thus Trump voters may have difficulty believing they made a mistake about his leadership. (5) Social mechanisms of gullibility: “all symbolic knowledge is socially constructed and shared. Comparing our views and ideas with the views and ideas of others is the way all symbolic reality is constructed” [23], p. 10. It is easy to see how Trump supporters, their personal relationships, their media (cable news and social media), their political and social groups and associations, their party, and their congressional representatives construct a narrative of Trump’s leadership and effectiveness that dialogically reinforces each aspect through their disinformation ecosystem. (6) Epistemological failures to monitor and correct. Human beings fail to monitor and evaluate incoming information correctly in terms of their logical merits [23], p. 11. Because Trump’s supporters are bathed in emotions such as anger and resentment, any logical analysis fails or critical self-reflection fails. If there is any reasoning at all, it is a “motivated reasoning” built on pre-given conclusions, a rationalization to serve one’s biases. We will look the issue of motivated reasoning in more detail later. Cognitive biases are another important psychological dimension of human beings, but our focus will be that of the predispositions of Trump supporters.

Cherry [24] 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. Wikipedia lists more than 200 types of cognitive bias, many with variant names [25]. In order to make such a large list manageable, Benson [26] proposes four clusters of biases based on whether they involve (1) too much information, (2) not enough meaning, (3) the need to act fast, or (4) confusion about what we should remember. Given the cacophony of available information streams in contemporary society, the first cluster has a high incidence. 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. Obviously, this strategy is true of all people, anywhere on the political spectrum from left to right, but the focus of the research here are those who lean to the ultra-right. 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 [24]. 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 Democrats. Among Trump’s voters, age may also be a factor, as in the 2016 election older voters heavily broke for Trump because aging can increase cognitive bias due to lost cognitive flexibility [24].

Thirteen pertinent cognitive biases have particular relevance for disinformation adherents: (1) the availability heuristic, (2) attentional bias, (3) illusory truth, (4) affect bias, (5) negativity bias, (6) anchoring, (7) confirmation bias, (8) the bandwagon effect, (9) stereotyping, (10) ingroup bias, (11) projection bias, (12)

the Dunning-Kruger effect, and (13) the self-serving bias. The explanation of these factors with examples from the Trump administration should not obscure the fact that all persons, of any political stripe, are vulnerable to them.

The availability heuristic is a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to the mind of a person when assessing a particular topic, idea, or decision. It relies on placing greater value on information that comes to mind quickly, based on the assumption that it must be important and more trustworthy than countervailing information. A person's judgments weigh their assessments based on more recent information, meaning new opinions rely on the latest news [27]. A senior writer at *Wired*, Emily Dreyfuss [28], claims that Trump is a master facilitator of the availability heuristic. He starts with the straw man fallacy, a logical fallacy in which one exaggerates the position of one's opponent and then attacks it. A classic example is Ronald Reagan's use of the notion of a "welfare queen," a Black woman who exploits the welfare system. Linda Taylor who, in fact, did exploit the welfare system, became the straw man for Reagan, and her story exploited the availability heuristic because it was memorable. However, her case was extremely uncommon, and abuse of the welfare system was and remains rare. Trump's story of Mexican rapists reflects the same strategy with the same impact on his supporters, who come to believe that immigrants have a high level of criminality in spite of strong evidence to the contrary. Salient images stick in the minds of his supporters and come to mind readily.

Second, attentional bias refers to how the direction of attention affects a person's perception. Engaging this bias, one pays attention to some things while simultaneously ignoring others. For example, a Trump supporter might focus on Trump's deployment of federal troops to quell "riots," giving no attention to the fact that so-called riots are mostly peaceful protests against police brutality, and thus believe his claim to be the law-and-order president. Trump often invokes this bias through ad hominem attacks: "sleepy Joe," "crooked Hillary," or characterizations of attacks on him, "witch hunt" or "hoax," so that his listeners revert to the stories he invents to apply such memes.

The illusory truth effect is a bias that occurs when repetition creates bias. This bias mimics the positive feeling we get when we hear information that we know is true in the service of information that may be false but that we have heard before. The Republican party has long been a master of repetition in the sense that it creates discipline such that all Republican officials repeat variants of the same message, such as that trickle-down economics lessen poverty. When Trump reports that he has managed an excellent response to the coronavirus, Republicans as well as *Fox News*, white evangelicals, and like-minded leaders are prepared to repeat the message that hundreds of thousands of deaths represent a good outcome because it could have been worse.

Fourth, the affect heuristic, reflects the tendency to rely on emotions in our initial decisions regarding some action, event, or information. Rather than reflecting on the long-term consequences of a decision, we rely on our emotional state. Business ethics expert, Chris MacDonald, attributes Trump's 2016 election victory primarily to affect bias:

The net result of this built-in human mental trait is that rather than letting our beliefs about the world tell us how to feel, we tend to let our emotions tell us what to believe. Afraid of crime? Then you'll tend to see the world as violent (even if violent crime is at its lowest point in a generation or more). Worried about your job? Then you'll believe that unemployment is up (even if it's at a 10-year low). Trump capitalized on this by telling Americans things they felt were true. And feeling is much more compelling than listening to eggheads spout statistics on television [29].

As he faces another election, Trump claims that he promotes law and order even as racial strife and police brutality erupt, and he speaks approvingly of murderous vigilantes. He inflames emotions such as anger, resentment, and racial hatred to justify the falsehood.

Negativity bias occurs when persons have a greater recall of unpleasant memories than pleasant ones. Even when adverse events and positive events are of the same scale, we feel the negative ones more strongly. Trump and GOP members used this during his first presidential campaign by focusing on Hillary Clinton's involvement with Benghazi. In his reelection attempt, he hoped fearing crime and the destruction of property would outweigh the memory of watching George Floyd die at the hands of police.

Anchoring is the bias in which one relies heavily on one trait or characteristic (the anchor), usually the first piece of information one hears on a particular topic. When the coronavirus began in earnest, Trump asserted that it was not a serious problem and that it was not more dangerous than the common flu. That initial piece of advice stuck in people's minds and made them doubt the seriousness of the pandemic and to continue to court the idea it was a hoax.

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 preexisting beliefs: e.g., that Trump is a great president; was successful in curbing the coronavirus, 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.

The bandwagon effect is the bias in which we support opinions as and when they become popular. We tend to adopt certain behaviors or beliefs because many other people do the same. Trump's constant use of rallies throughout his presidency exploits this effect. Social media can have the same effect, as seen in the popularization of QAnon theories.

Stereotyping is the bias when we expect a member of a group to have certain beliefs or characteristics because of their group membership. Trump relies on racist stereotypes by calling Black Americans dirty and lacking in intelligence and by suggesting women of color in Congress go back to their countries.

Ingroup bias is the tendency for a person to give preferential treatment to those they perceive as members of their own group. Thus if Trump supporters see Trump as good for the working class, they may support him even if they recognize his harms to people of color. Political scientist Jeffrey Friedman argues that Trump's harsh policies on immigration stem more from nationalism (ingroup favoritism) rather than xenophobia [30]. Trump supporters tend to make the claim that he always has their backs, although the actuality may be something else, e.g. attacking Obamacare and Social Security.

Projection bias occurs when we believe that our current preferences and values will remain the same in the future, which can lead to short-sighted errors. Many Trump supporters, especially poor ones, believe that the current values will remain the same in the future, failing to remember when they had the same view when they voted Obama into office. Many members of minorities voted for Trump, and they projected that their feelings about him would have remained the same throughout his presidency. One suspects that Trump's actions during his first term may have dissuaded many of those who originally voted for him, illustrating their original projection bias.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is the tendency to overestimate one's abilities. Trump himself clearly suffers from this effect, given his confidence that he "alone" can solve all the nation's problems. Many of Trump supporters suffer from this same effect. They overestimate their capabilities in assessing his character and

achievements. They are uncritical of their being uncritical and lack the skills and acumen to make a realistic assessment of their own abilities, let alone that of the president.

The final bias, self-serving bias, occurs when one claims responsibility for one's successes while blaming failures on external factors. Trump seems to have made a lifestyle from this bias. His rewards are due to his "very stable genius," but his bankruptcies were due to others' failures. Any promise he has not kept is due to the Democrats' resistance, Congress's unwillingness to do his bidding, or unfortunate circumstances (e.g., the coronavirus coming to the U.S. during his presidency), and so on.

We shall see shortly how these biases play into how disinformation campaigns succeed. To see how they play in Trump supporters, we can look at the psychological studies specifically devoted to them.

4.1 Psychological studies of Trump supporters

When reviewing their psychological aspects, it is clear that there is an overlap among studies on willful ignorance, information avoidance, gullibility, and cognitive bias, and that these definitions are approaches to the same issues from different perspectives [16]. To provide details, there are specific studies of Trump supporters. In his paper, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," psychologist Thomas Pettigrew [31] identifies factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters' devotion: tolerance for authoritarianism, a preference for associating with socially dominant groups (social dominance orientation, SDO), prejudice, low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves), and relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are). While acknowledging political factors may be at work as well as other psychological factors, he argues that these five dimensions are particularly relevant.

Pettigrew finds that many Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian figures. Authoritarianism is characterized by such traits as "deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups, a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experience" [31], p. 108. Authoritarians see the world as dangerous, and fear guides their response to it. While social psychologists debate whether authoritarianism is a personality construct or a political ideology, Pettigrew argues that "there is no necessary conflict between these two perspectives." That is, it usually starts as a personality orientation, which then leads to an engagement with right-wing political ideology. Trump's rhetoric stokes fear, which leads his supporters to consider him to be an authority on matters of American security, leading them to support him in his efforts to secure the borders against outgroups, including through family separation policy and a border wall between the United States and Mexico. His deployment of federal troops on peaceful protesters in Portland, Oregon, and tear gassing of protesters in Washington, DC, reflects his authoritarianism.

In a related study of right-wing politicians who are high on the authoritarian scale, psychologists Alyssa H. Sinclair, Matthew L. Stanley, and Paul Seli found that they fail to update their belief system when confronted with new information and they are motivated to preserve their entrenched beliefs. They concluded high right-wing authoritarians have "a relatively closed-minded cognitive style that negatively influences belief updating" [32]. Donald Trump's self-deception seems to clearly conform to that of other authoritarian leaders.

Returning to Pettigrew, he defines SDO as "an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" [31], 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. People with strong SDO are “typically dominant, driven, tough-minded, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power” [31], p. 108. Trump’s assertions that he alone can solve the nation’s problems and that those who oppose him are “losers” (including media critical of him as well as Democratic officials) reflects a belief that they are inferior to members of his group, which include *Fox News* and loyal Republicans. Trump’s claim that some white nationalists are “very fine people” because they support his presidency reflects lauding of the ingroup. Trump’s supporters embrace of authoritarianism and SDO also make them more likely to accept outright lying by commission or omission or by paltering a part of the morally acceptable behavior of politicians [33]. For most rational persons, Trump’s excessive and blatant lying is enough to disqualify him from a repeat term in the White House, but his behavior does not matter to his supporters. According to the *Washington Post*, which has kept track of his lies and misleading statements, he exceeded the 20,000 mark as of July 3, 2020 (440 days in office), averaging 45 per day [3].

Pettigrew’s third factor points out that Trump supporters are anti-outgroup, 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: bans on entrants to the country from certain Muslim countries, harsh restrictions for asylum seekers, and the separation of children from their parents at the border as a measure to discourage immigration. Support for Trump correlates positively with a standard scale of modern racism, which Trump has fully articulated in his attacks on Democrats of color in Congress and by having his supporters at his rallies chant “send her back” about Congresswomen Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna S. Pressley of Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, making references to their ethnic origins [34]. Calling COVID-19 “kung-flu” and the “China virus” reflect the same tendencies [35].

Pettigrew [31], p. 108, also observes that there is growing evidence that Trump’s white supporters have little contact with groups other than their own. 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. Ignorance of others allows one to self-enforce negative stereotypes, as in Trump’s references to immigrants as “animals” [36]. It also supports the tolerance of brutal methods of quelling protests that seek to dismantle racism as well as callousness about the impact of unrest on people in cities, as Trump supporters are disproportionately rural.

Pettigrew’s fifth factor, 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. Trump supporters felt that other members of society were better off than they were and that their expectation of where they would be in life had been severely limited. They were heavily motivated by a sense of loss of status through a sense that American global dominance is in decline and that white people were losing status and dominance domestically [37].

Hours of *Fox News* and right-wing social media sites denigrating “welfare queens” and welfare programs, the more frequent appearance of minorities and mixed and gay marriages in the media, and the media’s depiction 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. 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. Anti-Trumpers are called "lib-tards" (combining 'liberal' with the slur "retard").

5. Types of Trump supporters

Creating an ad hoc taxonomy, we can establish four different groups reflect distinctive or related motivations for supporting Trump:

1. Economic and power profiteers or exploiters. These are senators, House members, cabinet members, other politicians, and friends and associates of Trump, who are driven by an appetite for power and for profit. The appetite for power usually includes the promotion of right-wing political ideology to retain governing power. Initially, many Republicans deplored both the character and the nomination of Trump to the presidency, but after he amassed power and popularity, they changed their orientation to loyalists. Many Republican officials have shown more loyalty to Trump than to traditional conservative values, such as limited government and constraining the national debt; they also have ignored their duty to represent all of their constituents, by refusing to hold town halls with their constituents and voting as a block on party lines. As Michael Tanner [38] of the libertarian thinktank Cato Institute wrote, Trump is the "profligate president," yet they continue to support him. Trump's ability to rally his base against a Republican who fails to support him, making a candidate vulnerable to a primary challenge from the right, incentivizes such support. Likewise, some of Trump's supporters may fear exposure (e.g., for illegal or immoral activities), given rampant corruption in the Trump organization. As well, Trump has delivered on many conservative agenda items, such as appointing federal judges and crippling government agencies and public goods (like the post office). *Fox News* has profited from supporting Trump. Not only do they support and gain power from supporting a right-wing ideology, they make nearly 2 billion dollars a year [39], p. 20.
2. White evangelical Christians, Christian Dominionists, and other religious supporters. These people believe or have come to believe through their religious leaders and problematic interpretations of the Bible or religious traditions that Trump's ascendancy is a direct consequence of God's will. Their objective is to overturn the legal grounds for abortion, to have conservative judges appointed in the courts, to have "religious freedom," and to make the United States a Christian nation.

In the 2016 election, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump, in spite of his record of adultery, divorces, bizarre work ethic ("deals" and bankruptcies), broken promises, lies, racism, and allegations of sexual assault [40]. Many evangelicals rationalize their behavior by likening Trump to Persia's King Cyrus II (the Great) from the Book of Isaiah, who lived between 590 and 529 B.C.E. Though not a Jew, Cyrus was seen as an instrument appointed by God, a heroic pagan ruler who freed the Jews from captivity in Babylonia. Though pagan, he was ethical and allowed his conquered lands to retain their traditions, including those of the Jews, and he led the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple

and restore the city. His religious supporters argue that Trump, like Cyrus, is a powerful figure who is not a believer yet is an instrument being used by God to serve God's master plan, a strong leader fighting on the side of the righteous. However, Isaiah's depiction shows Cyrus as an ethical leader who did not foster divisiveness, hatred, false accounts, or challenges to civil authorities or institutions to maintain his authority. These religious supporters exercise "motivated reasoning," a rationalization of their dubious interpretation of a Bible story in relating it to Trump, feeding their individual, social, and collective self-deception, which reinforces each other and are sustained and promoted by their religious leadership. The effect is undermining American democracy [41].

Dominionism is centered on the removal of the idea of the separation of church and state from the Constitution. There is a hard version, which advocates that the Constitution and current form of government must be overthrown and must be replaced by a government based on Biblical law as articulated in the five books of Moses (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), ironically in the same way they fear that Sharia law will dominate the land should Muslims come to power in the United States. While this version has few adherents, many Christian fundamentalist denominations embrace a softer version, which calls for merging the church and the state, restoring to Christians control over all political and cultural institutions, such that the United States will be an overtly Christian government [42]. The viewpoint is promoted, based on the idea that Christians are currently being persecuted for their beliefs, particularly in the attacks on their refusal to provide goods and services for LGBTQ+ people in the marketplace, which they claim violates their "freedom of religion." They interpret freedom of religion to mean the ability of merchandisers in the public sphere to discriminate against persons or institutions that run contrary to their religious beliefs. It also is invoked when children in public schools are said not to be allowed to pray, by which they typically mean Christian prayer. In fact, they are allowed to pray as long they do not disrupt others and initiate the prayers themselves.

There is even a strain of conservative Catholics who support Trump, as evidenced in the book *The Catholic Case for Trump* by Austin Ruse [43]. Ruse's argument largely relies on claims that Trump is pro-life, but it conveniently ignores what he has actually done, such as putting children in cages, attacking environmental rights, attacking LGBTQ+ protections, and engaging in the most corrupt practices in government. Even Pope Francis has called Trump out on his anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, and his hypocritical pro-life stance [44]. The only area where Trump supports the Catholic viewpoint is his appointment of anti-abortion judges.

3. Media supporters such as *Fox News*, One America News (OAN), Sinclair Broadcasting (193 local broadcasting stations who all promote pro-Trump messages and anti-other-media messages). These organizations are essentially propaganda media for Trump [39]. Their motivation is power, greed, pro-right ideology, and the need to retain power. In most cases, this group's membership insects with the first category, profiteers and power-driven ideologues. But because of their distinctive and major role in the disinformation-misinformation ecology, they deserve their own category. We have not only broadcast and cable media but right-wing social media as well, such as Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, and Zero Hedge. These are abetted by foreign governments, such as Russia, Iran, and China, who see the Trump presidency as good for their countries' power on the world stage. Clickbait entrepreneurs, who also belong in the category of profiteers, see profit alone, but they do it through

social media. NBC News documented a case in which a Macedonian teenager earned \$60,000 in six months through clicks from Trump supporters [45]. Conservatives are more susceptible to clickbait than liberals [46].

4. The true believers, sometimes called “the cult of personality,” colloquially referred to as Trump’s base. Their motivations include resentment, greed, prejudice or racism, feelings of relative deprivation (that they fall short of what others have accrued in life), anger, vindictiveness, self-righteousness, and negative polarization. In negative polarization, voters side with a given candidate primarily from a distaste for the candidate’s opponent [47, 48]. In a study of both Trump and Hillary Clinton supporters, K. Jasko et al. [49] found that one’s individual sense of personal significance predicts hostility to the preferred candidate’s opponents.

Cognitive neuroscientist Bobby Azarian [50] summarizes four factors that support true belief in what he calls the “unwavering” support of Trump. The first is the Dunning Kruger effect (the cognitive bias mentioned above): it implies that Trump’s supporters are misinformed but also lack the capabilities to become aware that they are misinformed. The second is hypersensitivity to threat, which is common among conservatives. As Azarian [50] writes, “As long as Trump continues his fear mongering by constantly portraying Muslims and Mexican immigrants as imminent dangers, many conservative brains will involuntarily light up like light bulbs being controlled by a switch. Fear keeps his followers energized and focused on safety.” That threat was the major threat before his election. Right before the 2020 election, it has shifted to create fear against protestors retaliating against police brutality of Black Americans in major cities. The third factor, terror management theory, suggests that reminders of one’s own death stoke incite a strong defense of the ingroup and aggression toward others. Azarian writes, “By constantly emphasizing existential threat, Trump creates a psychological condition that makes the brain respond positively rather than negatively to bigoted statements and divisive rhetoric.” The fourth is high attentional engagement. Azarian cites a study [51] of participants engaged in political ads that shows that Trump keeps viewers engaged more and for longer periods and that they were more emotionally aroused than those watching Hillary Clinton ads. This pattern held for both Clinton and Trump voters. Azarian attributes this to Trump’s experience as a reality TV star:

Essentially, the loyalty of Trump supporters may in part be explained by America’s addiction with entertainment and reality TV. To some, it does not matter what Trump actually says because he’s so amusing to watch. With Donald, you are always left wondering what outrageous thing he is going to say or do next. He keeps us on the edge of our seat, and for that reason, some Trump supporters will forgive anything he says. They are happy as long as they are kept entertained [50].

Azarian observes: “As a cognitive neuroscientist, it grieves me to say that there may be nothing we can do. The overwhelming majority of these people may be beyond reach, at least in the short term. The best we can do is to motivate everyone else to get out to the voting booths” [50]. This observation holds true for the 2020 election as well.

As a consequence of their loyalty, one of the sad aspects of the Trump presidency is that he enabled his supporters to unleash their anger, rage, and explicit prejudice by echoing his.

6. Trump supporters and conservatism

Trump supporters tend to label themselves as conservative, but they are not referring to things like fiscal responsibility. Under the Trump administration, the deficit soared, even before the economic demands of the pandemic. Government is somewhat limited, and badly executed under Trump, supporting a long-standing Republican belief that government is corrupt and wasteful by being corrupt and wasteful [52], except for the following instances (not all due to Trump but often the result of a conservative agenda) of intrusion: (1) into hiring or providing medical treatments of military transgender individuals (Trump instituted a ban on transgender individuals in the military in 2019) or other forms of discrimination against LGBTQBT+ individuals; (2) into the right to have an abortion (in their defense, anti-abortionists claim that fetuses are individuals and have the right to life); (3) into the protection of companies with a particular religious viewpoint from having to serve all customers in the public sphere (e.g., the right of a cake baker to refuse to make a wedding cake for a gay couple *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*); and (4) into exemptions to the Affordable Care Act (*In Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* *Hobby Lobby Stores* argued that because its store was founded on specific religious principles, it should be excluded from the demands of the Affordable Care Act, which mandates that companies provide access to contraception and the morning-after pill). While the latter two can be seen as an attempt for less government intrusion, they invite government intrusion to enforce them. Typically hostile to foreign powers' intrusion into American politics, conservatives have turned a blind eye when Trump cozies up to dictators like Putin, ignores the concerns of U.S. intelligence agencies about Russian intrusion into U.S. elections, and takes no action against Russia for its bounties for the deaths of American soldiers in Afghanistan. According to Wikipedia, conservatism in the United States

is a political and social philosophy characterized by respect for American traditions, republicanism, support for Christian values, moral universalism, pro-business, opposition to trade unions, strong national defense, free trade, anti-communism, pro-individualism, advocacy of American exceptionalism, and a defense of Western culture from the perceived threats posed by communism, socialism, and moral relativism [53].

Current challenges to that vision from Trump and the GOP include: respect for American traditions has enshrined racism and white privilege; support for Christian values has come to mean a certain problematic version of Christianity (e.g., one that sees no problem with putting children in cages), and hostility to such genuine Christian values, such as helping the poor and needy, or hostility to the values of other religions, humanism, or atheism; moral universalism tends to reject the cultural differences of a pluralistic society; republicanism is devoted to oligarchy and moving to fascism, a non-representative form of government run by a single branch of government (the executive). The Republican party and the Justice Department have failed to implement any checks and balances on Trump and his administration. The supposedly pro-business policies promote a capitalist ideology on all institutions in civil society, which by its nature ignores or exploits the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised (e.g., providing farm-labor immigrants with poor wages and work conditions). Much to the chagrin of many American farmers, Republicans have soured on free trade [54]. Instead of anti-communism (granted that Russia is strictly not communist anymore but totalitarian, but still an enemy of the United States in the traditional conservative view), Trump welcomes Putin and wants to put him in the G7, and Republican Senators Johnson and Grassley have become conduits of

Russian propaganda for the reelection of Trump [55]. According to a Gallup poll, having a favorable view of Putin has more than doubled, from 12–32%, between 2015 and 2017 among Republicans [54]; in 2014, only 9% of Republicans thought that Russia was a friend or ally, but in 2018, 23% did [54]. The party is no longer pro-individualism for anyone but primarily white, able-bodied, straight males. Public goods are derided, e.g., healthcare coverage for all or wearing a mask during the coronavirus pandemic. Trump has twisted American exceptionalism such that, instead of seeking to be a moral leader in the world, America depends on its military dominance. As for the defense of Western culture from the perceived threats by communism, socialism, and moral relativism, Trump proclaimed in his reelection campaign that the election of his opposition will lead to all three, but he ignores the worst threat to America, whose source is him and his administration: creeping fascism, corruption, and the failure to adhere to the Constitution and the rule of law. Looking at the evolution or dissolution of conservatism, is there much left to conserve? Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, the conservative thinktank, asserted that Trump's presidency is marred with failure in conservative matters [5].

7. Cognitive authorities

If Trump and his supporters do not listen to bonafide authorities in conservative circles, what authorities do they heed? [16]. We must understand something of the character of cognitive authorities to see what enables their emotional response to Trump. If disinformation and misinformation depend on self-deception, social self-deception, and collective self-deception; if adherents engage in psychological methods to facilitate that self-deception by making themselves willfully ignorant or avoiding information contrary to their beliefs; if they are gullible, and fall prey to various cognitive biases that enforce their beliefs, cognitive authorities are a major factor in allowing all of these mechanisms to come together. A cognitive authority is a source one turns to when one lacks experience, education, knowledge, time, or inclination to acquire direct information. A cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as secondhand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. In his book on the subject, *Second-hand knowledge: An inquiry into cognitive authority*, information specialist Patrick Wilson [56] argues that cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness. In her article on the subject, Rieh [57] points out that trustworthiness is not equivalent to credibility because expertise is also required.

Rather than having one clear definition, credibility has been defined along with dozens of other related concepts such as believability, trustworthiness, fairness, accuracy, trustfulness, factuality, completeness, precision, freedom from bias, objectivity, depth, and informativeness. 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 [57], p. 1337.

Credibility involves both trustworthiness and expertise. And trustworthiness “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source.” Rieh adds that

“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” [57], p. 1337–1338. While the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* are generally considered to have center-left bias, they are thought to be credible: they are trustworthy because they check their facts, try to be complete as possible in their reporting, and publish corrections when they make a mistake. They have expertise in newspaper reporting, and their reporters are clear and consistent in their assessments. Opinions are appropriately flagged as such. Readers generally believe in the “perceived goodness and morality of” these sources because of their long history of accurate and fair reporting, following good journalistic norms and practices.

8. Fox News

Viewers of *Fox News* also believe that their source is credible; that is, its reporters and commentators are trustworthy and have expertise. They believe that the news reported is trustworthy, fair, objective (lacking in liberal bias), accurate, factual, complete, precise, in-depth, and informative. They assume that views articulated on *Fox News* are good and moral. *Fox News* claims that other national media are biased, and their viewers agree that they are the only genuine cognitive authorities [39, 58] (along with some other media, among which *Fox News* plays a dominant role). All others produce “fake news.”

In reality, *Fox News* is a false cognitive authority. It produces almost exclusively misinformation and disinformation on a daily basis [59]. While they like to claim that their programming during the day is exclusively unbiased news, they omit facts that do not fit their preconceived narrative. For example, during the coronavirus epidemic they have been consistently omitting references to Trump’s failures, his lack of a national plan, and his disregard of the pandemic preparation that existed under the Obama administration. All information that comes from newswires (e.g., Reuters, Associated Press [AP], and selected adverse content), scientists, experts, opposition politicians, and other national news networks that provide a contrary narrative are ignored, omitted, rejected, or challenged. One of their core techniques is paltering, taking parts of a story and making it a complete narrative. For example, when President Trump’s tax records were revealed, showing that he paid only \$750 each in the first two years of his presidency and none for the previous ten years because he claimed losses in his businesses. By rational standards it portrays what a poor businessman he is [60], and yet *Fox News* focused on how clever he was because he paid so little in taxes.

It would be helpful to understand the relationship of news consumers and their loyalty to sources because one can argue that source loyalty is a measure of its cognitive authority, that what they are reporting is a source of secondhand “knowledge” for them. The Pew Research Center did a survey on “The Modern News Consumer” in 2016 [61]. They found that, despite digital advances, most Americans still share news by word of mouth. Older Americans tend to use the same sources for news, and they prefer TV to other sources, such as print sources. Younger people are less enthusiastic about news, and most get their news online. Democrats are more trusting of national news media than Republicans. Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans are more likely to get one-sided news from family and friends than news sources. Conservative Republicans are more likely than liberal Democrats to say that they are content to get one-sided news from family and friends [61].

Loyalty to a news source is a measure of consumers’ sense of credibility and trustworthiness. The fact that Republicans are comfortable getting one-sided news

and the fact that most news consumers still share news by word of mouth features reinforce certain aspects of the disinformation ecology that *Fox News* generates, sustains, and inflames. Just as other news consumers spread the word to relatives and friends, so too do *Fox News* consumers, but it may be tinged with more emotional content.

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.
 - a. 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.
 - b. 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.
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 [62].

The survey also indicated that on a scale of warmth, just a quarter of U.S. adults gave Trump a rating between 76 and 100 (100 being the warmest). So, despite his general apparent lack of warmth, he still receives high approval ratings [62]. On the other hand, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi got a very cold rating (between 0 and 24) by those who used *Fox News* as their main source of political news [62].

People who get their news from outlets other than *Fox News* 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 [62]. *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%)” [62]. These observations serve to show the extent of the power of *Fox News* to influence its consumers.

Their viewers rejection of every other major news source, pandemic experts, medical institutions, scientists, and critical thinking individuals is remarkable. *Fox News* viewers see it as a cognitive authority with all the apparent trappings of such an authority: credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and so on. Yet PolitiFact (<https://www.politifact.com/>), which is devoted to evaluating the truth value of political utterances, estimates that of the statements “made on air by Fox, *Fox News* and Fox Business personalities and their pundit guests: 10% are true, 12% mostly true, 19% half-true, 21% mostly false, 29% false and 9% pants-on-fire false” [63]. In other words, 78% of the statements on the air

are dubious at best. (A limitation of this assessment is that PolitiFact does not provide a time range for these data).

When we speak of *Fox News* as one entity, we must clarify what we mean by the collective notion of *Fox News* (an overall assessment that comes to mind when we think about *Fox News*). *Fox News* is composed of regular hosts like Steve Doocy and Brian Kilmeade and pundits like Sean Hannity, Jeanne Pirro, and Tucker Carlson, who are more overt in stoking the flames of grievances and resentments. While there are some rational observers in *Fox News*, like Chris Wallace, the overall policy is to defend Trump and praise an unrestrained capitalism and get-rich-entrepreneurs. While Steve Doocy does not fan the flames of grievance as does Tucker Carlson or Sean Hannity, their silence on the many outrages of Trump reflect an overall view of biased support of the president and right-wing ideology.

Fox News is essentially an apologist for a right-wing ideology (with a belief in unrestrained capitalism and an evolving notion of conservatism noted above), the Republican party, and President Trump and his administration. *Fox News* almost never criticizes the president, his actions or that of his administration, and they put a positive spin on all of his actions, even his failure to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Rather than exposing him as an incompetent leader with no national plan, they pretend that he did the best that he could with an unfortunate pandemic. They echo his misinformation and denigrate the experts whom he has disagreed. They joined him in regarding the pandemic as an economic crisis and a culture war rather than a public health emergency. They not only challenged sound medical advice but denigrated those who disagreed with them. Trump spends a lot of time watching *Fox News* (it constitutes a major part of his “Executive Time”; [39], p. 23). He listens to *Fox News* pundits such as Sean Hannity, Lou Dobbs, Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, Glenn Beck, or Jeanine Pirro on their programs, does exclusive interviews with them, and talks to them privately and frequently takes advice from them. These pundits are so influential that he has made tweets, policy decisions, or taken other executive actions (e.g., pardons) based on his interactions with them. He threatened North Korea because a segment on *Fox News* addressed Kim Jong-Un’s nuclear capability [39], p. 23. Many of his presidential pardons occurred because of *Fox News*, and many of the errors of fact in his tweets or briefings were directly due to poor or manufactured reporting on *Fox News* [39], p. 23–24. Other fictions that Fox News created and which Trump embraced, according to reporter Brian Stelter’s book on the Trump Administration, *Hoax: Donald Trump, Fox News and The Dangerous Distortion of Truth* [39], included that a caravan of criminals and terrorists was marching north to invade America [39], p. 210; that a DNC staffer, Seth Rich, was murdered for leaking emails [39], p. 150; that it was Ukraine, not Russia, that interfered in the election (originated on a Sean Hannity show, [39], p. 24, and that the coronavirus was only as dangerous as the seasonal flu [39] p. 295.

A survey of some of the narratives the Fox pundits have “reported” show how *Fox News* systematically has portrayed misleading or false narratives about the president and his success as a leader or has denigrated his opponents. Lou Dobbs headlined and effused in his praise of Trump’s being nominated for a “Noble” (an error for “Nobel” in the *Fox News* chyron [64] that is indicative of common carelessness in *Fox News*’ attention to details) Peace Prize. What Dobbs did not mention was that anyone can be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and that the nominator was a far-right Norwegian who frequently took anti-immigration and anti-Islamic positions [65]. It is another instance of paltering that is too common of *Fox News*. When 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse shot and killed two peaceful protestors in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Tucker Carlson defended his actions claiming that his “killings had to maintain order when no one else would.” He neglected to explain the context of the murders, the background of the assailant (a high school dropout who identified

with white supremacists), the posture of the police in ignoring his behavior when protestors shouted that he had killed two protestors, and that despite some property damage, 95% of the protesters are peaceful [66]. On July 21, 2020, Sean Hannity asserted, “The Trump administration has had ‘zero unfulfilled equipment and supply requests from state governors.’” Larry Hogan, the Republican governor of Maryland, referring to phone call he had with 48 governors, disputed the claim [67]. With regard to “the real COVID record,” Laura Ingraham claimed on August 3, 2020, “The constant belittling of the administration’s efforts, it’s deeply unfair and it’s almost entirely political.” She further asserted that the “the biggest lie peddled by the left” was that the “the president doesn’t take the pandemic seriously” [68]. Granted that she did not know at the time that Trump lied about his knowledge of the potential severity of the coronavirus [69], it is the consensus of medical experts, epidemiologists, and public health experts that his response was not only lacking, by providing no federal leadership, but incompetent and deceitful [70]. These are the kinds of stories that *Fox News* viewers are being told, day in and day out.

Beyond these examples, a report in the *Los Angeles Times* found that on the rare occasions when Trump gets upset with *Fox News*, he sometimes calls its right-wing competitor OAN during his briefings instead of Fox. Because of Trump’s demand for absolute loyalty, it is a not-so-covert signal for Fox to realign their commitment [71]. When a *Fox News* security correspondent, Jennifer Griffin, supported *The Atlantic’s* report [72] that Trump called soldiers “suckers” and “losers,” he demanded that she be fired [73]. In this case, *Fox News* did not comply.

Contrary to good journalistic practice, *Fox News* is inconsistent. As Eric Zorn’s report in the *Chicago Tribune*, “The Foolish Inconsistency of the *Fox News* Propaganda Machine” [74] notes, it is not unusual for *Fox News* to make a claim one day and make an opposite claim the next day, often echoing the conflicting views of Donald Trump. Good news sources like the *Washington Post* will admit errors and retract them when they occur. *Fox News* virtually never makes such acknowledgements. They seem to expect that their viewers will not remember any inconsistencies, and indeed all signs indicate they are right to expect it, especially because a variety of their cognitive biases come into play.

Apart from their need to be a major player in influencing Republican and conservative opinion, another of the major motives for *Fox News’s* propaganda machine is making money. *Fox News* makes nearly \$2 billion a year, and they can make high demands for advertising and fees. They enjoy making money from Trump’s loyal supporters [39], p. 20. Inciting viewers to feed their biases keeps the money tree growing. Yet despite this huge benefit and despite the public appearance that *Fox News* is 100% behind Trump, not all staff and commentators support him. Behind his back, they make fun of him and acknowledge shock at the illegal suggestions of some of his tweets or comments (such as suggesting to his supporters to vote twice [75]). Stelter [39] says that one of the *Fox News* stars told him, “Trump is like Fox’s Frankenstein. They helped make him and he’s out of control” [39], p. 314. Sean Hannity, arguably the most influential commentator on *Fox News*, called Trump “batshit crazy” [39], p. 10, in private.

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 hearsay 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 hearsay 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 [58], pp. 485–486.

In other words, Smith argues that *Fox News* programming fosters an addictive process, based in addictive anger and resentment, that is played and replayed over and over again, and validated by a chosen-in-bad-faith, restrictive environment (i.e., their filter bubble) in which *Fox News* viewers live and dwell (i.e., peers, friends, political associates, religious affiliates, social media sources, etc., that reinforce their confirmation biases). Undoubtedly, left-wing news adherents experience a similar addiction that is also based in anger and resentment. The source of their bias may be anger and a concern for the truth and a belief in professional standards for reporting in the political sphere, not to mention that their views may be sourced in and verifiable in evidence, facts, or long-standing Supreme Court rulings like *Roe v. Wade*. This is frequently not the case in *Fox News*: rather than offering and verifying facts they create genuine fake news to reinforce their narrative. 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 [76].

The dominance of *Fox News* recalls the dominance of government-controlled news in authoritarian countries, from the Third Reich to modern-day Russia and China. In other countries control is through some government-run propaganda agency, but in Trump's world, the enslavement to one's biases is self-imposed by fostering addiction and inflating biases or resentments. *Fox News* viewers have no desire to escape it (nor right-wing social media sites), as its system of self-reinforcing self-deception—individual, social, and collective—is more robust than past generators of propaganda could ever conceive. Tobin Smith, refers to the consumption of *Fox News* as addiction to “tribal identity porn,” based on cultural and political resentments that “trigger feelings of hate, anger and outrage—the addictive trifecta of tribal partisan pornography” [58], p. 459.

While we have been using an addiction metaphor, following Tobin Smith, Devon Price makes the point that *Fox News* viewers and embracers of other right-wing media are not being passively manipulated, but cooperate in their own transformations.

The truth is, our Republican and right-leaning relatives are active parties in their own transformations. They chose to drink from the well of misinformation and hate on a regular basis. They decided to shut out critical discussion. They carried their viewpoints to the polls. They made our world a worse place. And we have a responsibility to take them to task for it [77].

In such a way, they are addicted but the source of their original addiction was a willingness to fall prey to their biases and self-deception, allowing it to be fostered into social and collective self-deception, which in turn reinforces their original self-deception.

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 [78], 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 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 [62].

To summarize how *Fox News* becomes, maintains, perpetuates, and builds its reputation of a cognitive authority:

It starts with a maelstrom of grievances, resentments, a sense of invisibility or a lack of importance in its viewers, where the wider culture often challenges many of their core values.

Fox News then tells those viewers what they want to hear, consciously or unconsciously, which are claims that support and fulfill their biases and real, instilled, or professed ideology. For example, they may think of themselves as conservatives, without having much depth about its meaning. *Fox News* will then shape and enlarge that image with anti-liberal, anti-labor, pro-sham-patriotic, pro-business, pro-average-joe narratives (as inconsistent as these narratives might be).

These messages are myths, tropes, and narratives often detailed during 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 or prosperity gospel (and that social structure plays no role in economic stability or success, including the stigmatization of poverty). Jesus was white, capitalism is God's way, and Christians are being persecuted. At the same time, Fox claims that immigrants are taking jobs and jobs are being exported abroad. 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 Jews have assumed positions of power and money they do not deserve, and 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 [78], p. 14. The emotional triggers that it fosters are legion, not to say they are true, only that they work.

One engages in "motivated reasoning," especially when the topic at hand is something that we care about. 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" [79]. When they grab onto what appears to be scientific evidence that supports their bias, they pounce on it. Mooney asserts: "Scientific evidence is highly susceptible to

misinterpretation. Giving ideologues scientific data that's relevant to their beliefs is like unleashing them in the motivated reasoning equivalent of a candy store" [79]. Mooney anticipated much of the conflicting and inaccurate positions that Trump supporters took in dealing with the coronavirus. Such narratives support their self-deception and their social self-deception.

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" [78], p. 33. Morrison [80] suggests that right-wing media keep over a quarter of Americans siloed in this "propaganda feedback loop."

Fox provokes fear, moral outrage, and self-righteousness. Megan Garber of *The Atlantic* observes:

Fox has two pronouns, you and they, and one tone: indignation. (You are under attack; they are the attackers.) Its grammar is grievance. Its effect is totalizing. Over time, if you watch enough Fox & Friends or The Five or Tucker Carlson or Sean Hannity or Laura Ingraham, you will come to understand, as a matter of synaptic impulse, that immigrants are invading and the mob is coming and the news is lying and Trump alone can fix it. [81]

Because of this 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, which are then 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 think is threatening them.

Misinformation and the authorization and propagation of misinformation causes mortal damage, including the thousands of deaths by the coronavirus. Public intellectual Eugene Jarecki's Trump Death Clock (<https://trumpdeathclock.com/>) in New York City's Times Square, calculates that Trump's incompetence, mismanagement, and misinformation has caused 60% of American deaths from COVID-19, some 115,419 as of September 13, 2020.

Fox News plays a major role as a cognitive authority in the disinformation-misinformation ecology. It is not that it is the only one—there is OAN, Sinclair Broadcasting, and radio programs (like InfoWars) that play the same role, but to a lesser degree. The focus of this paper is on right-wing sources and the powerful influence of *Fox News* and similar cognitive authorities. One might object that the same approach is characteristic of the left-wing media. But that claim is built on the idea of false equivalences, that the left-wing and right-wing have different opinions but that these opinions are of equal weight. This is not the case. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts published *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, which shows quite the opposite. 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" [78], 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 [78], p. 14.

While it seems exaggerated to say simply that liberals want facts and conservatives want their biases reinforced, and that liberals embrace journalism; while conservatives believe propaganda, Benkler et al. believe that the research they performed generally indicated that this was the case. With the more measured but still emphatic words, “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*’s role in this, “We found *Fox News* accrediting and amplifying the excesses of the radical sites” [78], p. 14.

Even in regular assessments such as who has scientific expertise, *Fox News* seems to help shape what kind of rational assessments are to be endorsed and which are not. Law School Professor Dan Kahan and colleagues did a study on “Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus” [82]. They looked at how an individual’s deep-seated moral values and their beliefs about how society should be ordered shaped how they assessed scientific expertise or what they thought was legitimate scientific consensus. Based on their cultural values, they divided the subjects into two pairs of categories: “individualists” and “communitarians,” and “hierarchical” and “egalitarian.” Hierarchical individualists are somewhat similar to conservative Republicans, and egalitarian communitarians are somewhat similar to liberal Democrats. Each subject was told that a close friend was undecided about the risks associated with “climate change, geologic isolation of nuclear waste and concealed weapon laws” [82], p.10. They were shown a picture of a fictional expert on each of the subjects at hand, and each expert had a Ph.D. in the pertinent field and now worked at a university other than the one from which they received their Ph.D. Each subject was given a passage from each author’s book, “the position of which was on the risk in question—whether the risk was high or low, well-founded or speculative—was randomly manipulated” [82] p. 10. They each had a story that represented low risk and another that represented high risk. The subject was then asked the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I believe the author is a trustworthy and knowledgeable expert on [‘global warming,’ ‘nuclear power,’ or ‘gun control.’]” [82], p. 10. One would have suspected that the nature of the credentials would be persuasive. This was not the case.

The goal of the study was to examine a distinctive explanation for the failure of members of the public to form beliefs consistent with apparent scientific consensus on climate change and other issues of risk. We hypothesized that scientific opinion fails to quiet societal dispute on such issues not because members of the public are unwilling to defer to experts but because culturally diverse persons tend to form opposing perceptions of what experts believe. Individuals systematically overestimate the degree of scientific support for positions they are culturally predisposed to accept as a result of a cultural availability effect that influences how readily they can recall instances of expert endorsement of those positions. [82], p. 27.

They found two forms of evidence to support their hypothesis:

The first was the existence of a strong correlation between individuals’ cultural values and their perceptions of scientific consensus on risks known to divide persons

of opposing worldviews. Subjects holding hierarchical and individualistic outlooks, on the one hand, and ones holding egalitarian and communitarian outlooks, on the other, significantly disagreed about the state of expert opinion on climate change, nuclear waste disposal, and handgun regulation [82], p. 27.

The second finding identified a mechanism that could explain this effect. When asked to evaluate whether an individual of elite academic credentials, including membership in the NAS, was a “knowledgeable and trustworthy expert,” subjects’ answers proved conditional on the fit between the position the putative expert was depicted as adopting (on climate change, on nuclear waste disposal, or on handgun regulation) and the position associated with the subjects’ cultural outlooks [82], p. 27.

The study suggests that what different individuals regard as scientific consensus depends on their cultural values. So *Fox News* viewers may be primed in what they regard as a rational consensus about how to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, such that they could buy into Trump’s actions and assessments. But are they the source of such “rational” assessments or the effect? Or are they another element in the dialectical reinforcement of elements of the misinformation or disinformation ecology?

Another major influence in the disinformation-misinformation ecology is social media.

9. Social media

The problem with the internet is that is a self-serve “information” bank. For many Trump supporters, 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 clickbait 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.

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 [83].

Reich does not reference the source of his data, but given his expertise and academic credentials, one would assume that they were reliable. However, the Pew Research Center survey provided a more conservative estimate. They did an analysis of their surveys from October 2019 through June 2020. It indicated that only 18% of U.S. adults get their political news through social media (versus 25% that use news websites or apps, 16% that use Cable TV, 16% that use local TV, 13% that use Network TV, and 8% that use the radio). They found that users of social media are less likely than other news consumers to follow major news stories closely, such as information about the coronavirus pandemic, and that they are less knowledgeable

about these topics. The largest group of social media users, 48%, are under 30, while 40% are between 30 and 49. Compared to the U.S. population generally, they are less likely to be white, have lower levels of education, have lower political knowledge than other groups, and were more likely to have heard a conspiracy theory that the pandemic was planned. Social media users were far less likely to be already following the election very closely in the study period; only 8% were, which is a quarter or less of the proportion of cable TV watchers (37%) and print media consumers (33%) [84].

The Pew Research Report did not indicate what it includes in social media. Beyond Facebook and Twitter, there is YouTube, WeChat, Instagram, Weibo, Twitter, Tumblr, and LinkedIn, the internet offers Telegram, Reddit, Baidu Tieba, LinkedIn, LINE, Snapchat, and Pinterest. Many of these are hotbeds of misinformation and disinformation. According to Wikipedia, social media sites share the following properties: they are interactive Internet-based applications; they run on user-generated content (e.g., posts, texts, videos, photos); users have profiles that give some information about them; and they facilitate interactions between members and/or groups [85].

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. Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, PayPal, GoDaddy, YouTube, and others have suspended users connected to the far-right after the Unite the Right rally. Those suspended argued that the action attacked their free speech rights and used coded messages to get around any problem of censorship. 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 2500 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 [86].

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.

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 [80]. Evidence also shows that untruths are not sorting themselves out in the disinformation-misinformation marketplace. Disinformation spreads unchecked by corrections across the internet. *Fox News*, for example, echoes Trump’s and his supporters’ talking points, which are often patently false. Correspondingly, in social media sites like 8chan, white supremacists will defend their right to be racist and espouse hate rhetoric. In fact, bad actors use Facebook not to make rational statements but to inflame partisans. Joanna Hoffman, who was once Steve Jobs’s closest advisor, criticized the leadership

at Facebook and other social media, saying that their laissez-faire attitude and failure to monitor content was “destroying the very fabric of democracy, destroying the very fabric of human relationships and peddling in an addictive drug called anger” [87].

Also, 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 organization. All told, these sites received an average of 8.7 m engagements in August. Fox News topped the list with 56.4 m interactions in the month; MSNBC, a rival cable-news network, received just 9.7 m [88].

Despite Zuckerberg's claims, Facebook is not a neutral information playground and skews to the right. And so, 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 ... [and] actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public importance to the detriment of the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of broadcast journalists” (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” ([89], 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 toward demonized populations; the destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions; the loss of expertise; and the denigration of science and evidence?

What makes this sorting out even more difficult is the spread and speed of disinformation, and the inflammation of emotional triggers (memes, tropes). MIT researchers Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral [90] 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. They conclude:

Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information [90], p. 1146.

Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel. Psychology Professor David Rapp's research on processing inaccurate information reveals that our brains quickly memorize information without remembering its source or validity. If we discover at a later time that the information was false, that realization does not override the initial impression [91], p. 282.

Cognitive issues of misremembering information complicate sorting false information. Such social media disinformation is spread by trolls, such as Russian operatives and Trump and right-wing supporters on the one side, and liberals and progressives on the other side (in addition to the clickbait entrepreneurs who solicit right-wingers [46]). The two sides are not equivalent. As we noted above, Facebook is more infused with right-wing activity [88].

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 even more provocative videos to view. The impact is to advance Google's profits, but 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 [92]. According to the analysis of *New York Times* columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taum, Brazil's ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro owes his electoral success primarily to YouTube videos [93].

Before the internet, aggregating in groups to form hate speech collectives was more difficult. Physical proximity tended to be a constraint. With the advent of the internet and social media groups, it is easier for persons with radical ideas to find like-minded individuals, creating a forum with a loud voice, which in turn can convince others to join their cause. It creates a crowd effect that creates an appearance of a large audience for a particular theory or belief. The mass shooting directed at Latino people at an El Paso Walmart in August 2019 can be traced in part to the gunman's participation in 8chan, a social media group that permits anonymous postings. Slate magazine described 8chan as "[a]n anonymous, meme-filled internet backwater...a place for white supremacists to indoctrinate others—particularly white men—into bigoted ideologies" [94]. Social media like 8chan not only aggregate a forum, but deceptively entice its followers to believe that they have a loud voice and that their group is larger than it really is, luring more members into the group.

While there are concerns for groups like 8chan, Facebook illustrates a broader problem of regulating speech on the internet, particularly hate speech or conspiracy theories. The problem with conspiracy theorists is that they view any attempt to correct their theories by appealing to contravening evidence as a verification and extension of the conspiracy theory itself, another sign of a cover up. Believers in QAnon have stretched any limits of credibility in the theories they espouse for which it can supply little or no evidence or which are virtually impossible (e.g., one cannot verify that Trump will be saving the world from a satanic cult of cannibals and pedophiles). Should their speech be curtailed? Is there a limit to free speech? The first amendment asserts that the "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." But Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes asserted in *Schenck v. United States* [95] argued that "the character of every act depends on the circumstances in which it is done." If a man falsely shouted fire in a theater and causes panic, he would not be protected on the basis of free speech. The "question in every case is whether the words are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent" [95].

Any person that creates panic in a theater by shouting fire should be censured if not jailed. The hate speech and conspiracy theories on the internet have gotten to the point where physical harm results. The attack on the El Paso Walmart was just one example; there has also been violence against Jews, Muslims, and members of the LGBTQ+ community because of the right-wing radical social media ecosystem. Other problematic speech of the right-wing media includes supporting Trump administration's imprisonment of immigrants and their children (leading to the spread of disease and death, not to mention psychological trauma); their applause of the killing of two peaceful protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, by a right-wing extremist; their lies about the growth of coronavirus infections and death; and so on. The support of false ideas and ideologies and the destruction of institutional norms and trust in expertise have created the equivalent of a stampede in a crowded theater. The loud, in-your-face refusal to wear masks as a civil liberties badge of honor in the war against the coronavirus in the United States not only denigrates the role of public health expertise but actively promotes the spread of the disease to the public, ignoring the rights and health of individuals who follow public health recommendations. The latter is not only a matter of yelling fire in a crowded theater but also fanning the flames. The foundation of a liberal democracy has been catapulted into chaos, where sources or institutions are politicized and not trusted (e.g., the intelligence community, the Justice Department), thereby attacking the very essence of democracy and democratic institutions.

To add to the mix, there is self-deception, social and collective. How do we cope with collective self-deception, where the truth is a contrived second-hand or false opinion, paraded as knowledge? The willingness of individuals to seek the actual truth appears to be extensively diminished, given that their cognitive authorities have all the "truth" and that only their venues have access to the "facts," and independent inquiry is fraught with seductive pitfalls designed to threaten to send one to hell, figuratively if not literally, based on one's religious persuasion (e.g., white evangelicals who believe that Trump was appointed by God and ministers who claim that a voter will be going to hell if they do not vote for him [96]). Even within orthodoxy, there are problematic results for questioning the powers that be: the corrupt Athenian government put Socrates to death for corrupting the youth by having them question the orthodoxy. In these days, "orthodoxy" (which comes from "right opinion" in Greek) is often a contrived constructed reality that one can call genuine fake news, validated through collective self-deception and false cognitive authorities.

Robert Reich [83] 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. 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. Facebook and Twitter spread Trump's lies (among other untruths, distortions, paltering, doxing, fake news, and conspiracy theories), and the American public must be aware of this fact. He argues that democracy flourishes with truth and dies when disinformation and misinformation are allowed to run rampant. He sees the problem as disintermediation, by which he means that "sellers are linked directly to customers with no need for middlemen" [83]. Prior to the internet, newspapers and public broadcasting mediated information. They employed fact-checkers and editors, mostly constrained their bias, and adhered to journalistic norms. With the internet, mediation disappears, and information seekers are confronted with raw opinions, and what is available is influenced by money-making, biases, and agendas of all sorts, to which the information seekers may or may not be savvy. Reich says:

Intermediating between the powerful and the people was once mainly the job of publishers and journalists—hence the term “media.”

This role was understood to be so critical to democracy that the constitution enshrined it in the first amendment, guaranteeing freedom of the press....

Zuckerberg and Dorsey insist they aren't publishers or journalists. They say Facebook and Twitter are just “platforms” that convey everything and anything—facts, lies, conspiracies, vendettas—with none of the public responsibilities that come with being part of the press.

Rubbish. They cannot be the major carriers of the news on which most Americans rely while taking no responsibility for its content [83].

Reich believes that there must be some control over internet content. While some social media platforms have some policies restricting some kinds of speech on the internet, such as far-right hate speech, false coronavirus information, and speech that incites violence [97], and no political ads on Facebook the week before the election, these restrictions are not sufficient to safeguard democracy.

10. The cult of Trump

Fox News and many right-wing social media sites have amplified the power and seductiveness of Trump and his demands for loyalty. They stoke grievances, anger, self-righteousness, social self-deception, and resentments. Prior to his election, Trump was a strong TV personality who claimed to be a successful businessman in spite of multiple bankruptcies. After the election, he wanted to project an image of a strong and popular leader, defending the interests of the small guy, the apparently ignored, the left behind, or the undervalued in American society; nursing the grudges of those who thought they did not get a fair shake in society, who thought their conservative values were being derided, and whose economic well-being was being trashed by outside forces, like immigrants and companies offshoring jobs. He demanded loyalty from all members of government and those who did not obey found themselves jobless. He marshaled the allegiance of the Republican Party, overcoming their clear doubts about his character and ability to run the government. But with the help of Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell and later a loyal Head of the Department of Justice, William Barr, he made them all of those who stayed in office loyal. Former critics like Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz not only to tolerate his incompetence, philandering, lying, projecting, self-aggrandizing, and demand for loyalty but also promote it. They refused to entertain the possibility of his guilt during his impeachment or turned any opposition to him into a culture war. Through him, the GOP was able to gain control of the federal government and to push their agenda, which slowly turned the GOP into Trump's party, for they abandoned many of the core values of the old Republican party, such as strong defense, balanced budgets, a low national debt, and so on. He became the face of the party, and those who were not loyal to him or did not fawn over him were pushed out of power. His TV persona and his ability to repeat the grievances, racism, and pettiness of his supporters turned him into a cult leader.

Sociologist Janja Lalich, who has studied cults extensively, suggests that members of “totalistic” cults—those that consider their ideology the one true path—share four key characteristics. They

1) espouse an all-encompassing belief system; 2) exhibit excessive devotion to the leader; 3) avoid criticism of the group and its leader; and 4) feel disdain for non-members [98].

She believes that followers of Trump belong to a cult.

The far longer list that Joe Navarro, former FBI agent, produced in *Psychology Today* also fits the facts about Trump. Based on his 1912 study of nine dangerous cult leaders, he produced a list of 50 characteristics of cult leaders, many of which apply to Trump. Below finds a sample of 20. A dangerous cult leader:

1. Has a grandiose idea of who he is and what he can achieve.
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance.
3. Demands blind, unquestioned obedience.
4. Requires excessive admiration from followers and outsiders.
5. Has a sense of entitlement—expecting to be treated as special at all times.
6. Is arrogant and haughty in his behavior or attitude.
7. Has an exaggerated sense of power entitlement that allows him to bend rules and break laws.
8. Is hypersensitive to how he is seen or perceived by others.
9. Publicly devalues others as being inferior, incapable, or not worthy.
10. Is frequently boastful of accomplishments.
11. Behaves as though people are objects to be used, manipulated, or exploited for personal gain.
12. When criticized, he tends to lash out not just with anger but with rage.
13. Anyone who criticizes or questions him is called an “enemy.”
14. Has “magical” answers or solutions to problems.
15. Habitually puts down others as inferior; only he is superior.
16. Treats others with contempt and arrogance.
17. Is constantly assessing people to determine those who are a threat or those who revere him.
18. Hates to be embarrassed or fail publicly; when he does, he acts out with rage.
19. Doesn't seem to feel guilty for anything he has done wrong nor does he apologize for his actions.
20. Believes he possesses the answers and solutions to world problems ([99], reordered by author).

In *The Cult of Trump* [1], leading cult expert Steven Hassan cites Trump's “air of ‘only I can fix this,’ his practice of sowing fear and confusion, his demand for absolute loyalty, his tendency to lie and create alternative ‘facts’ and realities, his shunning and belittling critics and ex-believers” [1], p. xii. Having been rescued from the Moonies himself, Hassan compares Trump to Sun Myung Moon as well as L. Ron Hubbard, David Koresh, Lyndon LaRouche, and Jim Jones. The only strategy that seems to work to remove a cult follower from someone like Moon is being deprogrammed, physically removing the cult member from the cult context and challenging their belief system, until they see the unreality of their cult existence. Hassan himself experienced such deprogramming and has become a consultant who helps people recover their loved ones from cults. There is unfortunately no way to deprogram the entire 40% of America that currently lives in Trump's cult, and deprogramming must be continuously enforced, which is impractical as well as illegal. The support for Trump is so broad and is local to a network of strong supporters and advocates that extends and is supported by a broader network that includes newspapers, cable news networks, and social media sites. Extraction from this cult is unlikely, even more so a prolonged removal from it, for the disinformation is so pervasive.

Amy Penn [100] argues that due to the cult-like nature of his presidency, Trump is conditioning his supporters to take up arms if he loses reelection. Bandy Lee, a psychiatrist who studied at Yale Medical School makes the same argument in a statement reported to a Salon reporter:

When Donald Trump suggests that the [corona]virus be taken as a “hoax,” that people gather in churches or that people protest for their own sacrifice, he is actually testing people’s loyalty to the “laws” of his mind over the laws of nature, or even impulse for survival. The more he abuses them, the greater their devotion grows, since the psychological cost of admitting their mistake is ever higher—and so it becomes easier to dig a well of unreality than to see the obvious truth [101].

If Trump supporters are willing to have their grandparents sacrifice themselves for the economy [102], they should be more than willing to die for the rightful president in a rigged election. While Lee attributes the resistance of Trump supporters to facing reality to a refusal to admit their mistakes, I would argue this is too simple. It more likely has to do with the failure of their lives, their refusal to admit that they are the source of their own failures. It is their failure to make difficult choices and to accept responsibility for their own actions and their life. Trump gave them permission to publicly externalize their failures onto other people (like immigrants and the coastal elites) and external events (like poor border walls), to embrace their victimhood, just as Trump extols his. They are his cult followers and active agents for his deceit and disinformation.

In addition to the corruption of *Fox News* and pro-Trump social media sites, there are many agents and agencies who are working to get Trump accepted and reelected. They include Russian trolls using disinformation campaigns, far-right agents, white supremacists, white evangelicals, members of the Republican party (Senators, House Members), the Department of Justice, the Trump administration and its political appointees, and clickbait entrepreneurs. The common tactics that they use to deal with challenges to their position include projection (unconsciously taking unwanted events or consequences for which one is responsible and attributing them to someone else, e.g., Joe Biden is causing racial violence), denial (asserting that what is actually happening is not what is actually happening, e.g., Trump claimed that the coronavirus is just like seasonal flu, about which he lied [69]), false equivalence (all opinions are equal, ones founded on opinions have the same value as those based on facts or evidence, e.g., the impeachment trial of Trump was a Democratic hoax), name-calling (also called an ad hominem logical fallacy, using names to try to tar the character of one’s opponent in an effort to destroy the legitimacy of their arguments, e.g., Crooked Hillary), whataboutism (instead of focusing on the claim against them at hand, they bring up an unrelated matter on one’s opponent, e.g., when one observed that Melania Trump uses unofficial email in conducting business, the argument is shifted to Hillary Clinton’s use of unofficial email), and gaslighting (a tactic in which a person tries to gain more power by making a person question their own reality, e.g., Trump’s calling the Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election “fake news” after intelligence agencies had established it beyond doubt). Whataboutism seems to be a favorite with his supporters. When they are confronted with evidence they do not like, they latch onto a narrative that ostensibly tars his opponent.

What makes Trump as a cult figure both problematic and perhaps also attractive to his cult is that he has a disturbing psychological profile. Psychologist John Gartner argues that Trump has at least three personality disorders: narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and paranoid personality disorder [103]. Bandy X. Lee’s edited volume, *The dangerous case of Donald Trump: 27 psychiatrists and mental health experts assess a president* [101], contains the work

of experts who agree. Both his sister, Maryanne Trump Barry, and his niece, Mary Trump, find serious problems with Trump's mental health [104]. Dan P. McAdams [105], a psychologist who teaches at Northwestern University argues that Trump has no inner story, no moral frame of reference:

Rather than see his life as an ongoing story Donald Trump lives in the emotional moment from one moment to the next. He refuses to be retrospective, prospective or introspective. He never looks back, he never looks very far forward, and he never looks inside. One after another, each life episode involves a battle of some kind, a struggle to triumph over an adversary because, as he sees it, the world is a dangerous place filled with vicious people. Without the luxury of a life narrative, each episode arises as a new event disconnected from others. Over the course of a day, a week, and indeed much of his life, Donald Trump has awakened anew to each event as if there were no distant past and will be no long-term future [105], p. 172.

Because of this character deficiency, he has no inner story or evolving story, and he cannot learn lessons from his past or reorient his course for the future.

He is always on the surface, always right now. In his own mind, he is more like a persona than a person, more like a primal force or superhero, rather than a fully realized human being. Even at the Republican National Convention in the summer of 2016, when the Presidential nominee was expected to appeal to the American public by telling his own story, Trump refused to humanize himself. He passed up the golden opportunity to convey who he is, who he was, and how he came to be [105], p. 233.

He did not do so, because he could not. In the 2020 Republican National Convention, his handlers had to construct an inner narrative for him, and it was mostly projected by his children, Ivanka, Donald Jr., and Eric. Others were instructed to humanize him: Trump's Twitter-man-slash-golf-caddy Dan Scavino said he was "a kind and decent man who shows endless kindness to everyone he meets." RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel observed that there are "private moments where he comforts people in times of pain and sadness." And Kellyanne Conway assured that when the president meets people in need he is "comforting and encouraging...assuring them that they matter." There is little evidence to confirm such stories [106].

McAdams calls Trump a "truly authentic fake" [105], p. 169, all surface with no depth. Perhaps because of this he captivates his supporters who can pour their hopes and imaginary stories into him, because there is nothing there that can contradict them.

There are little rational grounds for supporting Trump. Nicholas Kristof, in an assessment in the *New York Times*, examines 21 (of the more than 280) major promises that Trump made during his 2016 President campaign (e.g., build a wall and have Mexico pay for it, help students drowning in debt, repeal and replace Obamacare, drain the swamp in Washington, end chronic trade deficits, etc.), and there is only one promise that he kept (albeit with the enormous help of Mitch McConnell): put in conservative judges [4]. Perhaps there is one other basis: maintaining white privilege or racism. There appear to be no psychological grounds for supporting him either. Supporting Trump defies any sort of coherent rationale.

11. Conclusion: the age of inflamed grievances

Fox News and many right-wing social media sites are dominant cognitive authorities in the disinformation-misinformation ecology, though one cannot

deny the influence of political leaders, a political party, and white evangelical leaders, among others. At the moment, their focus is Donald Trump and what he has come to represent: a form of conservatism that seems to have denied its roots (fiscal responsibility, strong national defense, anti-communism). It is now heavily characterized as anti-liberal, for it seems to have lost a lot of the meaning that conservatism had before Trump. The consumers of *Fox News* and right-wing social media sites are predisposed to swallow what they expect to ingest, employing these sources by conscious motivation (such as willful ignorance or avoidance of information contrary to their beliefs) or unconscious ones (gullibility, cognitive biases), conditioned by previous exposure from “information” channels such as *Fox News*, or from like-minded peers, friends, associates, religious leaders, politicians, and pundits. They are also conditioned to avoid or reject certain channels of information, what they are trained to believe is fake news. Because of the “propaganda feedback loop” [78], p. 33, in which they live, a disinformation-misinformation ecology, each element reinforces every other element in a dialogical process, facilitating self-deception. Their self-deception or bad faith infects their friends and associates, and is reinforced by them (social self-deception), fostering a collective identity (collective self-deception), with such labels as “conservative” or “anti-liberal.” It is a dialectical process that is self-reinforcing and in which any contrary fact, logic, or evidence is rejected. Their like-minded (false) cognitive authorities authorize the validity of their biases and beliefs, oppose other cognitive authorities either partially (e.g., rejecting parts of science that have been made out to be part of a culture war, such as scientific recommendations of wearing of masks during the coronavirus pandemic, but accepting parts of science when they take their children to the hospital for a ruptured appendix) or completely (non-like-minded media, such as the *New York Times*). Both cognitive authorities of *Fox News* and right-wing social media and their consumers tell themselves that they operate in a sphere of knowledge, when at best it is opinion and at worst propaganda or false opinion. They claim their authorities are authentic, credible, and trustworthy, but they only supply information to confirm their biases, cherry-pick facts or evidence, and omit data unfavorable to their narratives (e.g., they failed to show how incompetently Trump handled the response to the coronavirus pandemic or that he lied about knowing about its severity). They live in a filter bubble, where everything that does not accord with their worldview (even its inconsistencies) is not only ignored but strongly disavowed as “fake news.” There is a strong case to be made for their commitment to its cause (the support of Trump and right-wing ideology) as being addictive. In terms of *Fox News*, their “addiction to tribal partisan porn” [58] triggers an emotional meme, trope, or narrative, about which the viewers are primed to be angry (whatever the emotional trigger) or are already angry.

The engaging, enraging emotional triggers may vary among individuals or groups, just as the motivations of Trump supporters vary along a wide range: at the top there is likely more “motivated reasoning,” an attempt to rationalize acceptance of all things Trump in the interests in power, wealth, privilege or ideology. At the bottom are those who are addicted to their anger and resentments, their loss of privilege, their presumed displacement in society, and/or other antagonisms. All sorts of narratives can fuel their emotional state. Examples include the claim that the liberals are going to take away one’s guns if they get into power, jobs are being taken by immigrants or sent abroad, one is being persecuted for being Christian, many people get free money from the government while you work hard for yours, and so forth. These narratives are stoked and restoked by daily examples dredged from the news and sometimes from dubious internet sources, such as alt-right sites. They can be distortions of events, such as claiming that there were no peaceful protesters in Portland, only rioters. They are repeated over and over again from the

same sources and different sources. Repeating information, true or not, increases its believability, and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches [107]. They are repeated and echoed throughout the disinformation-misinformation ecology—from *Fox News* to/from conspiracy sites to/from friends to/from colleagues to/from associates to/from right-wing religious leaders to/from political leaders to/from government administrators and so on down the line, so that the emotional content is stoked into anger, aggression, a distorted perception of reality, fear and so forth. Like all addictions, the addiction to *Fox News* is never satiated. There is always a need for more and more and more memes, tropes, and narratives to nurse and inflame biases.

This condition of embracing and seeking self-serving tropes and narratives is similar to a perversion of what is presented in Søren Kierkegaard's notion of the demands of faith. In *Sickness unto Death* [108], God demands that Abraham sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Abraham not only sets out to obey but also does not even try to rationalize and explain himself to others, and only God's intermediary, an angel stops him. For Kierkegaard, the act of faith entails following God's demands, as irrational as they may appear to be. Kierkegaard wonders what faith would be if it demanded only something that was rational. The more irrational the demand, the greater the demand of faith to follow through. This seems to be true of the addicted Trump supporters—the greater the insane comments and demands, the greater the unflinching allegiance (e.g., science is a cultural war against one's individual rights to refuse to wear a mask, unless your child gets a case of smallpox [anti-vaxxers not withstanding]). Like Abraham's unflinching acceptance of God's demands, consider the unflinching acceptance of conspiracy theories, such as the willing suspension of disbelief that was required to swallow one of the early conspiracy theories called Pizzagate. It was conspiracy theory espoused by the alt-right, particularly through Alex Jones, the host of InfoWars, that Hillary Clinton was sexually abusing children in the basement of a pizza shop, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington, DC. On December 4, 2016, based on his embrace of the Alex Jones' narrative (along with an anti-Democratic bias and other cognitive biases), Edgar Madison Welch, of Salisbury, NC, walked through the front door of the restaurant, pointed an assault rifle in the direction of an employee and fired [109]. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the narrative was so compelling to Welch that checking the facts did not occur to him (e.g., that the restaurant had no basement). What is disturbing is his unflinching acceptance of the narrative, his emotional triggers having become supersensitive. Another case was the conspiracy theories about the cause of the horrendous fires in Oregon and California in the summer of 2020. The conspiracy theory was that the fires were set by members of Antifa (Anti-Facists, started originally to fight racism but expanded to include other extremists [110]) and when homeowners were asked to leave their homes for safety reasons, they refused, arguing that they needed to protect their homes from the roaming gangs of Antifa [111]. It was a false rumor most likely set by the alt-right trying to help Trump's reelection campaign. Even higher on the irrational scale are the QAnon conspiracy believers, who embrace a conspiracy theory that could never be shown to correspond to reality: e.g., Trump is secretly saving the world from a satanic cult of pedophiles and cannibals, most of whom are Democrats and the liberal elite. Every utterance or tweet Trump makes is a code that supposedly substantiates the theory. A QAnon embracer is told to believe that everything that Trump tweets or says has a meaning, even his errors in spelling and pronunciation, e.g., "covfefe" [8]. The theory is detached from any form of reality, which seems to strengthen adherents' devotion and addiction. Their faith in Trump is another form of sickness unto death, sickness built on an ill-conceived, propagandized self-righteousness. The difference between Kierkegaard's sickness unto death and theirs was that his goal

was redemption, while theirs is a willful ignorance that pretends it is not willful, an addiction to some Gnostic gospel that is supposedly the subtext of all political reality. Cognitive authorities like *Fox News* (and OAN and Sinclair Broadcasting) and right-wing social media sites train consumers to engage and inflame their anger because it keeps them addicted to their message. While such authorities create, engage, and amplify consumers' emotive state, they generally seek money and power [39] and promote a right-wing ideology that tends to run contrary to the real demands of most American citizens, 40 per cent of whom continue to support and empower them.

Privately *Fox News* staff acknowledge they feel tied to supporting Trump while absolving themselves of any journalistic integrity while feeding the "Frankenstein" that they have helped to create, sustain and perpetuate, a Frankenstein that demands uncritical loyalty, from whom they derive power, money, and support for their ideology of an unfettered capitalism. With social media sites, they perpetuate the addiction and uncritical loyalty, but they ignore its potential result: a civil war, the destruction of American democracy, the collapse of law and order, rampant corruption, the descent of the planet into an irreparable condition. Because their will to power feeds on the emotional triggers of its audience or social media engagers, their biases trump their abilities of critical thought, even their abilities to know that they do not have the ability for critical thought. That is why it is impossible to engage them with a rational argument or to train them in logical fallacy literacy, information literacy, media literacy, or digital literacy. Such tools, as critical and important as they are, are only useful to those who are open to using them, not to those that live in a filter bubble or closed "propaganda feedback loop" [78], p. 33.

In sum, *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. While we are engaged in disinformation wars in the Age of Disinformation, we also have entered the Age of Inflamed Grievances, given the in-your-face stoked grievances by the alt-right in cable news, social media, and the Trump administration. While we have had many grievances over the years, entities like *Fox News*, some social media sites (like Brietbart and QAnon), and other right-wing media have stoked and flamed one's resentments on a continuing basis so as to accumulate power, economic benefits, and an ideological supremacy, often quite opposite to interests of their supporters, democracy, and the survival of the country. To a significant extent, it has also become the Age of the Anti-Enlightenment, because science is not only treated as an alternate opinion but challenged as false (e.g., the coronavirus epidemic was a hoax invented by Democrats, and the Centers for Disease Control provide biased or false information about the pandemic).

Plato would not have expected Trump supporters' resolution to return to the Cave, where they now shout obscenities at those who want to move them out of the Cave (e.g., at the local stores, they berate clerks on their insisting they wear a mask as part of the store's policy in coping with the pandemic, or they attack Black Americans as if they were all going to attack them). We now have segments of extreme right partisans that choose to abide in their self-righteousness and non-negotiable postures, where every affront becomes a culture war, and any cause that disturbs them is inflamed into a righteous political act. Rather than a Socrates leading them out of the Cave, *Fox News*, right-wing social media sites, the Republican (Trump) Party, and the pro-Trump religious leaders, all want to secure the prisoners back into an enlarged Cave with self-imposed cells, where there is chaos, inflamed anger, tyranny, cruelty, fascism, narcissism, idolatry, arrogance, selfishness, and ignorance, and where many prisoners praise their jailors and oppressors.

We have entered a brave new world, where, as Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* [112] said, “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” The more one leans to the right, the truer this position 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 you are also 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” [113]. In the age of inflamed grievances, truth is whatever you are predisposed and enflamed to click.

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