

An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

## Truth or Lie?

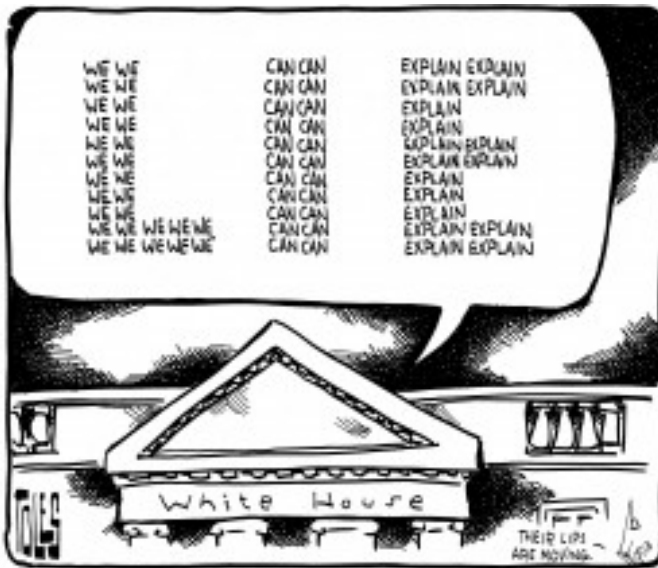


- Editorial Cartoons: Tom Toles | The Truth
- Student Activity: Tom Toles: Read the Editorial Cartoons
- Post Reprint: “The truth is losing”
- Post Reprint: “Once again, mainstream news outlets miss the social-media boat”
- Post Reprint: “I was a victim of a smear campaign. I understand the power of fake news.”
- Post Reprint: “Museums and libraries fight ‘alternative facts’ with a #DayofFacts”
- Post Reprint: “The Fix: Trump’s reelection campaign says more TV networks are refusing to air an ad targeting ‘fake news’

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**T**ruth or lie? What a dilemma when students are faced with this question when friends and family are involved. How much greater the dismay when those we trust to provide leadership or with whom the common good has been

entrusted spread doubt, accuse others of being mendacious or undermine the foundations upon which our society has been structured.



America has been the example of a democracy, a society of respect for others and the home of guaranteed freedoms. The land of justice and corrections in media, if mistakes were made. Who

would have thought that museums would need to archive data-filled and research-based websites.

Editorial cartoons, guest commentary and news articles remind us of how important honesty, integrity, accuracy and truth are to civil society, academic research and daily life.





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DAVID IGNATIUS

# The truth is losing

Richard Stengel, the State Department's undersecretary for public diplomacy, bluntly states the problem that has been worrying him, and should worry us all: "In a global information war, how does the truth win?"

The very idea that the truth won't be triumphant would, until recently, have been heresy to Stengel, a former managing editor of Time magazine. But in the nearly three years since he joined the State Department, Stengel has seen the rise of what he calls a "post-truth" world, where the facts are sometimes overwhelmed by propaganda from Russia and the Islamic State.

"We like to think that truth has to battle itself out in the marketplace of ideas. Well, it may be losing in that marketplace today," Stengel warned in an interview. "Simply having fact-based messaging is not sufficient to win the information war."

Stengel poses an urgent question for journalists, technologists and, more broadly, for everyone living in free societies or aspiring to do so. How do we protect the essential resource of democracy — the truth — from the toxin of lies that surrounds it? It's like a virus or food poison. It needs to be controlled. But how?

Stengel argues that the U.S. government should sometimes protect citizens by exposing

"weaponized information, false information" that is polluting the ecosystem. But ultimately, the defense of truth must be independent of a government that many people mistrust. "There are inherent dangers in having the government be the verifier of last resort," he argues.

Our conversation took place in Stengel's office, the same room that was used by Secretary of State George C. Marshall, a paradigmatic figure in the American age of reason. As Stengel observed, the problems of today's information-saturated society would have been unimaginable for Marshall, who lived at a time when information was scarce and precious, and openness brought change.

Now, says Stengel, social media give everyone the opportunity to construct their own narrative of reality. He recalls the early days of the Islamic State in 2014, when extremists used brutal imagery to terrorize people and recruit followers. The State Department's early counter-radicalization efforts mistakenly were "tit for tat," arguing with jihadists' interpretation of Islam. A better strategy, U.S. officials learned, was to empower others who could make the case more effectively.

"The central insight was that we're not the best messenger for our message," Stengel explains,

"because in the post-truth world, the people we're trying to reach automatically question anything from the U.S. government." As the Islamic State has weakened, so, too, has its media campaign. Messages have dwindled; recruits have disappeared; the "brand" has been devalued.

Russia's propaganda campaigns since the 2014 invasion of the Crimea have been much subtler and harder to combat. That's partly because Moscow's goal isn't to confront the West head-on, but to spread doubt and mistrust within. Stengel quotes Peter Pomerantsev, the author of *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*. For a Russian leadership schooled on KGB tactics, Pomerantsev argues, "It's not an information war. It's a war on information."

Stengel dissects the pastiche of fact and fantasy on Russian media outlets such as "Russia Today" and "Sputnik" this way: "They're not trying to say that their version of events is the true one. They're saying: 'Everybody's lying! Nobody's telling you the truth!'"

Russia's hacking during the U.S. presidential election had this aim of polluting the public information stream. "They don't have a candidate, per se. But they want to undermine faith in democracy, faith in the West." In

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the cyber-propagandists' atomized, construct-your-own-narrative world, agreement on a common framework of factual evidence can become almost impossible.

How should citizens who want a fact-based world combat this assault on truth? Stengel has approved State Department programs that teach investigative reporting and empower truth-tellers, but he's right that this isn't really a job for Uncle Sam.

The best hope may be the global companies that have created the social-media platforms. "They see this information war as an existential threat," says Stengel. The tech companies have made a start: He says Twitter has removed more than 400,000 accounts, and YouTube daily deletes extremist videos.

The real challenge for global tech giants is to restore the currency of truth. Perhaps "machine learning"

can identify falsehoods and expose every argument that uses them. Perhaps someday, a human-machine process will create what Stengel describes as a "global ombudsman for information."

But right now, the truth is losing. And we wonder: Which side will America's next president take in the war on information?

— November 30, 2016

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# Once again, mainstream news outlets miss the social-media boat

BY PAUL FARHI

• Originally Published January 22, 2017

From its inception, it was a social-media phenomenon, not a mainstream-media one.

The organizers of the many women's marches that filled the streets of cities across the world on Saturday got the word out about their projects primarily via Facebook. From there, news spread from one feed to another, and from one mouth to another, feeding a vast river of humanity.

By contrast, mainstream news outlets — focused primarily on the inauguration of a president, against whom many of the marchers were protesting — gave the run-up to the event relatively scant coverage.

Taken collectively, the Women's March on Washington and its many affiliated "sister" marches were perhaps the largest single demonstration of the power of social media to create a mobilization.

The march has precedent in the annals of online activism: The Arab Spring demonstrations of 2011 and the tea party, Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements, for example, were all driven by social media. But perhaps no such effort has turned out so many in a single day. The crush of bodies was so heavy that organizers and public safety officials in several

cities, including Chicago, suspended plans for actually marching anywhere. That turned some of the gatherings into rallies.

As with those other grass-roots causes, traditional news media outlets were late in catching up to the story. "NBC Nightly News" did its first story about the march on Thursday, two days before hundreds of thousands took to the streets, according to a search of the Nexis database. ABC's "World News Tonight" aired an 18-word sound bite from one of the march's co-organizers on Wednesday. And although the New York Times mentioned the event numerous times in the weeks preceding the march, the newspaper featured it just once on its front page through Tuesday. (Its story concerned racial divisions among organizers and marchers.)

*The Washington Post* devoted numerous stories to the planning and logistics of the march, including one only a week after its inception in November. But it published only one story on its front page. The Jan. 3 story's headline said it could be "the biggest inauguration demonstration."

"The women's marches were pretty much under the radar in most mainstream-media coverage over the last few weeks," says Marcus Messner, an associate professor of journalism at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he studies social media. The number of demonstrators and events, he says, "caught the media and public

off guard," even as the social-media buzz began growing into a "huge groundswell."

According to Messner, the event demonstrated that "organizers don't need media coverage anymore to reach large audiences and turn out large crowds for protests when people are passionate about issues and connect via social media."

TV reporters spent much of Saturday afternoon marveling at the massive crowds gathered in Washington, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, London and other cities. "The Metro system is completely overwhelmed. The cellphone system is overwhelmed. The satellite trucks are overwhelmed," MSNBC correspondent Cal Perry reported from the Mall in Washington, adding, "We're looking at a city that's overwhelmed."

A few minutes later on CNN, reporter Jessica Schneider also invoked the o-word: "The turnout here in New York City, frankly, is overwhelming," she said, as thousands could be seen behind her, shuffling down a city street.

Cable news coverage toggled between the march and Donald Trump's activities during his first full day as president, including attendance at a morning prayer service and a visit to CIA headquarters in the afternoon. Fox seemed to go heavier on the latter: Hosts Bill Hemmer and Shannon Bream took a few minutes

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in the afternoon to speculate about Trump's potential choice of White House pet and to show Donald Trump Jr.'s video of his family bowling in the executive mansion. By Sunday afternoon, just 24 hours after the march, Foxnews.com's homepage had all but forgotten the event had happened. The page displayed only one small story referencing the march. The headline read, "Trump on thrones of protesters: 'Why didn't these people vote?'"

The march itself began as a single Facebook post the day after Trump was elected Nov. 8. Disappointed by Trump's victory, Teresa Shook, a retired attorney who lives in Hawaii, dashed off a post asking if women were interested in rallying in Washington around Inauguration Day. She asked her online friends for help creating an event page and posted one for her proposed march. When Shook went to bed that night, 40 people had signed on to the idea. When she woke up the next

morning, the number of responses had jumped to 10,000.

New York fashion designer Bob Bland had a similar idea about the same time. She proposed a "Million P---y March," naming her creation after the vulgar language Trump used in describing his treatment of women during an unguarded 2005 conversation with "Access Hollywood" host Billy Bush. Sign

By early January, more than 150,000 people had responded to what professional organizers had renamed the Women's March on Washington. Dozens of groups, including Planned Parenthood, soon became partners, spreading the news on Facebook and other social-media platforms.

"Social media has entirely changed the organizing landscape," says Karen North, director of the social-media program at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. "It is a way to ask

people to join with friends and with like-minded people and promote a sense of belonging. Social media allows us to organize people in a manner that feels like a personal invitation and also in a manner that suggests a groundswell of support and passion about a cause."

Even if they don't spark movements, Messner says traditional-media outlets can still act as "an amplifier" of them, spreading attention and in some ways validating them. "It's not unlikely that women who stayed home today will show up next time, as they saw that they will be part of a bigger movement." Mainstream-media coverage, he says, "can now lead to an even bigger turnout down the road, if the movement continues."

If it does, the news media will have learned a lesson from Saturday's event, he suggests. Before the next big march, according to Messner, mainstream-media coverage will be "guaranteed."



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# I was a victim of a Russian smear campaign. I understand the power of fake news.

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM  
*Columnist*

• Originally Published  
December 20, 2016

We were told in June that the Democratic National Committee had been hacked by Russians. We were told in October that material subsequently passed on to WikiLeaks came from the same source. Numerous articles were written about these leaks and about Donald Trump's many Russian connections. And yet no one was really outraged until now. Why? I have a theory: Until you have seen for yourself how 21st-century disinformation works, you laugh at the very idea of it. Once you have understood its power, you stop laughing.

If I was slightly ahead of the curve, it's only because I saw it firsthand. A couple of years ago, I was the focus of a smear campaign. Elements of it could have been lifted out of a spy novel, but the basic idea was quite simple: In the wake of the invasion of Crimea, when I was writing quite a bit about Ukraine, nasty little articles about me started appearing on Russia-based websites. The technique was the same as that used by people who later dressed up the stories from the emails of the Democratic National Committee



and John Podesta: Mix truth and lies — my book contract and royalties were described as mysterious income from questionable sources — make ludicrous claims, pass on the lies to other Russian-backed websites, and then watch them pass it on again.

There was no way to correct the stories — to whom would I complain? — and as I'm not running for president, frankly, who cares? But it was eye-opening to watch the stories move through a well-oiled system, one that had been constructed for exactly this sort of purpose. Eventually the articles about me were echoed or quoted in a dozen places: on quasi-respectable websites with ties to Russian business, on Russia Today, and on pro-Russian U.S. websites such as Ron Paul's Institute for Peace and

Prosperity. The process peaked in November 2015, when WikiLeaks — out of the blue — tweeted one of the articles to its 4 million followers.

It was a peculiar experience, but I learned a lot. As I watched the story move around the Web, I saw how the worlds of fake websites and fake news exist to reinforce one another and give falsehood credence. Many of the websites quoted not the original, dodgy source, but one another. There were more phony sites than I'd realized, though I also learned that many of their "followers" (maybe even most of them) are bots — bits of computer code that can be programmed to imitate human social media accounts and told to pass on particular stories.

The Russians understood the power of such networks to fool people before anybody else. They also understood that the global information space, accessible to all, offered a cheap way for an impoverished ex-superpower to meddle in other countries' politics. In my case it didn't matter, because nobody I know cared about the stories. But during the U.S. election campaign, with millions and millions of bots at work, hundreds of fake stories in circulation and many volunteers joining the troll factories and botnets, maybe Kremlin-generated lies and Kremlin-created echo chambers did make a difference. The same techniques were at work:



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# Museums and libraries fight ‘alternative facts’ with a #DayofFacts

BY SARAH KAPLAN

• Originally published February 17, 2017

First the National Parks went rogue, sharing climate change data on Twitter. Now museums and libraries have taken up arms — or at least typing fingers — to fight on behalf of facts.

Using the hashtag #DayofFacts, more than 280 scientific and cultural institutions are devoting Friday to dropping 140-character truths on Twitter. Many of the facts seem pointedly political — like the National Museum of American Jewish History’s tweet about a George Washington letter affirming religious freedom in the country, or a placard held up in a video by Chicago’s Field Museum that stated “Climate change is accelerating the extinction of plants and animals.”

The political undertone is the goal, according to Alli Hartley, a museum educator from Virginia who helped organize the campaign with her colleague Mara Kurlandsky.

“We’re using facts to illustrate truth about the present moment,” Hartley said.

By midmorning Friday, the hashtag was trending in the United States.

The idea for a “Day of Facts” came to Hartley a few weeks ago, just after President Trump took office.



THE WASHINGTON POST

Museums and libraries fight ‘alternative facts’ with a #DayofFacts

The National Park Service Twitter account had been temporarily shut down after it retweeted an image comparing inauguration crowd sizes. Then senior adviser Kellyanne Conway tried to explain the dust-up over the attendance by saying the administration had “alternative facts.” Then an ex-employee at Badlands National Park briefly took control of the park’s twitter account to fire off a series of factual tweets about climate change. The missives were quickly deleted, but other parks (and a cadre of “alt” twitter accounts) took up the cause.

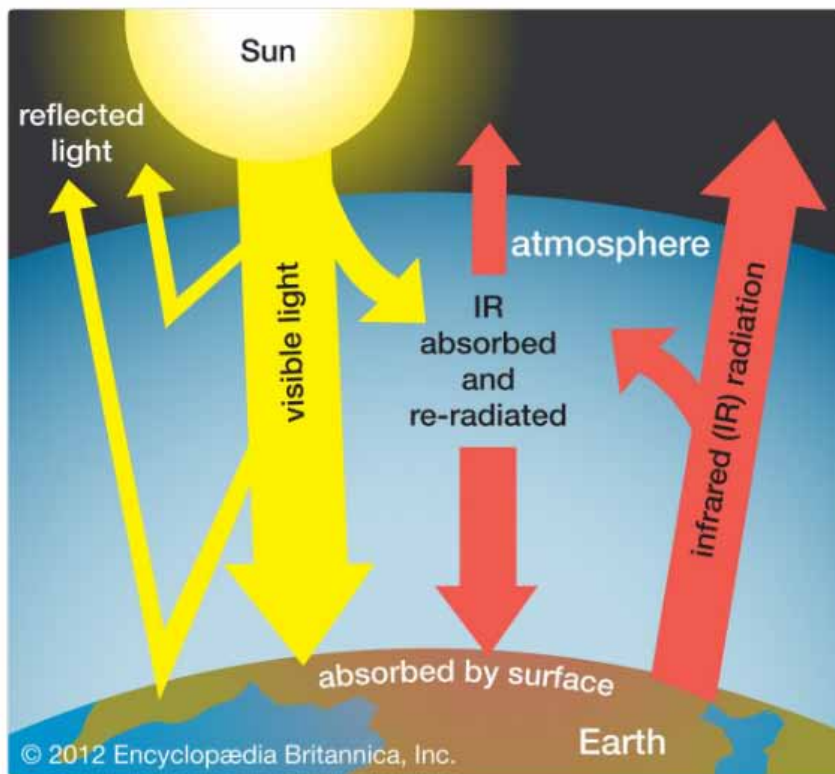
That’s when Hartley saw a post from Death Valley National Park noting that the park had hosted interned Japanese Americans during World War II.

“I thought it was brilliant in that there was no way an administration or anyone could question it, because on one level it wasn’t political, it was just sharing factual content. But on another level it really resonated with the political moment,” she said.

She reached out to Kurlandsky, who oversees digital engagement for the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, and asked for help organizing a social media campaign. Pretty soon they had a website, a twitter handle and a following that included the Newseum, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, the National Aquarium, even the Encyclopaedia Britannica, along with dozens of smaller museums and public libraries nationwide and even worldwide.

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The greenhouse effect: Sunlight is reflected by Earth's atmosphere & surface but most is absorbed, warming the surface. #DayofFacts

RETWEETS  
21LIKES  
29

7:40 AM - 17 Feb 2017

THE WASHINGTON POST

“Given the political discourse and discussion about alternative facts and fake news, it’s important for museums to remind people ... we’re here as trusted sources of

information and facts are important and truth is important,” Hartley said.

She and her colleagues were wary about calling the Day

of Facts a form of “resistance.” Most museums rely partly on grants from federal agencies like the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and neighborhood libraries depend almost entirely on public dollars. They don’t want to put their funding at risk by running afoul of public officials. (This is why Hartley, who works for a public park system, asked that her employer not be named.)

And not all of the facts are political — some, like these, are simply cool details, including, for example, one tweet about Benjamin Franklin’s founding of the nation’s first public lending library in 1731.

But when *Chicago Sun Times* columnist Neil Steinberg asked Alex Teller, communications director for Chicago’s Newberry Library, if this was a reaction to President Trump, Teller replied: “I would say ... that ... yes.”

“But I also think a lot of institutions are participating in this,” Teller added. “They would stress that standing up for the importance of historical truth, and standards of truth should not be perceived as taking a political stance. Standing up for truth and certain standards for verifying information shouldn’t be politicized.”

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## THE FIX • ANALYSIS

# Trump's reelection campaign says more TV networks are refusing to air an ad targeting 'fake news'

BY CALLUM BORCHERS

• Originally Published May 5, 2017

*This post has been updated.*

President Trump's political team says ABC, CBS and NBC have joined CNN in refusing to air an ad that labels them "fake news."

CNN was the first to reject the spot, which touts achievements during Trump's first 100 days in office while claiming that the media do not cover his accomplishments.

"CNN requested that the advertiser remove the false graphic that the mainstream media is 'fake news,'" the cable channel said in a statement Tuesday. "The mainstream media is not fake news, and therefore the ad is false and per policy will be accepted only if that graphic is deleted."

NBC issued a similar statement on Friday: "Consistent with our policies, we have agreed to accept the ad if the inaccurate graphic — which refers to journalists as 'fake news' — is corrected."

The "fake news" graphic appears over a split-screen showing NBC's Andrea Mitchell, CNN's Wolf Blitzer, MSNBC's Rachel Maddow,



**The Trump campaign committee-produced ad celebrates the president's first 100 days in office and refers to mainstream media as "fake news."**

ABC's George Stephanopoulos and CBS's Scott Pelley.

The ad was produced by Trump's campaign committee, which remains active; the president already has filed to seek reelection in 2020. The Trump campaign said Monday that it planned to spend \$1.5 million to place the commercial on TV and online.

"It is absolutely shameful to see the media blocking the positive message that President Trump is trying to share with the country," Michael Glassner, the Trump campaign's executive

director, said in a statement Tuesday. In an email on Friday, the campaign said the blackout is "setting a chilling precedent against free speech rights."

The president's daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, appeared on Sean Hannity's Fox News show Thursday night to decry CNN's decision.

"You would think after a while you would get used to this sort of thing, but it is never normal," she said. "It's really disappointing that we live in the United States of America. This is supposed to be a free society. We have freedom of speech."

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THE WASHINGTON POST

**Sean Hannity, FoxNews host interviews Lara Trump, the president's daughter-in-law.**

In this case, the free-speech argument is not a winning one. TV stations — even over-the-air broadcasters, which are subject to tighter regulation by the Federal Communications Commission than their cable counterparts — do not have to allow the president to buy airtime for his ad.

Here is the relevant FCC rule:

*No station licensee is required to permit the use of its facilities by any legally qualified candidate for public office, but if any licensee shall permit any such candidate to use its facilities, it shall afford equal opportunities to all other candidates*

*for that office to use such facilities. Such licensee shall have no power of censorship over the material broadcast by any such candidate.*

Remember: We're talking about candidates for president in 2020. Trump doesn't have opponents yet — not any serious ones, anyway, and certainly none buying ad time.

If, for example, Martin O'Malley were already in the race and if ABC, CBS and NBC affiliates had been airing his commercials, those stations would have no choice but to show Trump's, too. And they would have "no power of censorship."

But the networks, which are not licensed by the FCC, do not have to show Trump's ad, and their affiliates can turn down Trump, so long as they have not said yes to any other 2020 presidential candidate.

Also, by the dictionary definition of "fake," the networks are correct to say that the ad is "false" or "inaccurate." With few exceptions (Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair), mainstream news outlets do not fabricate stories. They might display shades of bias or

publish errors requiring corrections, but that does not make them fake.

Trump, however, has tried (largely successfully) to turn "fake news" into a catchall slur for reporting he doesn't like.

Observe: In its first email to reporters about the ad, his campaign said it is "calling out the mainstream media for peddling fake news and not reporting on the fact that President Trump is making America great again."

By Trump's standard, news is fake if it does not promote the subjective view that he is "making America great again."

It is easy to understand why TV networks would want to ban Trump's insulting ad from their airwaves. If Trump takes his "fake news" message into his reelection bid, however, he can probably compel them to air it — unless they are willing to give up ad revenue from all candidates.

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*Callum Borchers covers the intersection of politics and media. Follow @callumborchers*

### Discussion Questions

1. Why have CNN, NBC and other media companies refused to air ads created by the Trump campaign committee?
2. What argument is being used by those who want the ad to be aired?
3. Summarize the FCC rule that applies to this situation.
4. Certain ads air during the day, other ads do not appear on air until after 9:00 p.m. Do you think media have the right to determine what ads will air on their stations?
5. If you were a media executive, would you air the campaign ad? Why or why not?