

Greater Good Gathering - Panel V

Communication:

Truth and Meaning in the 21st Century

Moderators

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Panelists

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The Greater Good Gathering held on February 6–7, 2019 explored the future of public policy and how best to advance the greater good in the 21st century in light of technological innovation, economic disruption, ideological polarization, and governance challenges. Event co-sponsors included Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia Law School, Union Theological Seminary, The Academy of Political Science, and Public Works LLC/Brain Storm Consulting.

JAMES FALLOWS: Greetings, everyone. My name is James Fallows from *The Atlantic*. I am making a return engagement after the panel yesterday afternoon. This has been a fascinating sequence of panels this morning, as it was yesterday. I am going to spend just a minute trying to provide some connective tissue between where we started yesterday, where we are going the rest of today, and what I hope we are going to learn in these next few minutes, which I am really looking forward to.

For reasons I will explain to you in a moment, I will not be able to be at the end of the panel later today. I have a good excuse. I will just tell you in a moment. But what I would say, if I were going to be around then, is how impressive it is that the people planning this gathering had an actual strategy, and an actual way in which we are trying to have us share things that we have learned and wonder about and to move onto action, long term.

We have heard from people from a wide variety of backgrounds. We have had technologists. We have had people of national-level politics, international-level politics, local-level politics and activism, and engagement of all kinds. We have had scholars. We have had lawyers. They have shared impressions of the ways in which the technology of this moment, in how we communicate with each other, intimately and in large scale, is changing for better and worse.

The fundamental things that people have always tried to do is govern themselves—trying to understand reality, trying to protect individuals, or failing to protect individuals, and trying to separate signal from noise, when it comes to perceiving the world around us. Yesterday, Eric Schnurer properly corrected me in my attribution of the quote I was saying from Herman Talmadge. It was actually George Smathers who criticized a political rival by saying that his sister was a known thespian. Here is a correct quote that applies to what we are doing. This is from Adlai Stevenson, back when he was running for president. He said, “The role of editors was

to separate the wheat from the chaff and then print the chaff.” This is a longstanding challenge in our business.

We have had analyses of the challenges we are dealing with, but we have also had suggestions of what to do in this new, fast-changing environment. We are talking about the faith community, the university community, politicians, and the technologists, and how they could try to use this clearer understanding of where we are going to steer things towards a better direction of outcome. That is, I think, what we are going to do in this panel as well.

Here is the plan of battle for the next session separating us from lunchtime. I am going to ask each one of our panelists to talk in a first round about understanding what has happened to the question of truth and reality. I will give a little more setup of that. The first round will be understanding what has happened to us. The second round will be what we can do about it—a diagnosis and then prescription.

At 12 noon sharp, I’m going to pass this microphone to Eric Schnurer, our host, who will moderate the audience question stage of the conversation. The reason I am doing that is there is a young woman who I met when we were both 18 years old. We have been together ever since then, which is now 50 years, and I need to be in D.C. this evening for an event honoring her. So, I have to get the one o’clock train, or the 50 year run of being together with my wife, Deb, may come to an end.

At noon, this seat will be occupied by Eric rather than Jim, but for the next while, I am here. We are going to talk about a very specific part of the understanding reality challenge that has run through this conference. We are talking about truth and falsehood. Not as a matter of proportion—what gets more attention, what gets less attention. Not as a matter of just attention, distraction, or how our psychologies are being changed by our technology. Nor strictly a polarization, but simply about truth and falsehood. The stage where, compared even to other eras in American history, one could argue that there is simply more falsehood by metric tonnage than there has been before, and it is harder to perceive what is the actual reality. So we will see whether that assessment is true, and then what can be done about it if so.

We have three eminently qualified people. Jennifer Kavanaugh of the RAND Corporation has co-authored a recent book called *Truth Decay*, which has some obvious resonance with the problems we are discussing. She is going to give us her brief summary assessment of where we stand on the truth versus decayed truth front. You will recall that yesterday, Kathleen Hall Jamieson used her phrase VD for viral deception. We will see whether that resembles, or not, what Jennifer Kavanaugh will tell us about.

Then, Angelo Carusone, who has been involved for a long time with Media Matters, and for the last two years has been president of Media Matters, which is involved in trying to combat the media spread of falsehood. He will give us his assessment, and then Professor Robert Shapiro from here at Columbia, an eminent political scientist. One of his recent books is called *The Rational Public*. He can tell us whether that is still a viable way to describe our reasoning public. With that, let me turn first to Jennifer to give us her overview of the truth versus falsehood state of affairs.

JENNIFER KAVANAGH: Thank you. Truth decay is the term that my co-author, Michael, and I are using to refer to the diminishing role that facts, data, and analysis appear to play in our policy making process, in the way we talk to each other, and how we talk about political and social issues.

The reason that we initially were concerned with this comes very much from our business model, which is RAND provides research and evidence to policy makers. If research, evidence, and facts do not matter anymore, then what is RAND really supposed to do? That is how we

started here. Obviously, there are much bigger consequences than just for RAND. This has consequences for our democratic institutions and our society more generally.

One of the things that we wanted to do with this project was to take a holistic view of this problem, so we did not just look at media. We did not just look at political polarization. Or just look at education. Or just look at the internet. We wanted to understand how all these things were fitting together to cause this more systemic problem that we were observing. That was how we approached this.

How would we define truth? We defined it as comprising four specific trends. The first is an increase in disagreement about objective data and facts. Examples here would be disagreements about the safety of vaccines or evidence on climate change. These are areas where we have overwhelming body of evidence in support of one interpretation or one set of facts, and yet an increasing number of people disregard these facts or question them.

Second, is a blurring of the line between facts and opinion, and an increasing relative volume of opinion compared to fact. It is not just about the increasing amount of falsehood, but also the way in which opinion is mixed in there, so it is difficult for a reader to determine what is a fact and what is not.

Then, trust in institutions. We see a real decline in trust in institutions across the board, especially those institutions that we used to look to for facts, data, and evidence. Therefore, we end up in a situation where not only are we not sure what is true and what is not, but we are not even really sure where to go to find that factual information.

What do we think is causing this? I think this gets to the question of what is wrong, or how did we get here. The first is actually something that has not changed, and it was really one of the focal points of the first panel today. That is cognitive bias and the way we process information. We like to be right. We seek out things that prove we are right and we disregard things that say we are wrong. We rely on our friends and family, which can be great if you have informed friends and family. Not everyone has informed friends and family, and it can be dangerous. We use shortcuts to make decisions, which can be helpful, except when they lead us astray. There are all these ways in which just the way we process information makes us susceptible to this.

That is not new, but the internet, the social media, and the changes that we have seen in our media ecosystem, which is our second driver, really exacerbate those trends. I am talking not just about social media, which we talked heavily about in the last panel, or even the digital space, but some of the changes in the traditional news industry that have been driven by the rise of the internet. We have an increasing number of different sources, increasing intensity of competition between traditional media outlets, and the decline in the sustainability of the traditional investigative journalism model.

We also have a democratization of the information space generally, and that is a good thing. We should want more people to have access, but with it comes unintended or unexpected consequences—difficulty determining what is high quality information versus what is low quality information. We have this space that is increasingly difficult to navigate—increasingly difficult to figure what is a fact and what is not.

The third driver that we point to is the education system. As technology has changed the way information is shared and disseminated, it is becoming increasingly challenging for people to navigate that space. But technology changes fast, and institutions change slow, so schools have not caught up in terms of providing students with the skills they need to be able to navigate that space. This is also true of adults, of course, who were not taught how to use digital media in school because digital media did not exist.

There are a couple of reasons why the education system is important. The first has to do with what I pointed to here, this gap, this slowness of change. The second has to do with resources. We do not provide schools generally with enough resources to invest in revising and

revamping their curricula, making sure teachers are prepared to teach these skills to students. Schools are facing an increasing number of demands—providing before and after school care, doing a thousand standardized tests each year. They already face these demands.

Then, the final piece here that I do not think we have really dug into yet—what it means to teach someone to be digitally literate or media literate. We throw these terms around, and there is a sense that we just teach people how to use Google better. But that is really not what media literacy is about, and we could have a whole panel just on that. Those are some of the challenges there.

Finally, polarization. We have alluded to it here several times in the political space, but it is also important to think about social, economic, and demographic polarization, and the extent to which we live and work in very homogenized communities that are then separate from these other communities. These create the demand for alternative narratives as well as the space for these alternative narratives to thrive.

These are, I think, some of the drivers that end up getting us to where we are today.

FALLOWS: Jennifer, thank you very much for a masterful job of distilling in just a couple of minutes the arguments of a whole book and the surrounding work. Angelo, now tell us the Media Matters perspective on where we stand on the truth versus fiction frontier.

ANGELO CARUSONE: Sure. Right after the election, I moved into this world. One of the things that we did, just as an exercise that turned into something significantly more meaningful, was take 60 or so of the most trafficked fake news stories from the past year and a half. For example, Obama bans Pledge of Allegiance, Hilary Clinton is on a breathing machine, things like that. Pope endorses Donald Trump. We traced them backwards. We did a food chain analysis. Where did they start?

What we found is that they all started in the same place. What came out of that was important insight—not just into how the disinformation engine spreads a lot of these falsehoods and why they are so effective in some ways—but something more meaningful. Something that gets to what do you do in an environment where there are all these issues around trust and truth, and how do you combat that? The takeaway was a framework. They all started in these online message boards, places like 4chan, 8chan, Kiwi Farms, smaller white nationalist message board communities. They would create the raw material that ultimately became fabricated stories.

There was a Craigslist posting that they put in there as George Soros hiring people to go protest Donald Trump. Screenshot, post, there is your evidence that all the protestors are paid. That becomes a major story that ends up in an outlet called the San Francisco Chronicle Gazette, not a real news outlet, but boy does that sound real, and it goes viral.

What happened, we found, was that these communities were creating a lot of the raw material that then was moved into a pipeline of not just ideological storytellers—traditional misinformers—but also people that were just looking to make a buck off of some viral traffic, and they were distributed through a constellation of mostly ideological social networking communities.

I do not want to get too much into the weeds on that, but broadly speaking, it is message board communities, raw material, storytellers, distribution networks, social media. Why this is relevant to this inquiry though is that one of the hallmarks of the community creating a lot of this raw material is that they also engage in concerted harassment and abuse.

The ‘gamergate’ was referenced before. That is a pretty standard play—you just target people with all these harassments and abuse, you troll them, you dox them, you release their private information. There is a net effect of that, though. That is, during the 2016 cycle—and Pew did some studies on this, but there are others—they all show the same trend line. 44 percent

of people that identified as left of center did not really engage in political or civic conversations on their social media feeds. They did not post a lot of information about it. That number was only eight percent on the conservative side, so almost one out of every two people that identified as left of center was kind of tuning it out.

Now, that is not to say they did not care. When you drill down as to what was the motivation there, most of them would do it in really small circles. The people that were most likely to tune out were not the diehards. They were the ones that were more toward the middle. The ones that had the most persuasive power over their social networks—the people around them, their community. That is where it gets to this issue of truth, because on the one hand, the engine that is driving so much of this information was doing something even more damaging and lasting to the structures of the way that we communicate.

Word of mouth is still the most effective form of advertising, and it is by far and away the most effective form of transferring information. You might reject facts. You might not care about the specific data points, but the narrative—the part that validates and reinforces your world view—that you get from your peers.

If you are able to create a mechanism by which you allow for people to consistently withdraw out of fear of retaliation, harassment, abuse, or you make them feel impotent, that their voice doesn't matter, whatever the motivation is, you actually create a pretty clear landing strip for a lot of lies, disinformation, and misinformation to disseminate. That is how you get to a place, when you add it all up, where in London right now, in the span of just two years, their vaccination rates for MMRs have fallen below World Health Organization levels.

They could not believe it and do not fully understand how that could happen until you look at the engine here, which is that you get a bunch of message board communities just making up fake anecdotes. You get it spreading far and wide so that it feels very real. It feels like your own social networks are sharing the story about somebody who claims to go to this school where your kids go, and it has a deeper resonance. You create a system where anyone will be abused and harassed if they push back against it, mostly through bots, and you get a scenario where behavior changes fast.

Broadly, that is how we see the state of play right now, and a really significant counter measure and safeguard for truth has largely been neutralized as a consequence of this process.

FALLOWS: Thank you. Again, it is fascinating. Now, we have the academic perspective from Robert Shapiro. How should we think about this academically?

ROBERT SHAPIRO: Well, the academic perspective is the political perspective. The focus that I would like to emphasize is on the role of partisan conflict and polarization in terms of fomenting the spread of fake news and lies. However, things are not as bad as they seem. I want to cite, hot off the press, an article in *Science* that I got yesterday. In terms of the pervasiveness of fake news—this is in cyberspace and we can come back to mainstream media—it is an article on fake news on Twitter during the 2016 election. The takeaway is only one percent of individuals accounted for 80 percent of fake news source exposures, and only one-tenth of a percent accounted for nearly 80 percent of fake news sources share.

The scope of the problem here, at least in cyberspace of fake news, is much more limited than people think. Although, small percentages matter if you think about influences on the election outcome in Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Small differences matter, but in the grand scheme of things, it is small. The article also emphasizes where the real action is—in mainstream media. Think in terms of Fox News and liberal media here.

This fake news that we are talking about—Kathleen Hall Jamieson very nicely referred to as VD, viral deception. She didn't like the term fake news, because she thought that was a

contradiction. She liked the expression VD, Viral Deception. That seemed to catch on yesterday in a big respect. For me, there are two important aspects of lies. There are the kinds of lies that we see today that have proliferated in politics, including the elephant in the room, Donald Trump, obviously on steroids here.

Those are blatant, outright lies which has been refined a little bit in Roger Cohen's assessment of it and his citing of Harry Frankfurt's book, *On Bullshit*. That is, Trump is more of a bullshitter than a liar in the sense that a liar knows what the truth is and lies about it. A bullshitter does not care what the truth is. It is just trying to make the case—like Trump did in the State of the Union address, when he pointed to the fact that El Paso, Texas put up a wall and the crime rate dropped. Well, that was not quite what happened. The crime rate had dropped, the wall went up, the crime rate was steady, and actually ticked up a little bit. Trump probably heard El Paso has a wall, crime rate is low, and made the causal connection and causal story.

These things are troublesome, but they are less troublesome. And this speaks to the solution here. These are lies where the liars know that they are lying and know what the facts are. The critics of the liars know what the facts are and call them out. We have seen a proliferation of the calling out of lies, all the fact checking and so forth. These are lies that are countered and are potentially neutralized in public debate. That applies to liars and bullshitters alike.

This speaks to the solution, because this is the only solution I have. Over time, the public is wising up about this. They know that they cannot believe everything they hear, especially from partisan sources, and unavoidably they are exposed to a mix of news where eventually they pick up the truth. It may take a longer time rather than a shorter time, and people are not as cocooned as some experts have argued. There are studies that show that people are actually exposed to things inadvertently, and they do broader media searches.

The kinds of lies that I worry about most are the lies that have always been with us, and I talked about this in other contexts. These are damn lies. The difference between lies and damn lies is that in the case of lies, the facts are out there. The opposition can report about the facts and debate them openly because of free speech and freedom of the press.

Damn lies are lies that occur where the liars lie, and the critics are suppressed, because free speech and the media are suppressed. Take Nazi Germany and the rise of Hitler, or take what happened in Turkey, or what Maduro wants to do in Venezuela today. The damn lies that I worry about most, and this has not changed, are lies in which the liars have a monopoly over the information. They know what the truth is. The opposition does not have information. That is, the information here is asymmetric rather than symmetric. Only one side has it.

This has come up in American history going back to the explosion on the battleship Maine that led to the Spanish American war. FDR's deception of having a destroyer go after German submarines prior to the war and claiming that we weren't involved in the war. How we got into the war of Vietnam and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The alleged attacks on the destroyer as well did not quite play out the way Lyndon Johnson said. In fact, he and the intelligence community knew about it and lied about it. Weapons of mass destruction leading to the war in Iraq, and so forth.

Then today, and this is where I will close, the cases that worry me are when I see the intelligence heads testifying in Congress. They are asked about whether there was Russian involvement in the election, whether the Iranians are complying with the agreement that Trump has dropped, and thus far, they have told the truth. That is, they have told what they think the facts tell them as opposed to what Trump and the administration wants to hear. But had they said the Russians had not interfered in the election and the Iranians have not complied with the act, I would be worried.

FALLOWS: Thank you very much. There is an important issue on which I would like both Jennifer and Angelo to respond, because there is one implicit difference in perspective among the panelists. Robert Shapiro is not saying calm down, but he is emphasizing the feedback and self-corrective potential within today's info-sphere and political sphere. I am wondering how each of you responds to that. Would you agree with him that we should not exaggerate the effect of public fiction, and we should pay more attention to the natural feedback? Jennifer, will you start?

KAVANAGH: One thing that we did in the book was look back over United States history since about the end of the Civil War. We try to identify other periods that look like today and try to see whether we could find evidence of the four trends that I mentioned previously in those periods. Then we try to see if we do find evidence of it, does it end? The answer is we find evidence of three of the trends in the previous periods. What we do not see is this willingness to throw aside facts and data. There have always been skeptics. People have always been skeptical.

Take the example of vaccines. There has been skepticism and anxiety about vaccines and their consequences since vaccines were invented, but what we see now is an increasing amount of evidence about vaccines and an increasing number of people saying that they do not believe it. It is this divergence that we point to. That is distinct about this period.

If you look at why these other periods ended, it is hard to tell, but in a lot of cases, it is because of some kind of disaster or catastrophe, like the Great Depression, when people realized maybe they should actually use the macroeconomic data to make economic policy. That is what ended one of the periods in the 1920s and 1930s. If you look back at the 1880s and 1890s, the Spanish American War did not end it, but it certainly motivated journalists to get down there and figure out what's actually going on, and let's return to facts.

Is there a chance that this could self-correct? Yes. I think something that has motivated these types of trends in the past is new technology, and the period after new technology comes to the fore, those periods are messy. They are messy because we do not know how to use them. We are still getting used to what that means for our personal relationships. We do not have the institutions to govern and manage those spaces. There is a chance that that happens with social media, and we naturally go back to something that is good.

My concern, though, is that instead of that natural path, we end up really reaching rock bottom, and that is when things turn around. My motivation in continuing to work on this project is to try to identify what are the ways that we could get out of this? What is the exit ramp before the catastrophe, if such a catastrophe is coming? That is the way I kind of think about this.

FALLOWS: Angelo, before turning to you for that, let me thank and congratulate everybody who has put this conference together and thank the three panelists and welcome Eric to the chair, but how do you feel about Media Matters as part of a self-correction?

CARUSONE: I do not think the threat could be exaggerated enough, to be honest. On the Twitter point, that is well taken. But a very small amount of information consumers and distributors use Twitter. If you look at Facebook, starting June of 2016, the aggregate reach of all of these disinformation sites exceeded the total reach of all news sites on Facebook combined. Actually, a three-fold increase. It is incredible change in the distribution networks, and that is really the lens through which most people see the world, and there is plenty of other data there. I think that is one element to it.

On the self-correcting front, I am not Henny Penny about it. I think there are real meaningful solutions. Why I think you have to be really intentional about the self-correcting is that

in the past, the self-corrections were the economics. One of the things that helped self-correct the news industry was that they went from a paperboy model—where you had to sell your papers every day on the street, so therefore you needed these outrageous headlines—to a subscription model. That provided a steady revenue stream and allowed for journalistic ethics and the profession to turn into a profession.

It allowed for everything to not be so sensationalized, whereas the economics here are the opposite. They incentivize the very worst. They incentivize disinformation. They reward it. They reward the bad behavior that actually then turns into this feedback loop. That is where I worry a little bit about the self-correcting mechanisms, whether it is the MMR example or the resurgence of flat-Eartherism in the United States. You can see this engine having a real meaningful effect on the change of behavior and the self-correction is going to require just a little bit of a tip, I think, because it is against the economic headwinds.

KAVANAGH: If I could just add one thing before we move on. It is really important to note that when we are studying these trends, we talk about what we know about how people share and use information online. We are almost always talking about Twitter, because Facebook really does not share its data or make it public to researchers. That is a concern because most people are on Facebook, and as you just mentioned, the Twitter population is pretty small. So, Facebook is working with researchers now to try to do a better job of sharing their data, but we still do not have the papers from that research. Thus, most of what we know about how things spread online is from Twitter, and that is not necessarily a representative sample.

SHAPIRO: The other things to keep in mind with regard to the self-correcting mechanism is that people are still predominantly getting their information from sources other than social media. Mainstream media is still just edging it out. The one murky area is that sometimes the mainstream media are obtained online rather than in front of the TV, etc.

The other self-correcting mechanisms are: One, peoples' attentiveness to information in politics more generally. It is much more limited than is widely thought of in these kinds of circles here. The other is that people have prior beliefs and are often difficult to persuade, so even given exposure, whether people are persuaded by this new information is up in the air. Third, and this is the great unknown, we can talk about American society today, but in thinking about the future, we need to think specifically about how new generations wrestle with these problems of new technology and information. Whether they learn how to sift through this very complex information environment and come to rely on sources that are providing good information rather than lies.

ERIC SCHNURER: I think this would be a good point to open it up to the audience and have you ask questions. When those run out, we will come back for one more round of commentary from the crowd here. I will just comment —this whole conference is intended to be a conversation, not just us all talking at you. This is a great opportunity for us to take about 20 to 25 minutes for you to ask questions. Then after that, we will go to lunch where you can corner these people and ask them even more questions.

QUESTION 1: My question is that this whole discussion is U.S. centered. What about internationally? Regarding Europe or China, what data or information do you have? How do they behave? What is the reaction there?

CARUSONE: I have one thing to add on that. The underlying mechanism is the same. At least with respect to message board communities, they are a little bit ahead of us in every way. The

one thing that is really different abroad, that I think will become more an issue here, is the utilization of chat apps as sort of functional communities. Here, it is like Facebook groups are there. In the UK, for example, for people under the age of 25, 15 percent of them cite WhatsApp as their primary source of news, and it is basically just a group chat. That is a really big difference compared to the United States. It has implications for how you monitor it and how you combat it, but it is probably the single biggest difference that I could point to.

The London example is an example of the fake news crisis moving, and that is everywhere. I would say it is a little bit ahead. Most of the new experiments and the new forms of disinformation tend to happen internationally before they come here.

KAVANAGH: We just started looking at these same trends. Our book was entirely focused on the United States. We started there. We could only take on that as a first cut. We now have a project where we are looking at what this looks like in Europe and trying to understand to what extent there are the same trends or different trends. The same drivers or different drivers. It looks really similar. There are a lot of the same elements. There are some things that are different, especially the way politics plays in, because those political systems are different. They have different law, so they have different flexibility or a different willingness to regulate. Thus, they have taken different steps in terms of dealing with social media companies and disinformation online.

They are incredibly concerned about disinformation coming from Russia and Russia's interference in their elections. It is something that they think about all the time, and are a lot more proactive in terms of trying to get out there and think of solutions that they can implement to protect their elections, especially the upcoming European Union elections. I think it is a lot of the same dynamics. It plays out in a little bit of a different way, because they have different institutions, different structures, and different legal frameworks. But I think it is very accurate to say that foreign disinformation has been a problem in Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, well before it was something that we were even talking about here.

QUESTION 2: I completely understand the concern about disinformation and fake news versus real news, but who gets to be the arbiter of what is considered disinformation versus truth?

CARUSONE: I think that is a tough one. I try to focus on the biggest problem first and then get closer to the margins or the gray areas. If we can't deal with something as basic as Obama did not ban the Pledge of Allegiance—posting a fake proclamation that is just totally fabricated—that is a real dangerous piece of disinformation. Or, during the campaign when Donald Trump's social media director, Dan Scavino, went to a white nationalist message board community. He plucked an image that purported to come from a think tank, which did not exist, that had black on white crime statistics that were all fabricated and made up. There was nothing remotely truthful about it.

That, I would say, is the big stuff. The things that have no basis in truth whatsoever. There is not a different interpretation of it. It is not a debate about the implications of a policy. That is the stuff that really concerns me, not just because of the past. I think about it for the lessons of the future. It was mentioned earlier, that is how we get to things like synthetic video, fake video, and fake audio. That is going to be the real crisis, and to me, I would focus on the stuff that is really clear cut for now. That is how you make big policy changes at the platforms, and then you can debate about it. If it is debatable, then we probably should not be talking about it, at least in the context of fake news.

SCHNURER: Let me follow up on that. You said there are things that are so obviously false that they are dangerous. Is there anything that is so obviously false that it is obviously false, and therefore, it is not dangerous? We do not have to worry about it?

CARUSONE: That is a good question.

KAVANAGH: This is where politics comes in, right? I think there are things that are so obviously false that we would think they should not be dangerous. Except that there are actors in the system, and no matter what the information is, there is almost always some actor who stands to benefit from spreading that and getting people to believe it. There is always someone who had this little inkling that that was going to happen, and they see it online, and they think aha, I knew it. It was true.

I think there is information that we think should just be common knowledge, of course it is false. However, in the current environment that we live in, especially in the United States, because there are these political dynamics that create incentives to do this, and economic incentives to do this, that is what we see happen. Social media is such a powerful tool because word of mouth is definitely the best advertising, but you can only tell so many people. On social media, I can tell millions of people in a second.

That is why I think this is a problem that has always existed, this idea of there being false information and people using false information. It is just that now we see it on a totally different scale, and it becomes that much more dangerous, like an exponential increase.

QUESTION 3: I would like to ask a question about self-correction. I am inclined to agree with Professor Shapiro that the best way to counter false information is with the truth, but recent studies have indicated that it does not work that way. That the refutation of falsity with the truth may actually serve to increase the belief in the falsity by giving it greater publicity. I was wondering if you could address that concern.

SHAPIRO: That was discussed this morning based on experiments where partisans were given corrective information, and they became even more partisan as a result of that. My point is that we are talking about how this plays out over a longer period, where the process of lies, and counterarguments persist. The hope is that the truth would win out. In terms of instantaneous corrections, I do not see any way of doing that in any kind of instantaneous fashion.

SCHNURER: I have actually thought a good amount about that issue, and I was thinking about this as we were listening to the panel over the last hour. I taught a class about a year ago that essentially tried to draw parallels between the natural world and human affairs. I have had two conclusions about this. I think that most social processes follow an evolutionary process like in the natural world—that things are good, and so something naturally arises to attack that. Over time, there is a response that corrects for it. Overall, things eventually solve themselves and work out okay.

There are two problems with that. One is that is a long run process, and as Cain said, in the long run, we are all dead. Our problem is what is happening right now. The second thing is it does not always work out that way. In fact, every stable natural situation has a disease state that eventually evolves into chaos. Everything. Even the most stable, natural process. It is just a matter of how often it happens.

The research shows that essentially the occurrence of bad things in human affairs, like Nazi Germany or something like that, the intensity and the frequency with which things like that arise essentially follows the same mathematical model as earthquakes and other natural

phenomena. There are many little bad things that come along. There are really, really big bad things that come along sometimes, and it is essentially unavoidable.

At some point, everything is going to spin out of control. Our job as human beings is unlike earthquakes, which just happen. We do have some ability to at least put that off another day until the bad thing happens. We can act to improve that situation.

The bottom line is that I believe things will probably self-correct in some fashion, but there is a good chance that they will not. It is certainly not going to happen tomorrow. It is all contingent on what we do, and that gives us an obligation to do what we can to bring things back under control and keep them from spinning out of control as much as we can. That is essentially why we are here at this conference.

QUESTION 4: I have a question that will hopefully instill some hope for all of us. Some of those phenomenon seem to be lined up more to one side of the political spectrum than the other, and there are clear demographic lines in terms of age groups that align to those particular things. Is there actually any demographic data as to whether there is more of a spread of untruth in one particular segment of the population from an age group standpoint versus another? If so, I hope that it is more among the older crowd.

KAVANAGH: The demographics in terms of age—I wish I could tell you a more hopeful story, but it is not very hopeful. There is really no relationship between believing false information and age or education, which is surprising. In fact, some of the people who are most willing to hold on to something they believe, even though it is wrong, are the people who are the most educated, probably because they feel very confident in their knowledge. In terms of those demographics, we really do not see that relationship.

There is a recent paper that suggested that older people are much more likely to share false information online, which might suggest that younger people are better at distinguishing between fact and fiction online because they have been using it longer. Again, that is using Twitter data, and we have to look on other platforms to understand the extent to which that actually captures things well. Young people do not really use Twitter anymore. They use Instagram, Snapchat, closed messaging apps, and things like that.

I am just not really sure there is evidence to back that up. That said, this is a question that I do not think we yet really have the data to study in a really rigorous and systematic way. It is possible we will learn something that is more hopeful. I think that believing false information is something that does not really discriminate.

QUESTION 5: I think there are a handful of folks whose thought is along the lines of, fake news or not, the media has been lying about my community forever. I am wondering if you know the extent that the recent fixation on viral deception or fake news obscures the more general failure of American deliberative public culture?

CARUSONE: That is a good point. I think the reason why the term fake news caught on, and it gets to your question in a way, is that Donald Trump did not popularize the term fake news. He hijacked it. Fake news caught fire after the election, because we needed something to describe what we just experienced. The idea of calling it misinformation, or lies, or untruths, it did not feel right.

We knew it was something distinguishable from the kinds of misinformation or lack of full picture that we typically get from the news media. We knew it was distinct and different, and this was more like describing a phenomenon. That is largely why it caught on, because we

collectively understood we needed something different, and that gets back to the question which is that there are different problems.

One is a question of inclusivity in the newsrooms—the kinds of editorial policies that they currently have and how they make their decisions. A lot of them are suffering and are being hollowed out increasingly. They are responsive, more so than normal, to what is happening online. Gannett, for example, has this policy. They have a Twitter tracker. If something gets enough tweets, it goes around to all the editors. No big deal, that is okay. However, they also have an editorial policy, which is that if it exceeds a secondary threshold, you must write an article about it. It does not matter what it is. That is a policy that Gannett has. That is why you see those stupid roundup posts a lot. Here is what all the people on Twitter are saying about this thing, because that is their easy way of getting around that policy.

A part of it, and why I think they intersect, is how you deal with it from a traditional newsroom perspective. There is a structure and a mechanism by which it needs to be improved and addressed, and that is through advocacy watchdog work and a whole bunch of other things.

The other thing, though, this is something materially different. It is about a gaming of the refs on the social platforms, and in some cases, an enabling of it. Total fabrications are a lot different than, say, omitting a full story or misrepresenting. They are much more insidious in some ways especially given the way that they are distributed in a viral way. I do not think one is necessarily more important than the other. They are just really different problems that got blurred together, because it is the information ecosystem.

SCHNURER: We do not have any time for more questions. We will do another round back through the panel.

SHAPIRO: I just wanted to comment further. I think the media biases here at work are in the favor of attracting audiences. That usually means what is new, what is surprising—there is an economic angle that is at work here.

SCHNURER: Let us go to Angelo.

CARUSONE: The one thing I would say to wrap up is that there are solutions. Try to go to Facebook and upload your favorite movie. You cannot do it, and that is because they put in place countermeasures to prevent you from stealing and sharing intellectual property. There are mechanisms and solutions already in place that can be applied to this problem. If we think about the totality of what we talked about here is: Where does this lead? How do you solve the next crisis and prevent it? Fake video? You do a similar thing. You put in place a counter measure on the front end so that it does not have the destructive and powerful effects.

If you know that the overwhelming majority of true disinformation is starting elsewhere and does not reach the social platforms until three or four weeks after it started there, improve your AI so that it is looking at those Chans and those message boards first to help you get indicators for the kinds of disinformation. There are real structural improvements here that can be made to both prevent the next crisis and improve the rules of the game.

KAVANAGH: I also wanted to wrap up by talking a little bit about remedies. I think you can put remedies into three buckets. There is supply side, the demand side, and the policy. On the supply side, I think we need to think about different models for news production. The current model for investigative journalism is not sustainable. We need to think about different ways to produce news, whether that is crowd sourced or philanthropically funded. What does a sustainable model for journalism look like? That is one thing.

Another thing is thinking about ways that media companies can do a better job of distinguishing for readers between what is opinion and what is fact. Even the best newspapers now blur the two. I think that is really misleading for readers and it contributes to this problem. Even if we are not talking about falsehood, the blurring of facts and opinion is a problem.

On the demand side, we need to teach people how to use these different tool. How to navigate the information environment. How to synthesize and create and share and act on information given that the dynamics are so different now.

Then, in the policy space, I think there are a number of things that we could be talking about, and I want to kind of tie back to what ended the last panel—this discussion about regulation. I do not think the discussion about regulation should be regulation or no regulation. Those are not our choices. Our choices are not nothing and ministry of truth. Our choices are in this gray area between the two. We have many different models for thinking about how we manage information and different kinds of spaces.

As a society, we have been really creative in coming up with these different ways to deal with different types of information and different types of institutions. This is why I like to talk about media governance. What do we want? The internet and social media provide us with incredible tools. They are really powerful and valuable. They have unintended consequences. What do we want that space to look like in the future? That is the discussion that we should be having. That is the data that we should be focused on collecting and studying. That way, we can understand the dynamics and we can get there in the future. That, I see as a really hopeful story. We have a chance to create something powerful, both for ourselves and for generations to come.

ABOUT THE PANELISTS

JAMES FALLOWS is a long-time correspondent for *The Atlantic* magazine, and author of 12 books. His latest, with his wife, Deborah, is *Our Towns*, about the local-level renewal of economic, civic, and educational life across the country. The book has been a national best-seller and is the basis of a forthcoming documentary on HBO. Fallows has reported for *The Atlantic* and for public radio and TV outlets from around the world, including multi-year stints in Japan, Malaysia, China, plus Texas, the Pacific Northwest, and California. In that time, he won the National Book Award, for a book about defense policy; the National Magazine Award, for an article warning against an invasion of Iraq; and a New York Emmy for a documentary on China. Early in his career he spent two years as President Jimmy Carter’s chief White House speechwriter. He and Deborah Fallows met in college, at Harvard, and were married after graduation. They have two grown sons, and five grandchildren. He is originally from a small town in inland California.

ANGELO CARUSONE, since December 2016, has served as President of Media Matters for America, an organization with the stated mission of “comprehensively monitoring, analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media.” Prior to this, Mr. Carusone served as Executive Vice President of Media Matters for 3 years; previously, he worked as Director of Online Strategy and Campaigns and Campaign Director at Media Matters. Mr. Carusone is the organizer of #DumpTrump, a 700,000+ effort that successfully convinced Macy’s and several other former business partners to end their relationships with Donald Trump. In this role, Mr. Carusone conducted deep dive research and memorably broke the story that Donald Trump hired paid actors to attend his presidential campaign launch announcement.

JENNIFER KAVANAGH is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation and associate director of the Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program in RAND's Arroyo Center. Her research focuses on U.S. political institutions, public opinion, and their implications for U.S. foreign and domestic policy. She also studies defense strategy and military force posture. Her recent book, coauthored with RAND's President and CEO Michael Rich, defines *Truth Decay* as the diminishing reliance on facts and data in U.S. political and civil discourse and describes its causes and consequences. Kavanagh is a faculty member at the Pardee RAND Graduate School. Kavanagh graduated from Harvard University with a BA in Government and a minor in the Russian language. She completed her Ph.D. in Political Science and Public Policy at University of Michigan.

ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1982) is the Wallace S. Sayre Professor of Government in the Department of Political Science and Professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. He is currently Interim President of the Academy of Political Science. He specializes in American politics with research and teaching interests in public opinion, policymaking, political leadership, the mass media, and applications of statistical methods. He is co-author of *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (with Benjamin Page) and *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and The Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (with Lawrence Jacobs). His most recent books are *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and The Media* (edited with Lawrence R. Jacobs) and *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, The Media, and Public Opinion* (with Brigitte L. Nacos and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon). His current research examines partisan polarization and ideological politics in the United States, as well as other topics concerned with public opinion, the media, political leadership, and policymaking.

ERIC B. SCHNURER, founder of the Greater Good Gathering, has been involved with public policymaking at the highest levels for nearly forty years, since he worked in the White House during college writing speeches for President Jimmy Carter. He has served in all three branches of the federal government and for numerous state governments, as a speechwriter, prosecutor, policy advisor, general counsel, and chief-of-staff—and has worked in the private sector as a journalist, professor, business executive, and social entrepreneur. Today, he is president and CEO of a policy consulting firm advising Members of Congress, governors, mayors and other officials across the country; a regular contributor on the future of government and public policy for several major national and international publications; an adjunct professor of policy at various universities; and a sought-after speaker internationally. His latest venture is Virtu.us, a start-up designed to boost investment in human capital and public goods—and build community—in an era of declining public-sector responsiveness.