

Speakers

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News Media and the Politics of Truth

MISINFORMATION IS AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH, interfering with our ability to enact needed public policies and to bridge the bitter partisan divide. The forces behind misinformation are strong and enduring. Eric Alterman and Tom Patterson discussed the misinformation crisis we are facing.

ERIC ALTERMAN

- Eric Alterman spoke of a threat of homegrown fascism facing the United States. He explained how Donald Trump appealed to authoritarianism and created the fundamentals for a fascist movement. Alterman's position is that mainstream media, having stuck to its ways of doing business, has had a role in enabling this threat. When people no longer respect truth and democracy, the old method of objective reporting no longer works.
- Like Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, President Ronald Reagan, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich before him, President Trump exploited journalistic objectivity. The press tries to be fair by presenting opposing viewpoints and lets the audience interpret which viewpoint is correct or true. However, objectivity has no bias in favor of the truth. Trump engaged in trust manipulation knowing that he could say anything at all and that the press would report it in a straightforward way.
- Although CNN and newspapers ran fact checks, the fact checks were not always alongside the news stories where Trump got to tell his lie. Therefore, the lies carried the day.
- For Alterman, institutions that define public discourse comprise mainstream media. It consists of gatekeepers or people who define what is responsible discourse. This includes: national newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*; broadcast television and the main cable networks, such as ABC and NBC, but also Fox News; some newsweeklies, such as *Time* and *The New Yorker*. He excludes opinion magazines and bloggers.

- He considers both MSNBC and Fox mainstream media—describing MSNBC as a news station with a liberal bias and Fox as a propaganda network that communicates lies. Statements made on Fox then seep into mainstream media and become fodder for discussion on CNN, MSNBC, or NPR with profound effect.
- There are more factors pushing in the direction of embracing lies than there are forces pushing in the direction of embracing the truth. With the growth of Fox News, and at one point talk radio with Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing media became effective at determining the terms of discourse and in generating significant revenue in the process.
- The First Amendment protects the press to ensure that the electorate has the information necessary to choose its leaders. Democracy can't function otherwise. However, the media companies, including CNN, MSNBC, and Fox, put the entertainment value that Trump provided above serving their role in a democracy.

TOM PATTERSON

- Senator Joseph McCarthy dominated the news media because of the norms and conventions of reporting that prevailed through the Vietnam period. Around the time of the Watergate and Pentagon Papers scandals, the press realized that it needed to find an alternative to simply giving airtime or news space to the newsmaker.
- The alternative was “he said, she said” journalism. When a newsmaker made a suspicious claim, the press would go out and find someone to refute the claim. The media started to use this model routinely, whether there was a factual claim with which they disagreed or simply because it added conflict into the news.
- There was a Republican voice and a Democratic voice. The model began to break down when one side of the aisle began to play fast and loose with the facts, which started happening before Donald Trump—such as when conservative think tanks

and Republican leaders argued against the Kyoto agreement by claiming that the science around climate change was inexact, or against the Affordable Care Act by insisting that the legislations incorporated death panels.

- A study of the 2016 election found that Trump received more news coverage than Hillary Clinton, with only the week of the Democratic National Convention as an exception. The news media is an institution that we look to for public information. It is also driven by an economic imperative and the need to attract an audience. Trump was an audience magnet.
- The model of reporting which gives voice to both sides broke down during the 2016 campaign. James Fallows of *The Atlantic* calls this “false equivalency”: one side is lying, and the other side is straightforward with the facts, but each side is given equal weight. It is then left up to the audience to decide where the truth lies. Journalists did not weigh in on which side was telling the truth and which side was lying.
- Another study found that a third of Trump's tweets contained a significant falsehood. Most Americans got information about Trump's tweets from the news media, and not directly from his Twitter feed.
- At some point during the Trump administration, news stories began to call out the lies in a way that mainstream media had not done before. Mainstream media is starting to get the picture that it cannot be in the service of democracy with the old model of journalism. The old model contributes to the flow of misinformation by putting out statements that are false and leaving it to the audience to determine the truth.
- This approach does not work because we are all subject to two things that affect the way we respond to messages—cue taking and confirmation bias. In cue taking we use heuristics or short cuts to form opinions, such as relying on what our political leaders are saying. Confirmation bias entails our tendency to seek out that which conforms to what we like. In this polarized age, however, this means listening to our side and not the

other, with Democrats seeing one version of the world and Republicans seeing another.

- Journalists who do their civic duty and focus solely on calling out the lies will be seen as aligned, at least at the current time, against the Republican Party. Consequently, Republicans are increasingly going away from mainstream media and over to Fox, Newsmax, or Breitbart.
- In terms of possible solutions, the news media is not very good at self-correcting. According to Patterson, the news media is not going to bail us out until we put our institutions back in order.

QUESTION AND ANSWER TAKEAWAYS

What effect did lies in the media, and media not countering those lies, have on politics, public opinion, and voters?

- Alterman: Lies in the mainstream media caused an awful lot of damage, and it took a long time for the media to start calling Trump out. By the time they started calling out what was observably false, the damage was done.
- The media may not always be the source of a message, but they act as a megaphone.

How do we define bias? How can people consume news in a way that is constructive in terms of how they find and use information?

- Alterman: People are increasingly getting their news from social media, without knowing where it originated. The people who are willing to put in the time to get good news will get it. Everyone else gets rubbish and will become easier to manipulate. Young people have lost the habit of seeking out news. We need to teach more critical thinking.
- Patterson: We need to distinguish between misinformation and disinformation. We are really concerned with disinformation—deliberate

falsehoods meant to deceive. The category of facts is fairly narrow in politics.

Can you speak about the impact of the 24-hour news cycle?

- Patterson: The idea of news on demand seemed terrific early on. The problem with trying to fill 24 hours is that as you work your way through what was important during the day, you begin to run out of things to say. Once you get into the talk portion, a lot of opinion is inevitably introduced.

Do you think the public in the McCarthy period was as uninformed as the public today?

- Alterman: The public was not as well-informed as it is now, and not nearly as misinformed.
- Patterson: We have reached an unprecedented level of misinformation. Certainly, the number of really well-informed was fewer back then.

Long before Trump, Professor Neil Postman warned that we were amusing ourselves to death from news as entertainment? Has this changed?

- Alterman: What Postman was describing has been trumped—literally and figuratively. We are in a much worse situation. The 24-hour news cycle plays a part in creating this unnecessary drama.

Patterson referred to possible solutions by changing our political institutions. Do you have any particular legislation or solutions in mind?

- Patterson: We have to change the current political situation in one important respect. Our parties are closely competitive. When this is the case, their focus is almost entirely on the next election, and trying to destroy the other party's brand. Until one party becomes much stronger than the other, and is comfortable in that position, we are going to be stuck with dysfunctional politics.

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