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Vox, May 19, 2017

Donald Trump and the rise of tribal epistemology

Journalism cannot be neutral toward a threat to the conditions that make it possible.

By [David Roberts@drvox.com](mailto:David.Roberts@drvox.com) Updated May 19, 2017, 9:58am EDT

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(Javier Zarracina)

Back in November 2009, as the Obama backlash was just gathering steam, Rush Limbaugh devoted a segment of his radio program to [“Climategate.”](#)

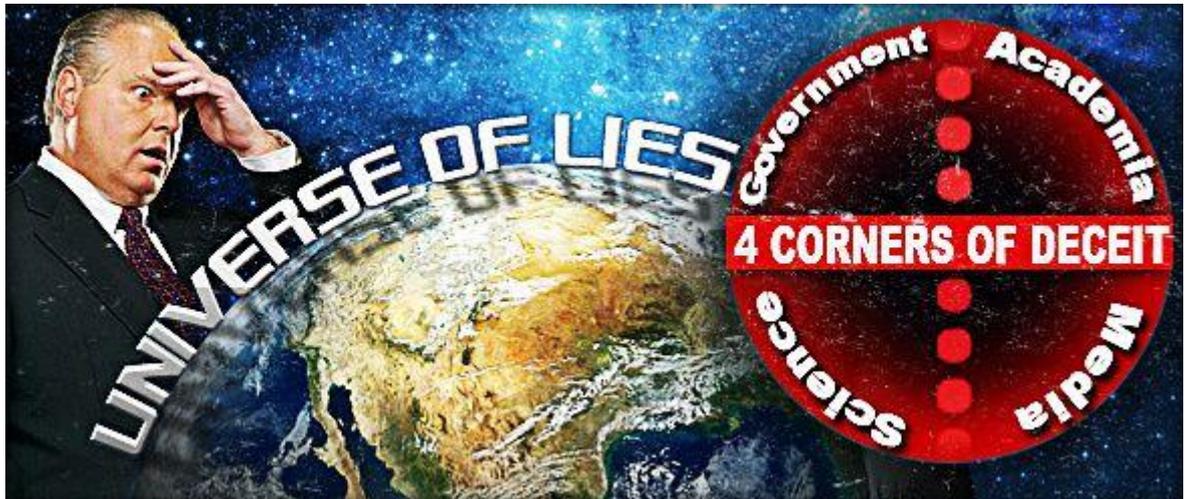
That was the episode in which a climate research institute was hacked and the private emails of scientists were leaked. Conservative media sifted through the emails, stripping individual sentences and phrases out of context and spinning them to look sinister, as though scientists were coordinating and manipulating results. Mainstream media dutifully covered the “controversy.”

No fewer than [five separate investigations](#) later cleared the scientists of any wrongdoing, but by then, for a large class of right-wing media consumers, it was already settled history, part of shared lore.

It pushed Limbaugh to new rhetorical heights.

“What this fraud, what the uncovering of this hoax, exposes,” he said, “is the corruption that exists between government and academia and science and the media. Science has been corrupted. We know the media has been corrupted for a long time. Academia has been corrupted. None of what they do is real. It’s all lies!”

He called these institutions — government, academia, science, and media — the “Four Corners of Deceit.”



The four corners of deceit ... in, uh, a circle. RushLimbaugh.com

He and his listeners, he said, live in a world apart:

We live in two universes. One universe is a lie. One universe is an entire lie. Everything run, dominated, and controlled by the left here and around the world is a lie. The other universe is where we are, and that’s where reality reigns supreme and we deal with it. And seldom do these two universes ever overlap.

This is not just run-of-the-mill ranting. It expresses something profound about the worldview of conservative media and its audience, something the mainstream media has ignored, denied, or waved away for many years.

In Limbaugh’s view, the core institutions and norms of American democracy have been irredeemably corrupted by an alien enemy. Their claims to transpartisan authority — authority that applies equally to all political factions and parties — are fraudulent. There are no transpartisan authorities; there is only zero-sum competition between tribes, the left and right. Two universes.

One obvious implication of this view is that only one’s own tribe can be trusted. (Who wants to trust a “universe of lies”?)

Over time, this leads to what you might call *tribal epistemology*: Information is evaluated based not on conformity to common standards of evidence or correspondence to a common understanding of the world, but on whether it supports the tribe’s values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders. “Good for our side” and “true” begin to blur into one.

Now tribal epistemology has found its way to the White House.

Donald Trump and his team represent an assault on almost every American institution — they make no secret of their desire to [“deconstruct the administrative state”](#) — but their hostility toward the media is unique in its intensity.

It is Trump’s obsession and favorite target. He sees himself as waging a [“running war”](#) on the mainstream press, which his consigliere Steve Bannon calls [“the opposition party.”](#)

For the media, Trump represents a great challenge but also a great opportunity. He will make the work of journalism more difficult (calling [only on sycophantic outlets](#) during press conferences is likely just the beginning). But by putting the integrity of the press in the spotlight, he might just force a long-overdue reckoning with the role of media in democratic politics.

The US political media underestimated Trump’s potential for many reasons. Prominent among them was its longstanding refusal to grapple with the deepening asymmetry in American politics — the rejection, by a large swath of the right, of the core institutions and norms that shape US public life.

Under Trump, that asymmetry has become glaring and inescapable. And it is bumping up against the foundations upon which all independent journalism stands.

It is time for journalism to take a side — to fight, not for any political party, but for the conditions that make its own existence possible.

I apologize for the lengthy post, but there’s a lot of ground to cover. Let’s start with the story of the asymmetry, how it came about, and what effect it has had on the media environment. It all begins with the [big sort](#).

America the sorted

It is well known that Americans have been sorting themselves into like-minded communities by race, class, and ideology, creating more in-group homogeneity and cultural “bubbles.”

A few years ago, Will Wilkinson [looked into some research](#) showing that the country is sorting itself by personality as well. He summarizes what he found: “liberals (low conscientiousness, high openness to experience) and conservatives (high conscientiousness, low openness) have distinctive personalities, and there’s reason to believe we’ve been sorting ourselves into communities of psychologically/ideologically similar people.”

In a [fascinating new piece](#) published in January, Wilkinson brought that evidence together with evidence from the social sciences that as a society becomes wealthier, its values tend to drift toward self-expression and secular rationalism, away from traditionalism and survival values.

The US has long been something of an exception among developed democracies — it has been drifting (mildly) in the direction of traditionalism. The explanation for this, Wilkinson hypothesizes, is that the small aggregate movement is hiding an extreme divergence underneath:

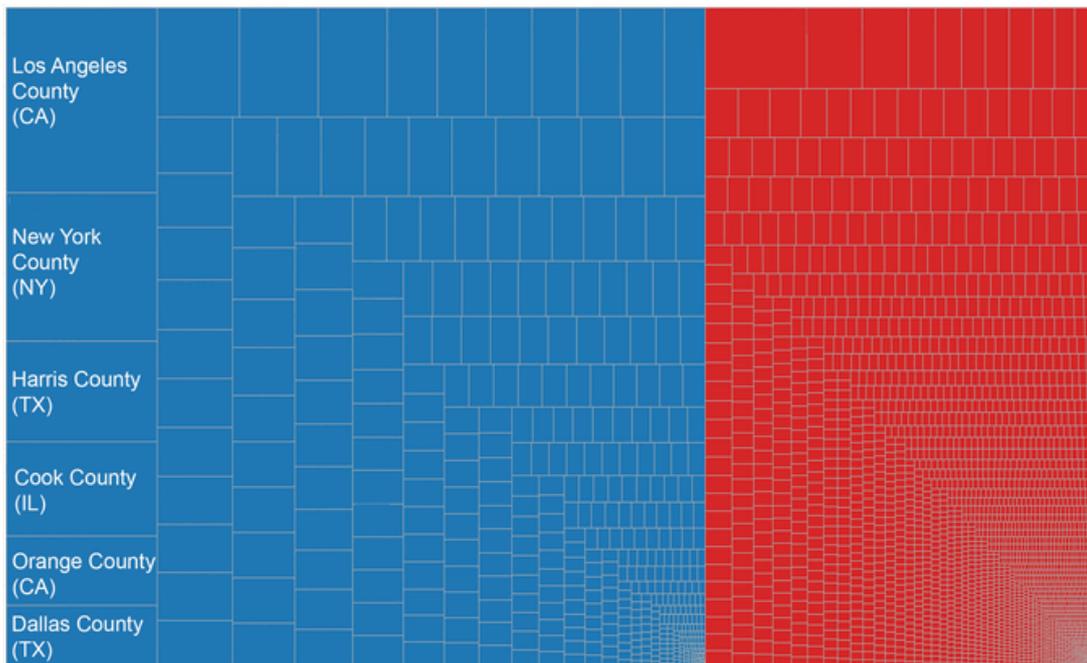
[T]he United States may be dividing into two increasingly polarized cultures: an increasingly secular-rational and self-expression oriented “post-materialist” culture concentrated in big cities and the academic archipelago, and a largely rural and exurban culture that has been tilting in the opposite direction, toward zero-sum survival values, while trying to hold the line on traditional values.

On this theory, globalization has effectively split the US into two countries: an economically booming urban country (albeit with plenty of poor people inside it) and a stagnant or declining rural and exurban one. The fate of midsize towns and cities seems to depend on which of those two currents they catch.

Democrats, like economic activity, are increasingly concentrated in cities. In a paper last year, Mark Muro and Sifan Liu at the Brookings Institution [found](#) that the fewer than 500 US counties that went for Hillary Clinton in 2016 represent “a massive 64 percent of America’s economic activity as measured by total output in 2015.”

Donald Trump won more than 2,600 counties. Together, they represent just 36 percent of the nation’s economic output.

Candidates’ shares of 2015 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by county in the 2016 presidential election



The less-than-500 counties won by Hillary Clinton generated 64 percent of America’s GDP in 2015

The more-than-2,600 counties won by Donald Trump generated 36 percent of America’s GDP in 2015

Source: Brookings analysis of Moody’s Analytics estimates.

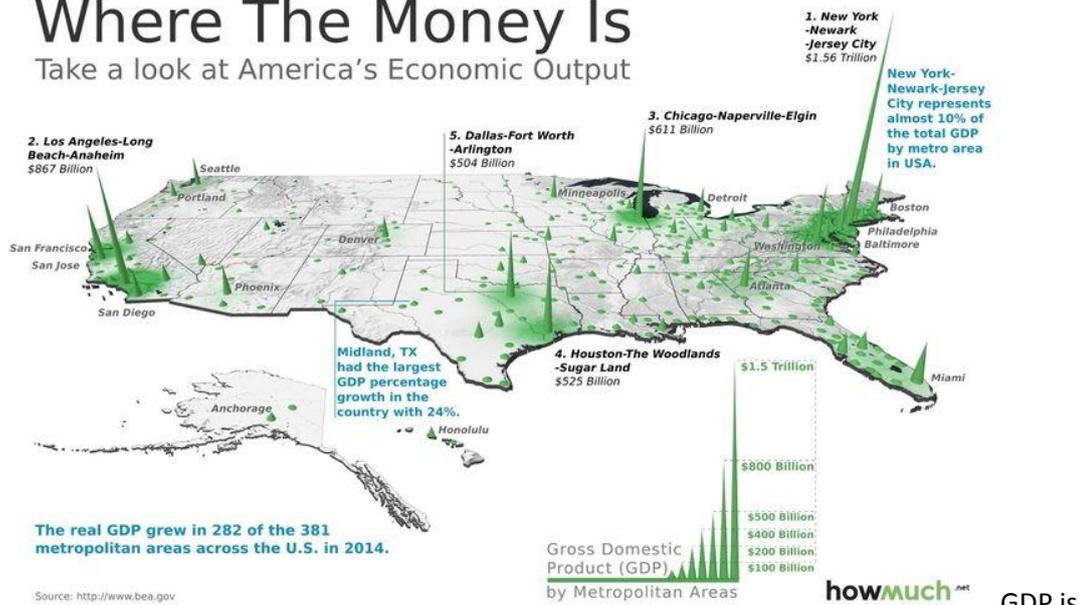
B Metropolitan Policy Program
at BROOKINGS

[\(Brookings\)](#)

Here’s another way of viewing the economic sorting — a 3D map that shows spikes where the economic output is.

Where The Money Is

Take a look at America's Economic Output



spiky. (howmuch.net)

These two Americas have experienced diverging fortunes and have consequently been diverging in values, ideology, and even personality. Increasingly, cosmopolitan risk takers flock to cities while traditionalists remain in rural and exurban areas. (Wilkinson had [yet another great piece](#) about this in the Washington Post last week.)

Sorting has been both a driver and a consequence of the extraordinary [polarization](#) of US public life over the past several decades.

The right's rejection of American institutions

From Reagan forward, the US has become much more politically polarized, but the polarization has [not been symmetrical](#) — the right has become far more extreme than the left. (That story is exhaustively told in [Asymmetric Politics](#), by political scientists David Hopkins and Matt Grossmann.)

But it doesn't help much to think of polarization as working purely along a single left-right axis, as though the right has simply moved further right. Instead, there has been a break, a divergence of political worldviews.

On one side is what we might call the classic liberal democratic (small-l, small-d) theory of politics. In this view, politics is a kind of structured contest. Factions and parties battle over interests and policies, but the field of play on which they battle is ring-fenced by a set of common institutions and norms. Inside that fence is “normal politics” — the subject of legitimate political dispute. Outside that fence is out of bounds, in violation of shared standards.

The “game” of politics is defined by explicit rules (e.g., the Constitution), enforced by various legally empowered referees (e.g., courts and the executive branch). But it is also defined by implicit norms, unwritten rules more informally enforced by the press, academia, and civil society. These latter institutions are referees as well, but their

enforcement power operates not through law but through *trust*. Their transpartisan authority exists solely because participants in the game agree it does.

The idea is that when political participants step outside the ring fence and violate some shared rule or norm, they are called on it by referees and must pay some penalty, reputational or otherwise. In this way, political contests are bounded and contained, prevented from spilling over into violence or illiberalism. That's how democracy — indeed, any framework of cooperation among large numbers of diverse people — works. Institutions and norms provide structure and limits, the shared scaffolding of cooperation.

That is the classic, some might say naive, view. But there has always been a powerful strain in conservatism (think the [John Birch Society](#)) that resists seeing itself as a participant in the game at all. It sees the game itself, its rules and referees, as captured by the other side, operating for the other side's benefit. Any claim of transpartisan authority is viewed with skepticism, as a kind of ruse or tool through which one tribe seeks to dominate another.

That's the view Limbaugh and others in right-wing media have consistently articulated. And it has found an increasingly receptive audience. Over time, the right's base — unlike the left's fractious and heterogeneous coalition of interest groups — has become increasingly homogeneous (mostly white, non-urban, and Christian) and like-minded (traditionalist, zero-sum values).

They are temperamentally prone to fear change, but a great deal of demographic and economic change has found them anyway. Their anxiety leaves them wanting clear answers and strong leaders. And under a steady diet of radicalizing media and tribal epistemology, their traditionalism has hardened into tribalism. (If you haven't already, you must read Amanda Taub's [“The rise of American authoritarianism.”](#))

Now the right-wing base has effectively taken over and is running the GOP. Republicans in Congress overwhelmingly come from safe districts and fear primaries from the right above all else. Trump is the base's unbounded id, and, at least so far, the GOP is genuflecting before him.

Trump's core supporters do not mind when he threatens the media, denigrates the courts, attacks intelligence agencies, dismisses the Congressional Budget Office, and treats the office of the presidency as a brand marketing opportunity. They have rejected the whole framework within which the two parties used to compete. They want to burn it all down.

The tribalization of information

The right's view that the institutions lean liberal is hyperbolic, but not without foundation. Science, academia (at least liberal arts and social sciences), and journalism do tend to draw their personnel from left-leaning demographics.

Those institutions have cosmopolitan aspirations — fair application of transpartisan standards — but there’s no doubt that in practice, those aspirations often cover for more parochial preferences.

But the right has not sought greater fairness in mainstream institutions; it has defected to create its own. Grossmann and Hopkins recently published an article called [“How Information Became Ideological.”](#) They sum up:

[O]nly the Republican Party has actively opposed society’s central information-gathering and -disseminating institutions — universities and the news media — while Democrats have remained reliant on those institutions to justify policy choices and engage in political debate, considering them both independent arbiters and allies. Although each party’s elites, activists and voters now depend on different sources of knowledge and selectively interpret the messages they receive, **the source of this information polarization is the American conservative movement’s decades-long battle against institutions that it has deemed irredeemably liberal.** [my emphasis]

Democrats still largely see themselves as playing the game, bound by the ring fence, subject to common referees (e.g., science and media). That’s how most of the mainstream media sees the situation as well. But the right sees the game itself, its institutions and norms, as the enemy.

So it has waged a long war on those “information-gathering and -disseminating institutions.” Lots of landmarks stand out — Limbaugh and talk radio, Drudge and internet — but for symbolism, it’s hard to beat Newt Gingrich, House speaker in 1995, [shutting down the Office of Technology Assessment](#) (OTA), an organization created in 1972 to produce reliable nonpartisan information and analysis for members of Congress.



Passing the torch in 1985. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

The OTA often produced information inconvenient to Republican policy goals, so Gingrich killed it. Afterward, journalist Chris Mooney [wrote](#) that “the new Republican majority could freely call upon its own favorable scientific ‘experts’ and rely upon more questionable and self-interested analyses prepared by lobbyists, think tanks, and interest groups.”

In this way, information vouchsafed by independent, transpartisan authorities was sidelined in Congress in favor of competing sets of experts and lobbyists. The information available to lawmakers was tribalized.

(Meanwhile, just last week, [Gingrich called for the CBO to be abolished](#). At least he’s consistent.)

Another significant landmark, underappreciated to this day, was the founding and rise of Fox News. (Conservative Bruce Bartlett has a [great long read](#) on the subject.)

Conservatives have always believed that the mainstream media is biased against them. They’ve made a decades-long grassroots effort out of hassling journalists about it — “working the refs,” in the apt phrase.

But what the right wants is not better, fairer, more scrupulous information referees. It wants tribal information. It showed what it wants by what it created.

Liberal Ted Turner created CNN, an organization that, whatever its faults (and they are legion) saw itself, and still sees itself, as a neutral referee with transpartisan authority. It has cosmopolitan aspirations.

The late conservative [Roger Ailes](#) (funded by conservative Rupert Murdoch) created Fox News, a channel that carried, and still carries, mostly talk radio–style right-wing commentary. Like talk radio, it is of the conservative movement, in a way that no mainstream media outlet would ever think of itself as of the left. The closest thing on cable, MSNBC, is running from the liberal label as fast as it can, “balancing” Rachel Maddow with a growing roster of conservatives.

Fox plopped down on cable and dared the mainstream media to say anything about it. It never saw itself as better mainstream media — it saw itself as a conservative competitor to a liberal incumbent. It started mainstreaming conservative talking points and conspiracies, quickly gained a huge (mostly [white](#), mostly [old](#)) audience, and, through sheer chutzpah, was accepted as a legitimate news outlet.

It’s not that Fox News hasn’t produced some good journalism and good journalists. It’s that the ultimate axis around which the enterprise revolves is partisan. It is an instrument to advance the interests of the conservative movement. When Ailes was ousted in the wake of [horrific sexual harassment allegations](#), he almost immediately [became a Trump adviser](#). The cat was never in the bag.

In the 2016 election, Fox News remained the [predominant source of political news for Trump supporters](#).

(Pew)

Of course, the reality of Fox News has never loomed as large as its influence. Cable's audience is waning, and Fox's core demographic (median viewer age: [68](#)) is, not to put too fine a point on it, dying off. As the Atlantic's Derek Thompson [wrote](#):

The network averages about 2 million viewers each week, and Bill O'Reilly's show fetches a bit more than 3 million. ... Fox News is "mainstream" only by the modern and severely diluted definition of the term; Walter Cronkite once pulled audiences in the tens of millions. By any reasonable calculation, Fox News is niche. And its niche is old white men.

(Fox viewers are also, incidentally, the [most misinformed](#) of any TV audience.)

Nonetheless, despite Fox's current diminished state and demographic peril, it did its job: It threw open the door of the mainstream conversation to dozens of explicitly conservative news outlets. It established that "balance" in US media would consist of mainstream outlets striving to be neutral and conservative outlets openly leaning right.

Conservative grassroots media, the vast network of radio shows and websites that has blossomed since the 1990s, is [arguably responsible](#) for a great deal of the far right's success. It has galvanized and mobilized a large tribe to organize and fight for its own interests.

But now establishment Republicans have caught the tiger by the tail. Originally the Washington GOP saw conservative media as a way to bypass the mainstream media and speak directly to their base. But along the way, right-wing media became the gatekeeper, and then the power broker.

As conservative writer David Frum [famously put it](#), "Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us. Now we're discovering we work for Fox." (Longtime New York Times political reporter Jackie Calmes [tells the story](#) in a long report titled ["They Don't Give a Damn about Governing!: Conservative Media's Influence on the Republican Party."](#))

Conservative media has different incentives than do Republican officeholders. It doesn't have any reason to compromise or accept partial progress. It doesn't have any reason to grapple with unwelcome facts, calm irrational fears, or temper unrealistic expectations. It profits from ideological maximalism and a constant state of mobilized outrage.

In effect, right-wing media took an audience already inclined to traditionalism and deliberately played on its fears and anxieties, pushing it further and further into tribalism. (That is the evolution many people in my cohort have seen in their older conservative relatives — from sensible fiscal conservatives in the 1980s to angry Tea Partiers in the 2010s.)

The result is that conservatives are pulled with increasing gravity into an information vortex that simply has no analogue elsewhere in American politics.

The right-wing media bubble contains much nonsense

In a [new study](#), Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman of *Columbia Journalism Review* analyzed 1.25 million stories published online between April 1, 2015, and the election. What they found:

While concerns about political and media polarization online are longstanding, our study suggests that polarization was asymmetric. Pro-Clinton audiences were highly attentive to traditional media outlets, which continued to be the most prominent outlets across the public sphere, alongside more left-oriented online sites. But pro-Trump audiences paid the majority of their attention to polarized outlets that have developed recently, many of them only since the 2008 election season [e.g., Breitbart].

Right-wing media, they write, has become “an internally coherent, relatively insulated knowledge community, reinforcing the shared worldview of readers and shielding them from journalism that challenge[s] it.”

October 2016, sized according to Twitter shares, colored according to proportion of each candidate’s supporters doing the tweeting. ([CJR](#))

The devolution of the right into unchecked tribal epistemology has involved, among other things, an absolute torrent of nonsense.

Millions of self-identified conservatives, in many cases majorities, believe that [the Clintons have been involved in multiple murders](#), Sharia law has [taken hold](#) in the US, Obama is a [Muslim](#) (and a [socialist](#)) who was [born in Kenya](#) and seeks to [destroy the US](#), Obama was planning a [coup in Jade Helm](#), Democrats are [running a child-trafficking ring out of a DC pizza restaurant](#), the UN’s Agenda 21 is an [international conspiracy to increase urban density](#), climate change is a [hoax](#), and on and on and on.

You could list these lunacies until your fingers went numb. (Just Google “[Glenn Beck’s chalkboard](#).”) There are new ones every day.

The right hypes its base up with bullshit — it [has for decades](#) — until an already tribally inclined audience has now descended into near-total [epistemic closure](#). It is contemptuous of outside fact-checking, no matter how assiduous, but endlessly gullible toward information shared on the inside. Consequently, it is an easy target.

Even the guys who make fake news for a living discovered this. The Washington Post [interviewed Paul Horner](#), one of the original fake news entrepreneurs, and he said this:

My sites were picked up by Trump supporters all the time. I think Trump is in the White House because of me. His followers don’t fact-check anything — they’ll post everything, believe anything.

BuzzFeed [analyzed the performance of a bunch of fake news stories](#) (the top three of which out-performed the top three stories from legitimate news outlets) and found “of the 20 top-performing false election stories identified in the analysis, all but three were overtly pro-Donald Trump or anti-Hillary Clinton.”

The [top story on Google News](#) the day after the election claimed that Donald Trump won the popular vote. (In the end, he lost by [2.8 million votes](#).)

Now such fantasies are being [propagated by the president himself](#), who accused Obama of wiretapping him on the basis of [“seeing a lot of things.”](#) When Bill O’Reilly confronted him about his claim that thousands of New Jersey Muslims celebrated 9/11, Trump [waved an article from Breitbart](#) in defense.

When asked about Trump’s [false statements regarding his inauguration crowd numbers](#), adviser Kellyanne Conway famously referred to her boss’s [“alternative facts.”](#) When asked about Trump’s [false statements regarding widespread voter fraud](#), his spokesperson Scottie Nell Hughes [said](#): “Mr. Trump’s tweets, amongst a certain crowd, a large — a large part of the population, are truth.”

In January, Rep. Lamar Smith (TX) [said](#) it’s “better to get your news directly from the president. In fact, it might be the only way to get the unvarnished truth.”

That’s tribal epistemology, as clearly articulated as it ever will be.

Now even some figures in conservative media are growing leery of how detached the base has become from fact-checking or restraint, as a recent [Oliver Darcy piece](#) detailed. “We have taught conservatives for many years to trust nothing other than what they hear in conservative media,” conservative radio host John Ziegler told Darcy. “Yet the conservative media has now proven to be untrustworthy.”

Back in 2005, David Foster Wallace wrote a [classic piece](#) on the rise of right-wing talk radio, centered on Ziegler, a war hawk and fervent conservative. Wallace worried that “the ever increasing number of ideological news outlets creates precisely the kind of relativism that cultural conservatives decry, a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which ‘the truth’ is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda.”

Now Ziegler worries about the same thing. He told Darcy:

If you are a conservative talk show host, which I am, if you don't accept that it's likely Hillary Clinton has taken part in multiple murders, or that Barack Obama is a Muslim extremist sympathizer who was probably born outside this country — if you don't accept those two things, it's almost as if you're a sellout. You're a RINO [Republican in name only].

The situation was perhaps best captured by the headline on a piece from the Washington Post’s Catherine Rampell: [“Americans — especially but not exclusively Trump voters — believe crazy, wrong things.”](#)

Unfortunately, the US media is not currently in a good place to deal with this crisis of authority.

Trust in the media has declined along with its power

As is true in many other Western countries, trust in institutions in the US has been declining for years. (See: [Twilight of the Elites](#), by Chris Hayes, one of the more prescient political books of the past decade.) The media is no exception. Gallup [recently reported](#) that trust in mass media is at a record low in the US:

[\(Gallup\)](#)

The decline is mostly driven by Republicans and independents (the latter often, and [increasingly](#), conservatives who do not self-identify as Republican).

[\(Gallup\)](#)

Republican trust in the mainstream media, hovering around 30 percent since about 2004, cratered last year to 14 percent. This is the culmination of the right's long campaign against media: a base that only trusts tribal news from tribal sources.

Journalism in the US has been through some traumatic times recently. The business model of newspapers and magazines fell apart, an enormous number of jobs were lost, local reporting was decimated. The number of outlets and voices exploded even as money for investigative reporting declined.

The weakening and fracturing of mainstream media happened alongside (and was not unrelated to) the rise of right-wing media, which has relentlessly challenged its legitimacy.

The result, writes longtime Politico editor Susan Glasser in an essay on [“Covering Politics in a ‘Post-Truth’ America.”](#) is a cacophony:

The bully pulpits, those of the press and the pols, have proliferated, and it's hard not to feel as though we're witnessing a sort of revolutionary chaos: the old centers of power have been torn down, but the new ones have neither the authority nor the legitimacy of those they've superseded.

While there was plenty of great political journalism this cycle — all those stories about Trump's bogus charity, his history of scams and bankruptcies, his record as a sexual predator — it “didn't seem to matter,” Glasser says. The signal was lost in the ideological noise.

Glasser goes rather too easy on the mainstream political press, which was also responsible for a lot of [misleading BS](#) during the campaign. And she is, like most US political journalists, blind to (or at least quiet about) the *asymmetry* of tribal news.

But she is right to see it as an institutional problem, a matter of authority and legitimacy. Facts do not, contra common belief, speak for themselves. Accuracy doesn't matter unless there are institutions and norms with the authority to make it matter. The question for the press is how to make truth matter again.

This is a battle the press has been avoiding for a long time, which is one reason among many its authority is at a low ebb.

In a battle over basic norms, the press cannot be neutral

To understand the media's dilemma, let's revisit the classic liberal view of democracy, in which there is an area of normal politics bounded and structured by a set of shared

rules and norms, enforced by institutions. This is still the view accepted, consciously or unconsciously, by most of the mainstream political press. It prides itself on being a neutral referee, enforcing shared standards of accuracy and honesty. (Yes, I am aware the reality falls painfully short.)

But what happens when political participants step out of bounds and violate shared norms? Is it the press's role to defend those norms, to push back, or merely to report on what has happened?

It's a dilemma. For one thing, no clear line separates legitimate subjects of political dispute from what is off limits or out of bounds. As circumstances change, those lines shift and warp at the margins. Collective values are always in flux. Things that were subject of dispute get put off limits (slavery, spousal rape), and things that were subject of consensus get opened back up to dispute (trans rights, marijuana legalization).

Instinctively, US journalists tend to see their role not as taking sides in those fights, but as accurately reporting on them.

They have faced the question again and again over the past few decades. From Gingrich's rule changes in the House through Clinton's impeachment through George W. Bush's theft of the 2000 election through adamant GOP intransigence under Obama to widespread state-level efforts to suppress the votes of minorities, the US political media has watched the right traduce one norm after another.

Each time, it has simply taken a step back and adjusted. A major political party will simply reject the consensus of the world's scientists on climate change? Okay. Senate Republicans will filibuster *every* bill now? Okay. House Republicans will routinely threaten the solvency of the country by refusing to raise the debt limit? Okay. The Senate will refuse to vote on a Supreme Court nominee in the last year of a presidency? Okay. The party will unite behind a serial swindler and self-confessed sexual predator? Okay.

It's been one step back after another, adjusting and readjusting to a new normal in politics.

And it's been the same with the profusion of right-wing media. One side of America's two-party system will build a giant parallel information apparatus operating on tribal lines, pushing one nonsense conspiracy theory after another into the political mainstream? Okay.

It's all been, to use a term much abused and misused lately, *normalized*.

"You, there, in the MAGA hat." ([Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images](#))

With Trump — his candidacy and now his presidency — the trampling of norms has become a stampede. The offenses range from small to large, petty to sinister. He [referenced the size of his penis](#) during a presidential primary debate, and it doesn't even make the top 10 list of [norms he's debased](#).

He's been accused of sexual assault by [more than a dozen women](#). He [hasn't released his tax returns](#), [hasn't divested from his businesses](#), hasn't appointed [most positions in his government](#). He [put a political adviser on the National Security Council](#), [conducted classified business in the dining room](#) of his Florida resort with [unsecured phone flashlights](#), is [giving his daughter security clearance](#) to be his "eyes and ears" inside the White House, and [accused an ex-president of illegally surveilling him](#).

This is all to say nothing of his [self-described](#) attempt to ban Muslims from the country. That seems bad too.

The norms are falling like dominoes. We're bumping up against core principles. Are we a multiethnic democracy committed to equality under law? Do we respect science and scholarship? Do we expect public figures to tell the truth?

This, finally, is the question the media must face: Can it be neutral toward a political movement that explicitly rejects core American institutions and norms?

The limits of journalistic neutrality

It's difficult to see how.

Journalism as practiced in the US is premised on professional norms of accuracy and fairness. Journalists and outlets very often fail to conform to those norms, or to apply them consistently, but the enterprise is founded on the notion that accuracy matters, that it means the same thing for everyone, that it can be reliably identified by knowledge communities like scientists, scholars, and field researchers, and that all sides in political disputes are accountable to it.

That enterprise is impossible, by definition, if all sides have their own truths. If there are no institutions with transpartisan credibility capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood, then for all intents and purposes, there is no truth — only individual and tribal truths, assembled like Facebook profiles. Politics becomes a pure contest of power.

At a deeper level, healthy journalism relies on the basic institutions and norms of liberal democracy — on transpartisan authorities capable of establishing a common bedrock of facts and rules. As we've seen in other democracies around the world that [succumb to autocracy](#) (think [Russia](#), [Hungary](#), [Turkey](#), [Venezuela](#)), the decline in institutions is both cause and consequence of authoritarianism.

As journalist Melik Kaylan [puts it](#), "no 'normalization' happens under the corrective effect of institutions. Rather, institutions themselves get eroded."

If it is premised on the integrity of transpartisan institutions and norms, then how can journalism be neutral toward a political movement that rejects them? How can it be neutral toward the preconditions of its own existence? In doing so, it can only negate itself.

Only strong institutions and norms can maintain the media's tenuous position

Defending core American institutions and norms does not come naturally to the American press. As Brian Beutler wrote in an [essay](#) last September, the US media is uncomfortable seeing itself as a guardian of anything beyond the narrowest press prerogatives like transparency and treatment of reporters.

This reticence is not unfounded. To defend broader civic norms and liberal institutions — equality before law, freedom of religion and assembly, respect for science, basic honesty and consistency — is to defend the preconditions for the existence of a healthy, independent media. But it is also, inescapably, to be at odds with an administration bent on degrading those norms and institutions. That puts political journalists in a tenuous (and, if things get really bad, possibly unsafe) position.

They must figure out a way to play a dual role: to be fair and consistent referees of policy and ideological disputes within the public square — while also acting to defend the institutional integrity of the square itself from what is, at present, a highly asymmetrical threat. They must fight to keep some core principles and commitments inviolate, outside the sphere of normal political dispute, against an administration that wants to drag them in.

They must resist authoritarianism and tribal epistemology, which are disproportionately animating one of America's two political parties, without acting consciously on behalf of the *other* party. They cannot afford to be, or be seen as, primarily instruments of the Democrats.

That's a humdinger of a problem. And there's no guarantee the US media will solve it any better than the media did in all those newly minted autocracies. It may be unsolvable, or at least at the mercy of larger social forces than journalism.

If it is solved, it will not be, in my view, on the demand side — by training media consumers to be more discerning. Too many of the tropes and delivery mechanisms of modern media are designed precisely to bypass critical filters. And everyone is subject to some tribalism, to biases and bubbles, in the best of circumstances.

Similarly, it's unlikely to be solved by individual journalists or media outlets. Their incentives are all askew. Modern media properties generally survive through advertising, which means above all they must seek scale and reach, especially on social media, and above all on Facebook.

The view from journalism HQ.

Especially if you're not one of the bigs (e.g., the New York Times), with tons of existing brand equity, it's often easier to go after a tribe. Tribal audiences bring intensity, which brings more clicks, views, shares, and reach, which bring more advertising.

Only two forces can counteract this basic incentive. One is the values and integrity of individual journalists and outlets. But as Glasser said, in an undifferentiated chaos of news, even good journalists and good journalism have trouble rising above the din. And anyway, relying on good hearts and good intentions is not a stable long-term strategy.

The other countervailing force is (at risk of repeating myself) norms and institutions — standards of accuracy and professional conduct in journalism and trusted civic or professional institutions to enforce them. Good journalism must bring some (reputational and ultimately financial) reward and bad journalism some censure. The alternative is further epistemic tribalism and attendant illiberalism, which undermine journalism's health.

Institutions like journalism draw their authority from trust. With enough of it, journalism can become a true “fourth estate,” an independent power center with an existence separate and distinct from dueling political factions. Without at least some trust that bridges tribal lines, its authority wanes, and it can only passively report as tribalism takes over.

In the end, for building trust, there simply is no substitute for A) guild professionals with special expertise in gathering and assessing information, B) strong norms to govern their behavior, C) institutions to enforce those norms and vouchsafe good work, and D) social norms granting those professionals some transpartisan authority.

The US has lots of A, but not much of B, C, or D.

The answer is ... ha ha, jk

If you waded through all 7 million words of this post, you were probably hoping I'd finish with a solution, or at least some good suggestions. I am here to disappoint you.

There's tons of advice floating around for individual journalists — be firm but fair, etc. etc. — but I've seen very little thinking or writing about how to strengthen journalism as such, the set of institutions and norms that comprise it.

I'm not sure what a certifying institution would even look like. The [other day on Pod Save America](#), Katie Couric said that journalism needs some sort of “Good Housekeeping seal of approval.” That expresses what I think is a very common, if inchoate, sentiment, which I share. Many people *want* to see outside their bubbles but lack reliable direction. It's a jungle out there.

But Couric said nothing about what such an institution might look like, how it might be established or staffed, how it could resist being, or being seen as, biased — how it could build the broad trust needed to be effective. And I'm afraid I don't have any ideas either, at least not any worth sharing here.

So I suppose I have the writer's lamest aspiration of all: to “start a conversation.” I don't know how to solve the problem, but I feel pretty confident it is located at the level of institutions and norms. One way or another, the media has got to hang the rules on the wall, reify and reaffirm its commitment to shared norms of accuracy, independence, fairness, and decency. It has to draw lines, reward quality, and resist the epistemic chaos that America's aspiring autocrat is pulling in his wake.

There's no other choice. In the end, if tribal epistemology wins, journalism loses.