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- + curl'd the blog posts and converted with pandoc
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Hate Inc by Matt Taibbi

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Preface: An Interview with Noam Chomsky

Ask the average liberal arts graduate about Dr. Noam Chomsky and one of the first comments is likely to involve his presentation. Despite being one of the world's leading experts in linguistics, he has a reputation for being a dull intellectual – someone “known for erudition rather than crowd-grabbing eloquence,” as one columnist once put it.

I always thought this legend was a bit of clever marketing on Chomsky's part. If you read his books closely, there's a conspicuous streak of ironic defiance that runs through his work. It animates his writing and his ideas and catches the reader conditioned to expect a bore by surprise.

He has a deadpan, dry sense of humor. If you asked him to sum up all of human history – and now that I think about it, I should have done this – he would probably say something like, “Unsurprisingly horrible.”

Chomsky in person turns out to be affable, funny, and generous. A million things have been written about him and he seems way past caring. A few years ago he moved to the University of Arizona in Tucson from his longtime home in Boston, at M.I.T. When I commented on the heat – I almost collapsed walking from my car to his office – he laughed and said that he actually liked it a lot. Boston in the summer is much worse, he said. He seemed to mean it. He looks like a happy man.

I came to ask about the legacy of *Manufacturing Consent*. How did he think his famous examination of the media held up over the years? Did he think the

famous “propaganda model” still played in the Internet age? What, if anything, had changed?

I also wanted to ask about the history of a book that had impacted many young reporters, including myself once upon a time. Why had a non-journalist ventured into this topic? I asked the same question about his co-author, Wharton School professor Ed Herman, who sadly [passed away last year](#).

About Herman: one of the first things Chomsky mentioned is that the “propaganda model” was “a little more his than mine,” which is why he insisted that the book’s byline read Herman/Chomsky, and not Chomsky/Herman. As it turned out, the book had a bit of a strange history, and he seemed to enjoy recounting it. We ended up talking about the future of the news media, and about the immediate political future.

There is a whole literature of reporters running to Chomsky in search of scare quotes about how this time, things are really bad – and coming away disappointed when Chomsky answers, with a shrug, that, no, things have always been this crazy, just remember X and Y and Z...

That drives reporters nuts. Particularly in the Trump era, when there’s constant pressure in the media business to scrape up a ten-alarm quote about how whatever lunatic thing Trump did today is the Worst Thing Ever, Chomsky has been a constant disappointment to the popular press.

He keeps telling reporters that Trump’s daily insanities are a distraction, and the real problems involve his administration’s dismantling of regulatory systems, its failure to focus on global warming, and its worsening of the threat of nuclear war. These are all things that, while historically awful, mostly happen behind closed doors, away from the headlines.

The world could use a little more of whatever well of equanimity he’s drinking from. In any case, here’s Noam Chomsky on the media’s past, present, and future:

Taibbi: Professor, it’s a great honor. Thanks so much for the time.

Chomsky: Thank you.

Taibbi: I want to talk [Manufacturing Consent](#), a book that had a huge influence

on reporters like myself.

Chomsky: Sure.

Taibbi: What was the genesis of that project? How did you decide to do a treatment of the media? Neither of you specialized in the subject.

Chomsky: Well, the first book we wrote had a very interesting history. It was called [*Counter-Revolutionary Violence*](#). There was a small, but quite successful, publisher that was publishing this. It was largely doing materials for universities, small monographs and things. One of them was this one we wrote, called *Counter-Revolutionary Violence*. They published 20,000 copies, and started advertising. But it turned out the company was owned by Warner Brothers. And one of the executives in Warner Brothers saw the ads, and didn't like it.

Taibbi: What didn't he like about it?

Chomsky: When he saw the book he practically went through the ceiling. So he asked them to withdraw the book. And they didn't want to do it. They said they would agree to publish a counter-volume if he wanted. No, he didn't want that. Wanted it withdrawn. What he finally did was put the publisher out of business, and destroyed all of their stock.

Taibbi: Goodness.

Chomsky: Including our book, and everything else.

Taibbi: Just to get rid of your book?

Chomsky: Yeah. And I brought it to the attention of some of the main civil libertarians, people like [*Village Voice* columnist] Nat Hentoff, and so on. But they didn't see any problems with American civil liberties. I can understand their point. It's not state censorship.

Taibbi: Right.

Chomsky: You're not supposed to notice that we have private governments that are much more powerful than the state. Anyway, that's not part of the ideology.

So this was okay, technically.

Well, we said, “Alright, that’s gone.” But we decided to expand it. The next major book that we did together was a two-volume [*Political Economy of Human Rights*](#), which came out in 1979. And it was around that time that we started working on looking at how the media handled things. And that led us to finally *Manufacturing Consent*.

Ed, as you may know, was a professor of finance. And his main work, his academic work, was called [*Corporate Power, Corporate Control*](#), which is a standard text on corporate power.

But he’s pretty left wing, so it was critical. The part of *Manufacturing Consent* on ownership and control, that’s basically his work, the introductory part. Then we kind of shared much of the rest. His style is different from mine. We worked together very well, but in different ways.

Actually we never even met! We met probably two or three times overall. ****
That was pre-Internet, so it was all on paper.

Taibbi: It was all done by correspondence?

Chomsky: Correspondence.

Taibbi: Wow. Like typewritten? Handwritten?

Chomsky: (smiling) Oh, typewritten!

Taibbi: Wow.

Chomsky: If you remember what it was like then – probably you don’t.

Taibbi: My generation is probably the last that does.

Chomsky: But the parts that are really carefully organized, all these charts on how many reports were there on one Polish priest –

Taibbi: Versus those in Central America.

Chomsky: Right. If I were doing it, I would have just given some examples. But when he did it, he did all of the statistics, and got the charts correct, and so on.

The main part that I wrote myself was mostly the Indochina part, and the parts on the Freedom House attack on the media.

This is a part that people don't really recognize, that a large part of the book was a *defense* of the media. It was actually a defense of the media from the attacks of organizations like Freedom House.*

Taibbi: Right.

Chomsky: But it's kind of interesting that journalists didn't like that defense. And the reason was – part of it first came out in an article of mine in a journal that was short lived, critical journalism review** that was run by Anthony Lukas, kind of a critical journalist, very cool.

I wrote a long article in it about the two-volume Freedom House thing. What we basically argued is that the journalists are doing honest, courageous work that's professional, and serious. And in lot of difficult circumstances, they do a very good job.

But they're all doing it within a framework of, an ideological framework, which is reflects the dominant hegemonic common sense.

Taibbi: Right.

Chomsky: So in fact, they would describe what's happening accurately, and that thing would be described as a mistake, a deviation, inconsistent with our values and our principles and that sort of thing.

Whereas in fact, it's exactly in accord with their principles and values.

The idea that they were not courageous tribunes of the people flaunting doctrine and so on was unpalatable. The idea that, "We're just honest professionals who are captured by an ideological framework that we're even unaware of," is an unacceptable idea. Nobody liked that.

Taibbi: So you got pushback on that immediately from reporters?

Chomsky: Yes. I mean, some did. I had some close friends who thought it was fine, but there was pushback, yes.

Taibbi: The main idea in *Manufacturing Consent* is basically that idea: that it looks like we have a vigorous system of independent journalists, but the debate has been artificially narrowed. Was there a moment when you first had that thought? Do you remember?

Chomsky: Probably when I was 10 years old! Actually remember, the work that I had done on my own before this was a critique of the intellectual culture. And my own view, Ed and I slightly differed here, is that the media aren't all that different from the general intellectual culture, the academic culture.

So the effect of the institutions: ownership, advertising, and so on, that's all there. But an overriding effect is just the way the general hegemonic culture works, and you see that in the academic world. You see it in scholarship, and you see it in a very striking way in the media.

But it's much easier to study in the media. Academic scholarship is diffuse. You can't do statistical analysis of how many articles there were on this, and that sort of thing.

So it's kind of focused on the media, and sharpened, then it's influenced of course by the filters that we talked about.

But I think riding through it is something that you see through the intellectual culture generally. In fact, the work that I'd done back in the sixties and on, it was mostly about that, continuing to the present. It's mostly about general academic intellectual culture. Which does show up in the media in a very striking form, and that's why we incidentally kept it to the elite media. So we talked about the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *CBS*. We didn't talk about the tabloids.

Taibbi: But basically you're talking about the same instinct for conformity, the inability to understand that you're working within a predetermined framework.

Chomsky: It was exactly what you said before. It's the assumption that you're being adversarial, independent, questioning everything, and so on.

But it's the same in scholarship. If you tell a scholar, "Look you're just conforming to ideological prejudices," they go crazy. You can see what happened when something really became prominent that questioned the basic ideological framework. Like when Howard Zinn's book...

Taibbi: The [*People's History of the United States*](#).

Chomsky: Right. When that became popular, historians just went berserk. There's a very interesting book that just came out about that, you want to take a look.

Taibbi: Is there? I didn't know.

Chomsky: It's called [*Zinnophobia*](#)... It's very careful analysis of Oscar Handlin, and all the guys who bitterly attacked the Zinn report.

Taibbi: Well, that gets to one of the other themes of your book: *flak*.

Chomsky: Right. This is it. In the intellectual culture. Of course there's plenty of it.

Taibbi: Have you thought over the years about what parts of the propaganda model have held up more than others? Clearly *flak* is one that has.

Chomsky: Actually there is a second edition, did you see that?

Taibbi: Yes, with the update.

Chomsky: We pointed out there correctly, that one part of the model was much too narrow: the part about anti-communism.

*(Editor's note: In *Manufacturing Consent*, heavy emphasis is placed on anticommunism as an organizing religion underpinning the media business. Here, Chomsky is talking about how other theologies have entered the scene since 1988.)*

Chomsky: It's got to be broader than that. Anti-communism was a salient illustration of the enemy that you construct to justify everything you're doing, But it could be terrorism, it could be anything.

Taibbi: Populism is another one.

Chomsky: You mean, what's called populism.

Taibbi: Yes.

Chomsky: That term had an [honorable history](#). It was the most democratic movement in American history.

Taibbi: Well they've quickly turned it into a different kind of a word.

Chomsky: Yes. Which happens.

Taibbi: When you published *Manufacturing Consent*, it was at the height of the go-go, *Top Gun*, Reagan eighties. Everybody was feeling very positive and patriotic about America, or at least that was the line.

Chomsky: We were a "City on a hill."

Taibbi: Exactly.

Chomsky: Did you ever go into the origin of city on a hill?

Taibbi: No, I didn't.

Chomsky: It's an interesting case. The term had never really been, barely been used before Reagan. But Reagan picked it up, and did the "[Shining city upon a hill](#)" speech.

But if you go back and you read [John Winthrop's sermon](#), he says almost the opposite. When he says we're a city on a hill, what he means is everyone is looking at us, and if we don't live up to the ideals that we profess, we're going to be punished.*** Of course, in his case, by the Lord. Not by society.

So it's really saying we're exposed, we have to try to live up to these ideals. He didn't say we were doing it, by any means. In fact, he knew we weren't. That was the point.

Taibbi: Instead, they turn it into a catch phrase for exceptionalism.

Chomsky: Yeah. So wonderful, isn't it?

Taibbi: Hilarious.

Chomsky: And of course it all went along with Reagan's nice smile, and all that.

Taibbi: So here you come, in the middle of all that exceptionalism, and you

publish *Manufacturing Consent*, which is exactly the opposite. It presents an image of a country that is completely deluded, and bloodthirsty, and it has this terrible history it can't face up to.

Chomsky: We had much more of that in the *Political Economy of Human Rights*, which wasn't about the media. It was partly about the media, but it was mainly about the actions.

That was just an anathema. Nobody could even look at *that*. Which was pretty striking, because the most – well, it was pretty interesting. There was an interesting reaction to those two volumes. If you look at them, we covered a lot of ground, but the focus was on two cases. One of them was East Timor. The other was Cambodia under Pol Pot.

Those are two places, same region of the world, during the same years, both huge massacres. East Timor was probably worse.

There was only one difference between them. In one case, you could blame it on someone else. In the other case, we were doing it.

Taibbi: Right.

Chomsky: And what we pointed out is that in both cases, there's massive lying but in opposite directions. In the Cambodia cases, there were all kinds of claims that there was no basis for. When things were refuted, they got elaborated upon and continued. Any invention is okay.

On the East Timor case, there appeared to be either ignoring, or pure denial. And of course the East Timor case is far more important, because that we could have stopped at any time. Because we were crucially responsible for it.

And in fact that was proven when finally 25 years later under a lot of domestic and international pressure, Clinton was pressured to [tell the Indonesians to call it off](#). And he basically told them, "Look, the game's over," and they pulled out a minute later. But it could have been done for 25 years.

So the East Timor case was vastly more important. Basically the same story, but lying in opposite directions and phenomenal, actually phenomenal lying in both cases.

Take a look at the reaction to the book. The East Timor thing had never been mentioned. The Cambodia thing, everybody went berserk. They said, we're [protecting Pol Pot](#), we're defending genocide. No. We were simply saying, if American intelligence probably has the story correct, than the stuff that you guys are publishing is crazed lies. It would have impressed Stalin.

So there's a huge literature attacking us, usually me, on Cambodia, and total silence on East Timor.

Taibbi: Because it's so totally indefensible?

Chomsky: Because you can't face it.

In fact, that holds until today. Take a look at [Samantha Powers' book](#), which was very highly praised. Everyone loved it, it's a wonderful book. She's probably perfectly honest, just naïve, but she was castigating the United States – which makes it good because it's kind of critical – castigating it for not dealing properly with *other people's* crimes.

It's such a perfect choice of topic. If a PR person had invented it, they couldn't have made it better. So everyone loved it and it won prizes, and it's wonderful. But there's nothing about any of our crimes. I think she mentions East Timor, and she says, "We made a mistake in East Timor. We looked away."

Looked away? We gave the green light to go ahead, provided the arms, backed them all the time.

(Note: East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in 2006 [concluded](#) that America's "political and military support were fundamental to the Indonesian invasion and occupation," which led to the deaths of at least 100,000 people.)

Chomsky: That all happened, but the most you can say is that "we looked away" in East Timor.

Taibbi: There's an analogous situation going on now with Yemen.

Chomsky: Yemen is the same. We're giving them intelligence on where to bomb. We're giving them weapons. But we don't know anything about what's going on. Must be a mistake of some kind!

Taibbi: That's another part of the model that seems to have held up perfectly since 1988: the concept of worthy and unworthy victims.

Chomsky: That's exactly it.

Taibbi: Syria and Yemen are almost perfect analogues to the Cambodia and East Timor examples in your book.

Chomsky: We used that term for East Timor and Cambodia. So the main themes of *Manufacturing Consent* are really there, apart from the institutional structure, you know. But that's a very dramatic example. Because here's two – you know, East Timor probably came as close to real genocide as anything in the post World War II period.

Taibbi: And yet, you won't hear that word "genocide" or see it anywhere in the popular press really attached to that incident – at least, not insofar as our involvement was concerned.

Chomsky: There are other rather interesting cases. Take Kevin Buckley, the *Newsweek* bureau chief in Saigon. A very good journalist. After the My Lai Massacre, Buckley and an associate of his, Alex Shimkin, did a [careful study](#) of what was going on in the Quang Ngai **** province, where the massacre took place.

And what they discovered was what people in the peace movement already knew, that there was nothing special about My Lai. It was going on all over the place, and further more, these massacres were minor. The major massacres were via the saturation bombing.

From guys sitting in air conditioned offices and telling B-52s to bomb everything in sight, you know. Those were the huge massacres. The My Lai, My Khe, the others like it, they were kind of footnotes. *Newsweek* wouldn't publish it, so he gave me the notes, and we basically published his notes, but nobody noticed that either.

Taibbi: That was in the previous book?

Chomsky: It was in the previous book, in the section on Vietnam. This was right at the time that the Argentine neo-Nazi regime was instituted, [strongly supported by the United States](#). I had material on that so, too, and a lot of other things, it

covered a lot of ground.

Now see Reagan was using – Congress barred direct military aid to Guatemala. So Reagan, what he did interestingly, was set up an international terror network. But we don't use people like Carlos the Jackal. We use terrorist states.

Taibbi: Right.

Chomsky: So we used Argentina, one of the neo-Nazi regimes. Taiwan. Israel was a big part of it. They provided the arms and the training and the support for the Guatemalan massacres.

Incidentally, people are still fleeing today [from the Mayan areas](#) that were subjected to virtual genocide. But they are driven back to the border, of course.

Taibbi: That brings me to another question. One of the main themes of *Manufacturing Consent* was that it was hard for people to recognize propaganda as propaganda, because it was private and there was absence of direct state censorship.

Chomsky: It's very much like the destruction of the press. It wasn't state censorship, so it's okay.

Incidentally, there's an interesting book that just came out finally, says some of the obvious things about this, by a woman named Elizabeth Anderson. She's a philosopher and an economist. It's called [Private Government](#) or some name like that, but her point is that, which is a major point, yes, there is a government, but governments can be repressive. But most of our lives are under private government, which she says are indistinguishable from communist dictatorships.

Any business, for example. If you subject yourself to it, you become essentially a slave of the institution with no rights, give away your liberty, and so on.

The interesting part of her book, which is somewhat new, is she goes through the seventeenth and eighteenth century advocacy of free markets by Adam Smith, Tom Paine, you know, up to Abraham Lincoln, and points out that that was a left wing position.

Because they were advocating free markets, because they wanted to undermine state monopolies and mercantilism, and to allow people to become free,

independent artisans not subject to any authority. And they regarded wage labor as equivalent to slavery. The only difference is that it's temporary. You can get out of it.

And when the Industrial Revolution came along, everything changed. You could only survive by being subordinate to a major corporate structure, and wage labor became the norm.

The contemporary libertarians are still citing the seventeenth and eighteenth century condemnations of wage labor and contract as being libertarian, because now it's not government. Everything has inverted totally. It's very much like you were saying before with censorship.

Taibbi: Well, that's interesting, because we're in this unusual place now. The media landscape now almost totally exists on a couple of distribution platforms. They're private, technically. Facebook, Google, but there's now a bit of an inter-relationship between those companies and the government. And some places like Israel, it's more of a direct relationship. Would that be a change in the model if they were to adopt a more directly censorious role?

Chomsky: Take a look at the Facebook phenomenon. Where are they getting their news from? They don't have reports.

They just getting it from the *New York Times*, so it's the same sources of information. They're just putting it out in trivialized form, so that people with a 10-year-old mentality can handle it. It's a very dangerous thing. They're not doing any of the things that the media do. They don't frame things. They don't select. They don't send reporters out. They don't investigate, you know, they just collect information hand it over to kids to look at in 10 minutes so you don't believe the newspapers.

Taibbi: After you published *Manufacturing Consent*, there was a major change in the business. I had seen this pretty dramatically because I'd grown up in the media. But suddenly in the late eighties and early nineties, there was a new commercial strategy that Fox employed. It was less about getting the broadest possible audience, but more about capturing a demographic, continuing to feed them news that they agreed with. It was a siloing effect – silos of news, fed separately to each demographic.

Chomsky: That's right, that's new.

Taibbi: And that has been massively accelerated by the Internet, by Facebook, and the platforms.

Chomsky: The other aspect of that, which I think is maybe underestimated, is talk radio, it reaches a huge audience. And I've often thought, I don't know if they've got it around here, but in Boston, I used to listen to it all the time while I was driving. It's totally insane.

Taibbi: It is. But how does that affect the model? Because *Manufacturing Consent* was significantly about organizing *everybody* behind hegemonic imperatives. But we now have a system where the news and its attendant messaging is fractured. Information is distributed differently, to each different silo. And many violently disagree with each other.

Chomsky: Well, you know what's actually happened, I think is they disagree – but the divisiveness I think is somewhat misinterpreted. It's always described as some groups moving left, others moving right. I don't think that's happened. I think both groups have moved to the right. There's a divide, but it's misrepresented.

Take Bernie Sanders. Take a look at his policies. I mean, Eisenhower wouldn't have been surprised by them. No, literally!

Eisenhower's position was that anybody who questioned the New Deal was out of his mind. There was strong support for unions by corporate leaders, in fact, because they kept things organized, and you didn't have strikes and so on.

But, the Sanders proposals are pretty much – you know, they would have been considered maybe mildly liberal in the 1950s. But certainly not radical, not revolutionary. It's just the whole spectrum has moved so far to the right that they *look* extreme.

Taibbi: Does the divisiveness also serve any other propaganda purpose? For instance, having people not realizing shared economic problems?

Chomsky: Definitely, there is an element.

Taibbi: You talk a lot in *Manufacturing Consent* about deceptions that are flagrant, like for instance the story about the supposed Bulgarian plot behind the attempt to kill Pope John Paul II in the Vatican in 1981. I remember you writing

that “there was no credible evidence for a Bulgarian connection from the beginning,” and yet the whole press corps dove into it. It later came out that there were indications that our government was really working hard to sell a Soviet connection to that incident.

Chomsky: There’s a book on that.

Taibbi: Despite episodes like that, we’ve had so many that were similar. Take the Iraq War: WMD you could have seen through, I thought, from the very beginning.

Chomsky: There are still people who believe there were WMDs.

Taibbi: And of course that story turned out very badly for the media. Do you think all that blatant deception resulted in a situation where people were willing to believe somebody like Trump –

Chomsky: Over the media?

Taibbi: Yes.

Chomsky: Well, I think it’s true. Although, honestly, I think one of the unfortunate effects of *Manufacturing Consent* is that a lot of people who’ve read it say, “Well, we can’t trust the media.” But that’s not exactly what it said. If you want to get information, sure, read the *New York Times*, but read it with your eyes open. With a critical mind. The *Times* is full of facts. You’re not going to find the information there on Facebook.

Taibbi: Or 4chan.

Chomsky: Also, don’t confine it to the media. There’s skepticism now about institutions altogether. In fact, faith in institutions has just declined radically, almost all across the board. Like Congress, the support for them is just sometimes in the single digits. About 80% of the population since the eighties have consistently in polls been saying, the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves. Which is...

Taibbi: True. Right?

Chomsky: And I think it’s the impact of the whole neoliberal aggression that

was major. That began technically with Carter, really picked up with Reagan and Thatcher, across the world. You've had tremendous damage to the general population under the neoliberal, business-first principles. And it's just happened everywhere. Take a look just at wages, I mean, real wages today are lower than in the late seventies. There's been economic growth, but into few pockets. Productivity keeps increasing, but not wages. Up until the mid-seventies, real wages tracked productivity. If you look back then, there's a split of productivity keeps going up, but wages stagnate or decline. And that's true by every measure you look at.

Taibbi: And naturally, people are upset about that.

Chomsky: They're upset. And the same in Europe, at least the anger, the hatred of institutions, the ugly attitudes emerge to try to blame somebody for what's going on. And you see in the European elections, in every election the centrist parties collapse, and they go to fringes. You see it in Brexit. Brexit is suicidal. But the people are so angry that they just want to get out of it.

Taibbi: During the 2016 election, I remember very vividly the experience of covering Trump and being behind the rope line with all the reporters and Trump pointing us out and making us villains. He'd basically say: "There are the elites, they're stenographers for the bad guys." And that was very effective I thought.

Chomsky: Yes, and it's straight out of the fascist history. Go after the elites, even while you're being supported by the major elites.

Taibbi: Right.

Chomsky: You ever read Thomas Ferguson? He's a political economist, a very good one. His whole life he's been working on things like the impact of things like campaign funding on electability. And he did a very careful study of 2016 election. What turned out was that, in the end, in the last couple of months when it became it was looking very clearly as if Clinton was going to win, the corporate sector really got pretty upset. And they start pouring money into funding not only for Trump, but heavily into the Senate and the House, because they wanted to make sure the Republicans controlled the House and the Senate.

And if you compare the increase in campaign funding with the shift in attitudes, it's almost perfect. It pushed not only Trump, but also the whole Congress into Republican wins. Just as a reflection of campaign funding.

So the real elites knew where their bread was buttered.

Taibbi: But Trump uses this trick of presenting other people as representatives of the elites.

Chomsky: Standard technique of the fake populists against the elites, while you're actually working for them.

Taibbi: Why do you think the population has become so much more conspiratorial-minded since the publication of *Manufacturing Consent*? Or has it? It seems to me that it has. Could it be that – well, when you wrote *Manufacturing Consent*, there was a commonly accepted set of facts. We had three networks, they mostly reported the same things, now-

Chomsky: Well there were conspiracies. I mean, take a look at the Kennedy conspiracies. That's much earlier. This goes way back in American history when [Richard Hofstadter wrote about it](#) fifty years ago. But it's true that it's been inflated recently, and I think it's just a reflection of the very natural anger at institutions altogether, across the board. Maybe the Army sort of escapes, but practically nothing else. And if you can't trust institutions, why can you trust the media?

Taibbi: But that's one of the developments, isn't it? That the media increasingly are viewed as an institution, whereas previously this was not so much the case?

Chomsky: Oh, they are. Because Trump is very effective in terms of eliciting anti-institutional furor against the media, making media the enemy, which is a clever trick. He's a good politician.

Taibbi: A lot of people who are fellow reporters have commented to me over the years – and I agree with them – that *Manufacturing Consent* really captured something about the inner workings of the media business. I think of things that Chris Hedges has talked about, about the dynamics inside media companies: if you're too independent-minded, if you have too obvious a bent toward independent thought, sooner or later, you're going to run into trouble. You won't be promoted, or you'll get wrapped up in some kind of bureaucratic fiasco. Some kind of label will get attached to you, particularly in the giant daily news operations.

Chomsky: They'll say you're too biased, emotional, too involved in things. But

you see, it's the same in the academic world. It just might be bigger words over here.

Taibbi: There might just be a hair more intellectual mediocrity in our world than yours, I would think.

Chomsky: Well, I'm not convinced of that.

Taibbi: Obviously, the structure of media now with the Internet-based distribution systems, what do you see as the future there? Will it be easier or harder to "Manufacture Consent" with so much concentration?

Chomsky: The crucial word was *distribution* systems. The Internet doesn't dig up any information. So, the information's coming from the same place it will always do. It's the reporters on the ground. Unfortunately, there are fewer of them.

But I think in a lot of ways, it's hard to measure, but my impression is that the media are probably more free and open than they were in the fifties and sixties. And the reason is that a lot of the younger people, the people who are now in the media, went through the sixties experience, which was very liberatory. It really opened people's minds, so they tend to be more critical and open-minded and so on.

People forget how conformist the media were in the fifties and sixties. It was shocking. When you look back, it's mind-boggling.

In 1961, I think around November, Kennedy authorized the U.S. Air Force to start bombing South Vietnam. They [used South Vietnamese markings](#), but everybody knew what was going on. They were American planes. This is a big thing: starting to bomb the rural population in a foreign country. I think the *New York Times* may have had ten lines on it on a back page.

Nobody knew, nobody paid any attention. I don't think that could happen now. And there are many cases like this.

Taibbi: Do you think that this is a source of concern to the government and large corporate interests, this idea that maybe there is a little bit too much freedom? A little too much independence? Maybe, something needs to be

Chomsky: There's a very important book, which came out 1975. It's called the [Crisis of Democracy](#). It's the first publication of the Trilateral Commission, which is a group of liberal internationalists from Europe, United States, and Japan, three main centers of capitalist democracy.

What's the "Crisis of Democracy"? The "Crisis of Democracy" is that in the 1960s, all kinds of sectors of the population that are supposed to be passive and apathetic begin to try to enter the political arena to press for their own interests and concerns, and that imposes too much of a burden on the state, which becomes ungovernable. So, what we need is "more moderation in democracy." That's their phrase. People should go back into their corners and leave it to us.

In fact, the American rapporteur Samuel Huntington looked back kind of nostalgically to the Truman years. He says Truman was able to govern the country politically with the aid of just a few Wall Street bankers.

Then we had democracy. But he goes after the media. He says the media have become too adversarial, too independent. We may even have to institute government controls to try to contain them, because of what they're doing.

That's the *liberal* position. The Trilateral Commission also went after what they called the de-legitimation of the universities. They said that the institutions – and this is their phrase – these institutions responsible for the "indoctrination of the young" – are being de-legitimized.

We've got to have more indoctrination. Remember, that's the liberal end of the spectrum. Over to the right wing, you get much harsher things... but that's the intellectual background. We've got to stop "too much democracy," "too much freedom."

The 1960s were always called the "Time of Troubles." That was a time when the country when all this started.

Taibbi: You mention that in the book, that they talked about an "excess of democracy" in terms of the media coverage of Vietnam.

Chomsky: This is the main source of it. When the book came out, I immediately got the MIT library to buy about ten copies, because I figured they were going to put it out of print. (*laughing*). Which they did. They later **** printed it again. That's never discussed. I've discussed it a lot.

Taibbi: All of that rhetoric that you're talking about is now resurfacing. We're hearing again about "[too much democracy](#)." And there are many discussions about having to rein in the media, really on both sides of the aisle politically.

Chomsky: Yes. It's very much the same.

Taibbi: Well, terrific. Professor, thank you so much.

Chomsky: Thank you.

Footnotes

* Freedom House, as described in *Manufacturing Consent*: "Freedom House, which dates back to the early 1940s, has had interlocks with AIM, the World Anticommunist League, Resistance International, and U.S. government bodies such as Radio Free Europe and the CIA, and has long served as a virtual propaganda arm of the government and international right wing."

** *MORE*, which went out of business in 1978.

*** From Winthrop's sermon: "*For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.*"

Introduction

I grew up in the media. In seventies Massachusetts, my father took a job at a fledgling ABC affiliate called WCVB-TV. These being the glory days of local television news, my childhood ended up being a lot like the movie *Anchorman*.

I was regularly exposed to the plaid suits, terrible facial hair, and oversized microphone logos the Will Ferrell movie made famous. There are photos of my

father in a yellow bow tie and muttonchops.

More seriously, Channel 5 and journalism became as intimately a part of my identity growing up as, say, baseball must have been for Barry Bonds. I was fascinated by my father's work.

He had a ritual he called the "phone attack." When he came home at night, he would pour himself a drink, light up a Camel unfiltered, and start going through a giant Rolodex, pulling names out at random. Then he would dial his clunky rotary phone and call people to chat.

As a boy watching, I learned this lesson: sources are relationships that must be managed both when you're doing a story, and also when you're not. People need to feel like you're interested in their lives for their own sake, not just when you need something from them. Also: ask people about whatever they want to talk about, not about one thing in particular.

This is an investigative principle articulated well in another goofy movie comedy, *The Zero Effect*. As Holmesian detective [Daryl Zero](#) says:

When you go looking for something specific, your chances of finding it are very bad. Because of all the things in the world, you're only looking for one of them.

When you go looking for anything at all, your chances of finding it are very good.

There's a lesson in this for modern journalists who've been raised to eschew talking in favor of searching for links (a type of "research" in which you're really just confirming a point you've already decided to make). My father taught me that reporting is not just about talking, but being willing to be surprised by what people say.

I thought I understood this and many other things about the journalism business at a young age. I even knew everything that "off the record" entails – really knew, as if it were religious tenet – before I hit junior high. I thought I was an expert.

Then I read *Manufacturing Consent*.

The book came out in 1988 and I read it a year later, when I was nineteen. It blew my mind.

Along with the documentary *Hearts and Minds* (about the atrocities of the Vietnam War) and books like *Soul on Ice*, *In the Belly of the Beast*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Manufacturing Consent* taught me that some level of deception was baked into almost everything I'd ever been taught about modern American life.

I knew nothing about either of the authors, academics named Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. It seemed odd that a book purporting to say so much about journalism could be written by non-journalists. Who were these people? And how could they claim to know anything about this business?

This was the middle of the George H.W. Bush presidency, still the rah-rah *Top Gun* eighties. Political earnestness was extremely uncool. America was awesome and hating on America was just sad. Noam Chomsky was painted to me as the very definition of uncool, a leaden, hectoring bore.

But this wasn't what I found on the page. *Manufacturing Consent* is a dazzling book. True, like a lot of co-written books, and especially academic books, it's written in slow, grinding prose. But for its time, it was intellectually flamboyant, wild even.

The ideas in it radiated defiance. Once the authors in the first chapter laid out their famed propaganda model, they cut through the deceptions of the American state like a buzz saw.

The book's central idea was that censorship in the United States was not overt, but covert. The stage-managing of public opinion was "normally not accomplished by crude intervention" but by the keeping of "dissent and inconvenient information" outside permitted mental parameters: "within bounds and at the margins."

The key to this deception is that Americans, every day, see vigorous debate going on in the press. This deceives them into thinking propaganda is absent. *Manufacturing Consent* explains that the debate you're watching is choreographed. The range of argument has been artificially narrowed long before you get to hear it.

This careful sham is accomplished through the constant, arduous policing of a whole range of internal pressure points within the media business. It's a subtle, highly idiosyncratic process that you can stare at for a lifetime and not see.

American news companies at the time didn't (and still don't) forbid the writing of unpatriotic stories. There are no editors who come blundering in, red pen in hand, wiping out politically dangerous reports, in the clumsy manner of Soviet Commissars.

Instead, in a process that is almost 100% unconscious, news companies simply avoid promoting rabble-rousing voices. Advancement is meanwhile strongly encouraged among the credulous, the intellectually unadventurous, and the obedient.

As I would later discover in my own career, there are a lot of C-minus brains in the journalism business. A kind of groupthink is developed that permeates the upper levels of media organizations, and they send unconscious signals down the ranks.

Young reporters learn early on what is and is not permitted behavior. They learn to recognize, almost more by smell than reason, what is and is not a "good story."

Chomsky and Herman described this policing mechanism using the term "flak." *Flak* was defined as "negative responses to a media statement or program."

They gave examples in which corporate-funded think tanks like The Media Institute or the anti-communist Freedom House would deluge media organizations that ran the wrong kinds of stories with "letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits" and other kinds of pressure.

What was the wrong kind of story? Here we learned of another part of the propaganda model, the concept of *worthy and unworthy victims*. Herman and Chomsky defined the premise as follows:

A propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as worthy victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be unworthy.

Under this theory, a [Polish priest murdered by communists](#) in the Reagan years

was a “worthy” victim, while rightist death squads in U.S.-backed El Salvador [killing whole messes of priests and nuns](#) around the same time was a less “worthy” story.

What Herman and Chomsky described was a system of informal social control, in which the propaganda aims of the state were constantly reinforced among audiences, using a quantity-over-quality approach.

Here and there you might see a dissenting voice, but the overwhelming institutional power of the media (and the infrastructure of think-tanks and politicians behind the private firms) carried audiences along safely down the middle of a surprisingly narrow political and intellectual canal.

One of their great examples was Vietnam, where the American media was complicit in a broad self-abnegating effort to blame itself for “losing the war.”

An absurd legend that survives today is that CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, after a two-week trip to Vietnam in 1968, was key in undermining the war effort.

Cronkite’s famous “Vietnam editorial” derided “the optimists who have been wrong in the past,” and villainously imparted that the military’s rosy predictions of imminent victory were false. The more noble course, he implied, was to face reality, realize “[we did the best we could](#)” to defend democracy, and go home.

The Cronkite editorial sparked a “debate” that continues to this day.

On the right, it is said that we should have kept fighting in Vietnam, in spite of those meddling commies in the media.

The progressive take is that the Cronkite was right, and we should have realized the war wasn’t “winnable” years earlier. Doing so would have saved countless American lives, this thinking goes.

These two positions still define the edges of what you might call the “fairway” of American thought.

The uglier truth, that we committed genocide on a fairly massive scale across Indochina – ultimately killing at least a million innocent civilians by air in three countries – is pre-excluded from the history of that period.

Instead of painful national reconciliation surrounding episodes like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the CIA-backed anticommunist massacres in places like Indonesia, or even the more recent horrors in Middle Eastern arenas like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, we mostly ignore narrative-ruining news about civilian deaths or other outrages.

A media that currently applauds itself for calling out the lies of Donald Trump (and they are lies) still uses shameful government-concocted euphemisms like “collateral damage.” Our new “[Democracy Dies In Darkness](#)” churlishness has yet to reach the Pentagon, and probably never will.

In the War on Terror period, the press accepted blame for having lost the last big war and agreed to stop showing pictures of the coffins coming home (to say nothing of actual scenes of war deaths).

We also volunteered to reduce or play down stories about torture (“enhanced interrogation”), kidnapping (“rendition”), or assassination (“lethal action,” or the “distribution matrix”).

Even now, if these stories are covered, they’re rarely presented in an alarmist tone. In fact, many “civilian casualties” stories are couched in language that focuses on how the untimely release of news of “collateral damage” may hinder the effort to win whatever war we’re in at the time.

“[After reports of civilian deaths, U.S. military struggles to defend air operations in war against militants](#),” is a typical American newspaper headline.

Can you guess either the year or the war from that story? It could be 1968, or 2008. Or 2018.

As *Manufacturing Consent* predicted – with a nod to Orwell, maybe – the scripts in societies like ours rarely change.*

When it came time for me to enter the journalism business myself, I discovered that the Chomsky/Herman diagnosis was mostly right. Moreover, the academics proved prescient about future media deceptions like the Iraq War. Their model predicted that hideous episode in Technicolor.

But neither Herman nor Chomsky could have known, when they published their book ** in 1988, that the media business was going through profound change.

As it turned out, *Manufacturing Consent* was published just ahead of three massive revolutions that were about to transform the business:

1. The explosion of conservative talk radio and Fox-style news products. Using point of view rather than “objectivity” as commercial strategies, these stations presaged an atomization of the news landscape under which each consumer had an outlet somewhere to match his or her political beliefs.

This was a major departure from the three-network pseudo-monopoly that dominated the *Manufacturing Consent* period, under which the country debated a commonly-held set of facts.

2.

The introduction of 24-hour cable news stations, which shifted the emphasis of the news business. Reporters were suddenly trained to value breaking news, immediacy, and visual potential over import. Network “crashes” – relentless day-night coverage extravaganzas of a single hot story like the *Kursk* disaster or a baby thrown down a well, a type of journalism one TV producer I knew nicknamed “Shoveling Coal For Satan” – became the first examples of binge-watching.

The relentless *now now now* grind of the 24-hour cycle created in consumers a new kind of anxiety and addictive dependency, a need to know what was happening not just once or twice a day but every minute. This format would have significant consequences in the 2016 election in particular.

3.

The Internet was only just getting off the ground in 1988. It was thought it would significantly democratize the press landscape.

But print and broadcast media soon began to be distributed by just a handful of digital platforms. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, that distribution system had been massively concentrated.

This created the potential for a direct control mechanism over the press that never existed in the *Manufacturing Consent* era. Moreover the development of social media would amplify the “flak” factor a thousand-fold, accelerating

conformity and groupthink in ways that would have been unimaginable in 1988.

Maybe the biggest difference involved an obvious historical change: the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One of the pillars of the “propaganda model” in the original *Manufacturing Consent* was that the media used anti-communism as an organizing religion.

The ongoing Cold War narrative helped the press use anti-communism as a club to batter heretical thinkers, who as luck would have it were often socialists. They even used it as a club to police people who weren’t socialists (I would see this years later, when Howard Dean was asked a dozen times a day if he was “too left” to be a viable candidate).

But the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet empire took a little wind out of the anti-communist religion. Chomsky and Herman addressed this in their 2002 update of *Manufacturing Consent*, in which they wrote:

The force of anti-communist ideology has possibly weakened with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the virtual disappearance of socialist movements across the globe, but this is easily offset by the greater ideological force of the belief in the “miracle of the market...”

The collapse of the Soviets, and the weakening of anti-communism as an organizing principle, led to other changes in the media. *Manufacturing Consent* was in significant part a book about how that unseen system of informal controls allowed the press to organize the entire ** population behind support of particular objectives, many of them foreign policy objectives.

But the collapse of the Wall, coupled with those new commercial strategies being deployed by networks like Fox, created a new dynamic in the press.

Media companies used to seek out the broadest possible audiences. The dull third-person voice used in traditional major daily newspapers is not there for any moral or ethical reason, but because it was once believed it most ably fulfilled the commercial aim of snatching as many readers/viewers as possible. The press is a business above all, and boring third person language ** was once advanced marketing.

But in the years after *Manufacturing Consent* was published the new behemoths

like Fox turned the old business model on its head. What Australian slime-merchant Rupert Murdoch did in employing political slant as a commercial strategy had ramifications the American public to this day poorly understands.

The news business for decades emphasized “objective” presentation, which was really less an issue of politics than tone.

The idea was to make the recitation of news rhetorically watered down and unthreatening enough to rope in the whole spectrum of potential news consumers. The old-school anchorperson was a monotone mannequin designed to look and sound like a safe date for your daughter: *Good evening, I’m Dan Rather, and my frontal lobes have been removed. Today in Libya...*

Murdoch smashed this framework. He gave news consumers broadcasts that were balls-out, pointed, opinionated, and nasty. ** He struck gold with *The O’Reilly Factor*, hosted by a yammering, red-faced repository of white suburban rage named Bill O’Reilly (another Boston TV vet).

The next hit was *Hannity & Colmes*, a format that played as a parody of old news. In this show, the “liberal” Colmes was the quivering, asexual, “safe date” prototype from the old broadcast era, and Sean Hannity was a thuggish Joey Buttafuoco in makeup whose job was to make Colmes look like the spineless weenie he was.

This was *theater*, not news, and it was not designed to seize the whole audience in the way that other debate shows like CNN’s *Crossfire* were.

The premise of *Crossfire* was an honest fight, two prominent pundits duking it out over issues, and may the best man (they were usually men) win.

The prototypical *Crossfire* setup involved a bombastic winger like Pat Buchanan versus an effete liberal like *New Republic* editor ** Michael Kinsley. On some days the conservative would be allowed to win, on some days the liberal would score a victory. It looked like a real argument.

But *Crossfire* was really just a formalized version of the artificial poles of allowable debate Chomsky and Herman described. As some of its participants (like Jeff Cohen, who briefly played the “liberal” on the show) came to realize, *Crossfire* became a propagandistic setup, a stage trick in which the “left” side of the argument was gradually pushed toward the right over the years. It was

propaganda, but in slow motion.

Hannity & Colmes dispensed with the pretense. This was the intellectual version of Vince McMahon's pro wrestling spectacles, which were booming at the time. In the Fox debate shows, Sean Hannity was the heel, and Colmes was the good guy, or babyface. As any good wrestling fan knows, most American audiences want to see babyface stomped.

The job of Colmes was to get pinned over and over again, and he did it well. Meanwhile rightist anger merchants like Hannity and O'Reilly (and, on the radio, Rush Limbaugh) were rapidly hoovering up audiences that were frustrated, white, and often elderly. Fox chief Roger Ailes once [boasted](#), "I created a network for people 55 to dead."

This was a new model for the media. Instead of targeting the broad mean, they were now narrowly hunting demographics. The explosion of cable television meant there were hundreds of channels, each of which had its own mission.

Just as *Manufacturing Consent* came out, all the major cable channels were setting off on similar whale hunts, sailing into the high demographic seas in search of audiences to capture. *Lifetime* was "television for women," while the *Discovery Channel* did well with men. *BET* went after black viewers. Young people were MTV's target audience.

This all seems obvious now, but this "siloining" effect that spread across other channels soon became a very important new factor in news coverage. Fox for a long time cornered the market on conservative viewers. Almost automatically, competitors like CNN and MSNBC became home to people who viewed themselves as liberals, beginning a sifting process that would later accelerate.

A new dynamic entered the job of reporting. For generations, news directors had only to remember a few ideological imperatives. One, ably and voluminously described by Chomsky and Herman, was, "America rules and pays no attention to those napalmed bodies." We covered the worthy victims, ignored the unworthy ones, and that was most of the job, politically.

The rest of the news? As one TV producer put it to me in the nineties, "The entire effect we're after is, 'Isn't that weird?'"

Did you hear about that guy in Michigan who refused to mow his lawn even

when the town ordered him to? Weird! And how about that drive-thru condom store that opened in Cranston, Rhode Island? What a trip! And, hey, what happened in the O.J. trial today? That Kato Kaelin is really a doof! And I love that lawyer who wears a suede jacket! He looks like a cowboy!

TV execs learned Americans would be happy if you just fed them a nonstop succession of weirdo *National Enquirer*-style factoids (this is formalized today in meme culture). The *New York Times* covering the OJ freak show full-time broke the seal on the open commercialization of dumb news that among other things led to a future where Donald Trump could be a viable presidential candidate.

In the old days, the news was a mix of this toothless trivia and cheery dispatches from the frontlines of Pax Americana. The whole fam could sit and watch it without getting upset (by necessity: an important principle in pre-Internet broadcasting is that nothing on the air, including the news, could be as intense or as creative as the commercials). The news once was designed to be consumed by the whole house, by loving Mom, by your crazy right-wing uncle, by your earnest college-student cousin who just came home wearing a Che t-shirt.

But once we started to be organized into demographic silos, the networks found another way to seduce these audiences: they sold intramural conflict.

The Roger Ailes types captured the attention of the crazy right-wing uncle and got him watching one channel full of news tailored for him, filling the airwaves with stories, for instance, about immigration or minorities committing crimes. Different networks eventually rose to market themselves to the kid in the Che t-shirt. If you got them in different rooms watching different channels, you could get both viewers literally addicted to hating one another.

There was a political element to this, but also not. It was commerce, initially. And reporters stuck in this world soon began to realize that the nature of their jobs had changed.

Whereas once the task was to report out the facts as honestly as we could – within the “fairway” of acceptable thought, of course – the new task was mostly about making sure your viewer came back the next day.

We sold anger, and we did it mainly by feeding audiences what they wanted to hear. Mostly, this involved cranking out stories about people our viewers loved

to hate.

Selling siloed anger was a more sophisticated take on the WWE programming pioneered in *Hannity & Colmes*. The modern news consumer tuned into news that confirmed his or her prejudices about whatever the villain of the day happened to be: foreigners, minorities, terrorists, the Clintons, Republicans, even corporations.

The system was ingeniously designed so that the news dropped down the respective silos didn't interfere with the occasional need to "manufacture" the consent of the whole population. If we needed to, we could still herd the whole country into the pen again and get them backing the flag, as was the case in the Iraq war effort.

But domestically, we sold conflict. We began in the early nineties to systematically pry families apart, set group against group, and more and more make news consumption a bubble-like, "safe space" stimulation of the vitriolic reflex, a consumer version of the "Two Minutes Hate."

How did this serve the needs of the elite interests that were once so concerned with unity? That wasn't easy for me to see, in my first decades in the business. For a long time, I thought it was a flaw in the Chomsky/Herman model. It looked like we were mostly just selling pointless division.

But it now seems there was a reason, even for that.

The news media is in crisis. Polls show that a wide majority of the population no longer has confidence in the press. Chomsky himself despairs at this, noting in my discussion with him that *Manufacturing Consent* had the unintended consequence of convincing readers not to trust the media.

People who came away from *Manufacturing Consent* with the idea that the media peddles lies misread the book. Papers like the *New York Times*, for the most part, do not traffic in outright deceptions.

The overwhelming majority of commercial news reporting is factual (with one conspicuous exception I'll get into later on), and the individual reporters who work in the business tend to be quite stubborn in their adherence to fact as a matter of principle.

People should trust reporters. It's the context in which they're operating that's problematic. Now more than ever, most journalists work for giant nihilistic corporations whose editorial decisions are skewed by a toxic mix of political and financial considerations. Unless you understand how those pressures work, it's very difficult for a casual news consumer to gain an accurate picture of the world.

This book is intended as an insider's guide to those distortions.

The technology underpinning the modern news business is sophisticated and works according to a two-step process. First, it creates content that reinforces your pre-existing opinions, and after analysis of your consumer habits, sends it to you.

Then it matches *you* to advertisers who have a product they're trying to sell to your demographic. This is how companies like Facebook and Google make their money: telling advertisers where their likely customers are on the web.

The news, basically, is bait to lure you in to a pen where you can be sold sneakers or bath soaps or prostatitis cures or whatever else studies say people of your age, gender, race, class, and political bent tend to buy.

Imagine your Internet surfing habit as being like walking down a street. A man shouts: "Did you hear what those damned liberals did today? Come down this alley."

You hate liberals, so you go down the alley. On your way to the story, there's a storefront selling mart carts and gold investments (there's a crash coming – *this billionaire* even says so!).

Maybe you buy the gold, maybe you don't. But at the end of the alley, there's a red-faced screamer telling a story that may even be true, about a college in Massachusetts where administrators took down a statue of John Adams because it made a Hispanic immigrant "uncomfortable." Boy does that make you pissed!

They picked that story just for you to hear. It is like the parable of Kafka's gatekeeper, guarding a door to the truth that was built just for you.

Across the street, down the MSNBC alley, there's an opposite story, and set of storefronts, built specifically for someone else to hear.

People need to start understanding the news not as “the news,” but as just such an individualized consumer experience – anger just for you.

This is not reporting. It’s a marketing process designed to create rhetorical addictions and shut unhelpfully non-consumerist doors in your mind. This creates more than just pockets of political rancor. It creates masses of media consumers who’ve been trained to see in only one direction, as if they had been pulled through history on a railroad track, with heads fastened in blinders, looking only one way.

As it turns out, there is a utility in keeping us divided. As people, the more separate we are, the more politically impotent we become.

This is the second stage of the mass media deception originally described in *Manufacturing Consent*.

First, we’re taught to stay within certain bounds, intellectually. Then, we’re all herded into separate demographic pens, located along different patches of real estate on the spectrum of permissible thought.

Once safely captured, we’re trained to consume the news the way sports fans do. We root for our team, and hate all the rest.

Hatred is the partner of ignorance, and we in the media have become experts in selling both.

I looked back at thirty years of deceptive episodes – from Iraq to the financial crisis of 2008 to the 2016 election of Donald Trump – and found that we in the press have increasingly used intramural hatreds to obscure larger, more damning truths. Fake controversies of increasing absurdity have been deployed over and over to keep our audiences from seeing larger problems.

We manufactured fake dissent, to prevent real dissent.

Footnote

- * In fact that piece is from the *Washington Post* in 2017, and it describes our “air campaign in Syria and Iraq.”
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Silos

Part I: The Beauty Contest

Why do they hate us?

We in the press *always* screw up this question.

Many of the biggest journalistic fiascoes in recent history involved failed attempts at introspection. Whether on behalf of the country or ourselves, when we look in the mirror, we inevitably report back things that aren't there.

We fumbled "Why do they hate us?" badly after 9/11, when *us* was guiltless America and *they* were Muslims in the corrupt Middle Eastern petro-states we supported.

We made a joke of it during the Occupy protests, when "Why are they so angry?" somehow became a [common news feature assignment](#) after a fraud-ridden financial services sector put millions in foreclosure and vaporized 40% of the world's wealth.

More recently, we've cycled through a series of unconvincing responses to *Why do they hate us?*- themed ** stories like Brexit, the Bernie Sanders primary run of 2016, and the election of Donald Trump.

We've botched them all, for reasons that range from incompetence to willful blindness. The Trump story in particular was an industry-wide, WMD-level failure that exposed many of our worst weaknesses (I was part of the problem, too) and remains a serious concern headed into 2020.

But the story that flummoxes us most has to do with our own business.

Everyone hates the media. Nobody in the media seems to understand why.

An oft-cited Gallup poll taken just after the 2016 election showed [just 20% of Americans](#) expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in newspapers.

An 80% no-confidence vote would be cause for concern in most professions. Reporters, however, have been unimpressed with the numbers.

Some of this surely has to do with the fact that the media business, at least at the higher end, has been [experiencing record profits](#) since Donald Trump tabbed us the “enemy of the people.” In the “Democracy Dies In Darkness” era, many in the press wear their public repudiation like badges of honor, evidence that they’re on the right journalistic track.

Few seem troubled by the obvious symbiosis between Trump’s bottom-feeding, scandal-a-minute act and the massive boom in profits suddenly animating our once-dying industry (even print journalism, a business that pre-Trump seemed destined to go the way of New Coke or 8-track tapes, has [seen a big bump](#) in the Trump years).

We certainly didn’t worry about it early in 2015, when the unseemly amount of attention paid to Trump-as-ratings-phenomenon gave the insurgent candidate billions in free publicity and helped secure his nomination.

Later, as Trump cruised toward the nomination, media execs couldn’t hide their excitement. Since-disgraced CBS jackass Les Moonves blurted out that Trump “[may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.](#)” adding, “the money’s rolling in.”

Comments like these caused anti-press complaints to come pouring in, this time not from flyover country (where hatred of the “elite” press was already considered a given within the business) but from urban, left-leaning intellectuals, a.k.a. the media’s home crowd.

These complaints came mainly in two forms. One came from dreary ratings-killing lefties like Ralph Nader, who focused on the entire system of commercial media. Nader said that campaign coverage had devolved into a profit bonanza in which media firms “[cash in and give candidates a free ride.](#)”

The former third-party candidate also noted that the constant attention paid to people like Trump excluded other voices, including “leading citizens who could criticize the process.” (Like, presumably, Ralph Nader, although he had a point).

I remember watching Nader’s comments with interest, having just returned from covering Trump’s nomination-sealing win in the Indiana primary. Trump had

beaten Ted Cruz, a politician who tried his damndest to be as cruel and reactionary from a policy standpoint as Trump, but was out of his league when it came to manipulating sensationalist campaign media coverage.

Cruz was routed in Indiana after Trump took the highly creative step of [accusing Cruz's father](#) of helping assassinate John F. Kennedy. The *correct* response for Cruz in that media climate would probably have been to counter-accuse Trump of eating Christian babies, or maybe bugging Lenin's corpse (the Democrats would later catch on and try a version of this). But Cruz didn't get it and actually denied the JFK charges, which of course had the practical effect of just making us think about them more. "[Garbage!](#)" he told reporters.

Worse, Cruz's wife Heidi was asked by a *Yahoo!* reporter if her husband was the Zodiac Killer, a popular Internet meme at the time. She, too, made the mistake of answering in earnest, providing more headlines. "I've been married to him for 15 years and I know pretty well who he is, so it doesn't bother me," was her answer.

I was at the miserable Cruz "victory" party in Indianapolis on the night of May 3, 2016, when the returns came in. A lot of reporters present were joking about Heidi's answer. Many noted that it was a "non-denial denial" and "exactly what the wife of the real Zodiac would say" (this hot take later [made it into](#) a [lot](#) of real [news reports](#), including, embarrassingly, [my own](#)).

The pretense that the presidential campaign was anything but an insane absurdist reality show was almost completely gone by that point. Reporters were openly enjoying the ridiculousness of it all. Many of us tasked with its daily updates had given into the campaign's grotesque commercialism several election cycles before Trump even arrived on the scene.

To digress briefly: the campaign process, for a generation, has been too long by at least a year. With each cycle, it grew even more unnecessarily protracted, and increasingly abhorred real policy discussions. By the seventies and eighties, when the nomination process left the smoke-filled room and became a more public affair, it became a kind of elite beauty contest in which Washington journalists assumed the role of judges.

Pre-Trump, the two-year saga was really a series of tests whose purpose was to produce obedient major-party mannequins worthy of "Miss Republican Orthodoxy" or "Miss Democrat Orthodoxy" sashes. There were both political

and commercial elements to this dynamic.

We routinely flunked candidates in our version of the swimsuit competition. Dennis Kucinich was hounded for his “[elfin](#)” appearance, and others, like Bobby Jindal, were dismissed with sleazy code terms like, “He doesn’t [look presidential](#).”

Myriad class/race/gender biases were hidden just in this one “presidential” descriptor, in addition to flat out high-school style shallowness celebrating looks, height even jockiness. To reassure us on that last point, candidates learned to “relax” by shooting baskets or tossing footballs around us in highly scripted episodes that went sideways with unsurprising frequency. Marco Rubio boinking [an Iowan child in the face](#) with a terrible spiral is the most recent viral classic of the genre.

Other tests, like the “[most nuanced](#)” competition (awarded to the candidate most adept at advocating the appearance of policy action instead of the real thing) helped produce the likes of John Kerry as a nominee. Kerry himself then *lost* to George W. Bush when the press flunked him by another asinine standard, the now-infamous “[likability](#)” test.

Heading into the 2016 race, pundits were openly celebrating all of this. We were proud of the dumbed-down barriers to political power we’d created. We bragged incessantly about how the “candidate you’d most want to have a beer with” had practically become a formal part of the process. We even made Barack Obama [submit to this horseshit](#). “The president has been polishing his ‘regular guy’ credentials by talking a lot about beer,” explained NPR (NPR!) in 2012.

By the last election, outlets like the *Daily Beast* cheerfully described the “[beer standard](#)” as the key to winning the “likability Olympics.”

It was therefore stunning to watch the universal lack of insight when the anti-candidate who rampaged through our idiotic campaign carnival in 2016 was not only a reality star, but also a beauty contest aficionado. Trump was a demon from hell sent to punish all of these reporting sins.

He was like Tony Clifton snuck into the *Miss Universe* pageant, doing a farts-only version of *Stairway to Heaven* as the musical portion. He pissed on “nuance” and spent his campaign flouting our phony “presidential” standard.

So long as we thought he couldn't actually win, most of us in the press were hugely entertained, even flattered. Floating on soaring ratings and click numbers, we cheerfully reported all of his antics. Yet very few picked up on the fact that the joke was on us, that Trump was winning votes precisely by running against our sham beauty contest.

As soon as it became clear that Trump was going to secure the nomination, however, a new kind of criticism of the media began to appear. This one was of the *When A Stranger Calls* variety: it came from [inside the house](#), i.e. from within our own ranks.

High priests of conventional wisdom like Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* began running pieces in early 2016 with titles like, "[My Shared Shame: The Media Helped Make Trump](#)." Kristof talked a bit about the commercial dynamics of the business, and he did cop to the "mother lode" of ratings Trump provided. But in the end, his key conclusion read:

It's not that we shouldn't have covered Trump's craziness, but that we should have aggressively provided context in the form of fact checks and robust examination of policy proposals.

Around the same time that Kristof's much-discussed column came out, Obama [gave a speech at Syracuse](#) in honor of Robin Toner, the first black woman to be a national *Times* correspondent. Though the speech didn't mention Trump by name, it was clearly about Trump, and the media's role in bringing about his success.

It was obvious that Obama had deeply-held feelings about the subject. This was natural given Trump's role in pushing the vicious birther campaign. Trump was one of the few figures capable of inspiring Obama to break character.

Obama, like Kristof, touched on the profit motive. He went much deeper than Kristof in his assessment of the media's structural problems, however, essentially saying that it was our intentional, profit-motivated indulgence of stupidity and mindless conflict that had brought us to this dark place. I personally was surprised he didn't lead with a diatribe about how Washington reporters are so dumb, you can get them to call you a "regular guy" just by [publishing a beer recipe](#) on the White House web site.

But he stuck to hounding us for valuing profit over substance. "The choice

between what cuts into your bottom lines and what harms us as a society is an important one,” he scolded.

Ultimately Obama landed near to Kristof in this critique:

A job well done is about more than just handing someone a microphone. It is to probe and to question, and to dig deeper, and to demand more.

Some pundits [rejected the notion](#) that Trump was the media’s fault. The *Guardian* around this time even [did a “fact check”](#) about this nebulous question (how does one “fact check” such a premise?). The paper concluded that there were “reasons to raise doubt” about our culpability in causing the Trump phenomenon, with the true observation that Trump voters don’t pay attention to our fact-checks anyway being one of the listed reasons.

But by the summer of 2016, it became accepted belief in our ranks that “the media” had created Trump. Reform became the watchword of the day. It was eye-opening to watch how quickly my colleagues ran from their own “likability” cliché once it began to look like it might be a factor in the increasingly infamous race. This was despite the fact that virtually every poll showed that Trump was actually [significantly more disliked](#) than his Democratic opponent.

Characteristically, there was no remorse over the fact that we had overemphasized the likability factor for a generation, helping ruin the candidacies of wonky dullards like Mike Dukakis, Al Gore, Kerry, and even Mitt Romney in the process. (“Professorial” was one of our negative code words for too policy-centric candidates).

Instead, it was now determined that “likability” was only a problem in this particular race, because (pick one) it wasn’t actually true about Hillary, or it was sexist, or because we reporters just mistake dedication, seriousness, and workaholic for a lack of charisma. People actually liked Hillary, or if they didn’t they were wrong not to, or we were wrong to report the fact – or something.

“How much do voters have to like their politicians?” [wondered Time](#), the same magazine that had put a giant black-and-white photo of Hillary over the headline [LOVE HER HATE HER \(check one\)](#) in 2006, back when this sort of analysis was not considered world-imperiling stupidity.

The *Atlantic* in 2012 had reinforced the cult of likability with a long piece explaining Obama's dominance of Romney by [writing](#), "In every instance [since 1984] the candidate seen as more likable won the election." In 2016, the same outlet [trashed likability](#) as a moral wrong, saying we shouldn't want a leader on our level, but one "demonstrably above us."

Beyond such changes, reporters on the trail began to sound sheepish notes, as if chastened by public displeasure. They began to talk about recasting their whole approach to Trump, and soon, we did.

Under the new formulation, *One Million Hours of Trump* became *One Million Hours of Trump (is bad!)*. Conveniently for our sales reps, the new dictum centered around the idea that we not only should *not* reduce the volume of TrumpMania, we must if anything increase it, because we now had an enhanced "responsibility" to "[call him out](#)."

We would hear a lot about "responsibility" in the coming years from the same people who *still* [remind us every four years](#) (and even, sometimes, [in between](#)) that Mike Dukakis is an all-time loser because he allowed himself to be photographed in a tank.

Later in the summer, in a [seminal op-ed in the *New York Times*](#), writer Jim Rutenberg argued that we reporters had an obligation as citizens to ward off the historical threat Trump posed.

Because Trump was a demagogue who played "to the nation's worst racist and nationalistic tendencies," we had to "throw out the textbook American journalism has been using for the better part of the past half-century" and "approach [Trump] in a way you've never approached anything in your career."

Rutenberg argued that we had to cast ourselves free of the moorings of "objectivity," and redefine fairness, fact, and truth. We should now be "true to the facts... in a way that will stand up to history's judgment."

The Rutenberg column never explained why changing a factual approach was necessary, if the Trump fact pattern was as bad as it was (and it was). Bad candidates and bad politicians looked bad even under the old "objectivity" standard, the old language, the old headlines. What were we changing and why?

Rutenberg said we had to grit our teeth and give up "balance, that idealistic form

of journalism with a capital ‘J’ we’ve been trained to always strive for.” Why? Because “now that he is the Republican nominee for president, the imbalance is cutting against [Trump].” An increased effort to scrutinize this candidate, call out his shit, etc., would hurt him at the polls, the theory went.

In reality, this column helped plant the seeds of the infamous symbiosis of today. What Rutenberg really meant by giving up “balance” wasn’t going after Trump more – we already were calling him every name in the book – but de-emphasizing scrutiny of the other side.

Announcing this gave Trump an opening to blast the press even more as being biased against him, validating his paranoid politics. Conversely, the posture rallied the core audiences of papers like the *Times*, at least for a while. A year after Rutenberg’s column, the paper was reveling in a so-called “[Trump bump](#)” in subscriptions, with the fourth quarter of 2016, when the *Times* had the honor of giving horrified audiences the bad news about Trump’s election, being its best year since it launched a digital pay model.

By the summer of 2018, however, the “Trump bump” was gone and the paper was seeing most of its digital growth [in crosswords and cooking](#). However, it still had the honor of having ditched its ancient and hard-fought reputation for objectivity in pursuit of a few quarters of growth.

One additional bizarre Trump-inspired change to reporting that took place in 2016 involved polls: we increasingly ignored data favorable to Trump and pushed surveys suggesting a Clinton landslide. The *Times* ran a piece in October pronouncing the race essentially over, telling us to expect a “[sweeping victory at every level](#)” for Clinton. The papers all through the race were full of confident predictions and demographic analyses with titles like, “[Relax, Trump Can’t Win](#)” and “[Donald Trump’s Six Stages of Doom](#).”

These stories were a crucial poker tell. The ostensible reason for our new adversarial posture was to advocate against Trump. But underreporting the seriousness of the Trump threat didn’t help Democrats at all. If anything, the opposite was true. De-fanging data reporting dulled attention to correctable weaknesses in the Clinton support base and, who knows, perhaps even motivated a voter or a thousand to stay home out of unconcern.

On the other hand, such reports got lots of clicks from blue state voters, thanks

to the same dynamic that inspires sports fans to read rosy predictions even when their teams suck. The vibe was closer to fanboy homerism (which incidentally is completely defensible in an entertainment genre like sports-writing) than “advocacy reporting.”

Trump’s victory came as a complete shock to millions in large part because of this quirk in the sub-genre of data reporting, whose whole purpose was to be a buffer against conventional wisdom and groupthink.

Election Day, 2016 was a historic blow to American journalism. It was as if we’d invaded Iraq and discovered there were no WMDs in the same few hours. Almost immediately, new conventional wisdom coalesced that explained the coverage failures in ways that incentivized future mistakes.

Chomsky and Herman wrote about how the elite reaction to America’s military loss in Vietnam was to create a revisionist history that not only steered us away from the reality of American crimes and policy failures, but set the stage for future invasions and occupations. The post-Vietnam story blamed an “excess of democracy” for the loss, especially in the media: loserific criticism of our prospects for victory undermined the popular resolve to keep fighting a winnable war.

So the press sheepishly abandoned a lot of its “excessively democratic” practices. We stopped showing deaths in battle, coffins coming home, etc. If you did any war zone reporting, you had to be “embedded” as part of an American unit, a practice that gave most war reporting a *Stars and Stripes* flavor. Even I submitted to these conditions.

In the same way, conventional wisdom after the 2016 vote steered attention away from the generation of press practices that had degraded the presidential campaign process to the point where the election of someone like Trump could even be possible.

Any real assessment of what happened would have focused on the fact that the campaign press had been so pompous for so long in telling voters what “presidential” meant, and in dictating fealty to crass stupidities like “nuance” and “the beer standard,” that voters entering 2016 were of course willing to cheer any pol with the insight to tell us to fuck off. The subtext of all of this, of course, was that our rants about beer and “likability” and so on were only the

Washington press corps' *idea* of what was important to a voter in flyover country.

Given that most actual voters were sunk in debt, working multiple jobs, often uninsured, saddled with ruined credit scores, and often battling alcohol and opiate addiction and other problems, it was a horrific aristocratic insult to tell people every four years that what *really* mattered to them was what candidate looked most convincing [carrying a rifle on a duck hunt](#). But we were so out of touch, we doubled down on these insults every four years.

That this was a huge part of Trump's appeal was obvious. But it was left out of electoral post-mortems.

Instead, the legend became that we hadn't been obnoxious *enough* during the election season. What America really needed, the press barons decided, was a more directly didactic approach about who was and was not an appropriate political choice.

The same pundit class that had raised us on moronic messaging like *Newsweek's* "[Fighting the Wimp Factor](#)" cover of George H.W. Bush created a new legend about how the Trump-era press corps had learned its lesson, and would be returning to its more natural role as serious-minded opponents of dumb populism.

For example, we weren't going to screw around with words like "misstatement" anymore. The new Press Corps Mark V would put the word "lie" in headlines. Go ahead and see if we wouldn't. We were tough now.

No less a figure than Dan Rather [sounded the "lie" bugle](#) as we entered the era of – gulp – *president* Trump. Rather's take was in response to a *Meet The Press* segment in which *Times* executive editor Dean Bacquet and *Wall Street Journal* editor Gerard Baker [harrumphed at length](#) as they debated this use of the "lie."

Eventually there was a great collective patting of backs when most of the major papers and networks decided to approve the forbidden word. Worse, despite the fact that the entire journalism business had just been forced to eat cauldrons of shit after its nearly two-year collection of misreads and smug dismissals of Trump's chances had exploded, Space Shuttle-style, on Election Day, papers and news networks everywhere were suddenly congratulating themselves for their new #Resistance fight-the-power posture. (Incidentally, what were we doing

before Trump? *Not* challenging power?) The *Washington Post*, for fuck's sake, actually [ran a *Behind the Music*-type feature](#) about how it settled on its new “Democracy Dies in Darkness” slogan.

Around the same time that Bacquet and Baker were holding their televised discussion about journalism's future, I was [interviewing Bernie Sanders](#) about the lessons of the 2016 race. He didn't use this language, but one of the big takeaways for Sanders from his run was that nobody out there gave a shit about *Meet the Press*:

What politics passes for now is somebody goes on *Meet the Press* and they do well: “Oh, this guy is brilliant, wonderful.” No one cares about *Meet the Press*.

Sanders spoke of the divide between the public and elite institutions, of which the press was now clearly considered one.

“It's not just the weakness of the Democratic Party and their dependency on the upper middle class, the wealthy, and living in a bubble,” he said. “It is a media where people turn on the television, they do not see a reflection of their lives. When they do, it is a caricature. Some idiot.”

When Sanders won the New Hampshire primary, Stephen Colbert invited him on the show — and had drink beer and eat peanuts. “If you like boiled peanuts, it'll certainly give you a leg up in South Carolina,” Colbert said.

Yuk, yuk.

Trump's election kicked off a lengthy period of personal despair for me, but not for the reasons you'd guess.

2016 was the fourth presidential election campaign I'd covered for *Rolling Stone*. Across all those races I'd been forced into a highly unusual position. The other “kids in the class” were constantly finking on me for various reasons. On my first-ever day on the trail for the magazine in 2004, an unnamed reporter called Howard Kurtz at the *Washington Post* to complain – this really happened – because I'd broken an unwritten rule by taking video of the press section without permission. I was also “spoken to” by a Kerry press aide, who relayed complaints of other unnamed reporters.

Later, when colleagues on that same trip went after Kerry for reaction after Matt Drudge published an unsubstantiated rumor that Kerry had a mistress, I made the mistake of asking other reporters on the plane why we were giving this story life without doing any work to see if it was true first. Reporters took in the treacherous fact that I was doing a story on *us* with varying degrees of fury.

“This,” one reporter said to me, waving a hand across the press seats in the Kerry campaign plane, “is a fucking *no-fly zone*, dude.”

After that incident the Kerry campaign (which had been the victim of the Drudge bumrush, remember) acquiesced to demands from other trail reporters and had me sent to the back of the plane, with the techies and documentarian Alexandra Pelosi. This should have struck me as a vivid demonstration of the unnatural relationship between campaigns and press corps, and of the group policing instinct that also led campaign reporters to school candidates in various unwritten political rules about “nuance” and “likability.” But at the time I just thought being stuck in the back of the plane was funny.

I didn’t agree with the core idea that reporters weren’t “part of the campaign story” and therefore should be exempt from all questions. But in subsequent elections I gave in to the argument that we couldn’t do our jobs without having a “safe work space,” and stopped hassling colleagues.

In 2008 and beyond, though, I kept getting in the soup. Because my print schedule was so different everyone else’s – I only had to file once every few weeks or months – I spent a lot of time twiddling my thumbs in filing rooms. Hour after hour, I watched colleagues slave away three or four times a day to send out the Urgent News that Fred Thompson or Mike Huckabee or whoever had just given the same speech he’d given fifty times in a row.

To pass the time I’d often read (in Iowa, I was hissed at by campaign staffer for turning the pages of a *Sports Illustrated* too loudly) or do even dumber things (a Rubik’s cube earned a rebuke in Houston). I finally learned that the only safe activity during filing hours was to do nothing. So I sat there, hour after hour, primary after primary, just thinking about what we were doing.

By 2012 I had a theory of the presidential campaign as a complex commercial process. On the plane, two businesses were going on in tandem. The candidates were raising money, which mostly entailed taking cash from big companies in

exchange for policy promises. In the back, reporters were gunning for hits and ratings. The candidate who most quickly found the middle ground between these two dynamics would become the nominee. Any candidate who was both good at raising money and deemed a suitable lead actor for the media's campaign reality show – who was “likable” and “nuanced” but also not too “left” or “weak on defense” or espousing of “[fringe](#)” politics like Nader or Ron Paul – would be allowed to move on to the general.

Journalists and candidates were not just political partners, but business partners. There was a massive sales aspect to the job that led reporters to take liberties with the truth more or less constantly. Politicians, even at their own expense, were often willing to help them there.

In 2012, there was consternation among campaign reporters early on that it was going to be hard to “sell” the Obama-Romney general as suspenseful, since we all got the feeling that Obama would win easily. This was not because of polls, but largely because of the same kinds of non-quantitative clues we would ignore in 2016: Obama's events were uproarious and huge, whereas Romney struggled to pack halls even in his home state, and seemed to be every Republican's third choice.

I went on CNN in the middle of that race and [said aloud](#) that reporters were pushing polls showing a close race just to rescue ratings. Despite the fact that everyone was saying this behind the scenes, I was the only one dumb enough to say it out loud. Noted Democratic consultant James Carville quickly came out to address the fact that he'd heard the same talk in private, and admonished everyone to remember that “complacency is dangerous” and Obama could lose.

Before long, we saw the remarkable phenomenon of Democrat-leaning pundits everywhere praising the absurdly maladroit Romney as a contender. The *Independent* called Obama “limp” (about the worst comment you get from a campaign reporter) and expressed shock that Obama wasn't fighting harder against Romney, because anyone who has “seen him play pick-up basketball” knows “how competitive [Obama] is.” (You see how all of this idiocy ties together; as if one can actually glean anything from watching a politician play basketball!).

Meanwhile Carville praised Romney's nonexistent debating skills, saying he “came in with a chainsaw.” Another high priest of conventional wisdom, CNN's

self-described “centrist” David Gergen, declared, “[We’ve got a horse race.](#)”

We didn’t, of course. Obama won with relative ease. But even if Romney had somehow taken advantage and won, the Gergens of the world wouldn’t have shed a tear: having a tax-slashing leveraged buyout artist in the White House, a Mormon Gordon Gekko, would have been okay with most of these clowns.

It was the ultimate demonstration of the *Manufacturing Consent* principle of a concocted, artificially narrowed public debate. We were meant to understand that the distance between Romney and Obama was vast, that much was at stake, with the outcome in doubt.

In reality everyone knew the outcome, and the people bleating the loudest about “dangerous complacency” would have shrugged at seeing a banker-supported private equity titan replace Barack Obama, who by then was in his fourth year of letting Wall Street toadies like Tim Geithner and Citigroup execs like Jack Lew lead his post-crash economic policy.

After 2012 I knew that any candidate smart enough to run against all this insanity would do well. When I saw in early 2016 that Trump was doing exactly this, I had a flash of insight he was going to be president. In the first feature I wrote about Trump, I talked about how he was looking “[unstoppable](#),” and explained:

It turns out we let our electoral process devolve into something so fake and dysfunctional that any half-bright con man with the stones to try it could walk right through the front door and tear it to shreds on the first go.

And Trump is no half-bright con man, either. He’s way better than average.

I went back to *Rolling Stone* after that trip and insisted to everyone in the office that Trump was going to win the White House. They all thought I was crazy. This was not something I was happy about, but I understood it. The most devastating part of Trump’s campaign is that we’d spent decades giving him the ammunition he would need to punch his way to the top. When Trump talked about conspiracies of elites, he was not 100% wrong, and this was not going to change going forward.

During the Republican primary, he spoke at length about things that by tradition we rarely discussed on the trail, like the financial backers who often traveled

with the candidates. “Do you think Jeb Bush is going to make drug prices competitive?” Trump asked. “He’s got Woody Johnson as his head of fundraising.” Johnson was the head of Johnson & Johnson, of course a major drugmaker.

Johnson and a slew of other big Pharma execs had been in the room during the Republican debate the night before. Johnson & Johnson was of particular interest because it owns Janssen Pharmaceuticals, which among other things [makes Fentanyl](#), the drug reportedly responsible for [about half of the 72,000 overdose deaths last year](#). Trump didn’t mention this — in fact he crudely blamed New Hampshire’s drug problems on dealers “across the souther border” — but he was giving voters a peek into the kingmaking process. No major candidate that I could remember had talked about the donors being in the room during debates.

I knew Trump would use the same tactics against Clinton he’d used against Bush, and wrote:

Trump will surely argue that the Clintons are the other half of the dissolute-conspiracy story he’s been selling, representing a workers’ party that abandoned workers and turned the presidency into a vast cash-for-access enterprise, avoiding scrutiny by making Washington into Hollywood East and turning labor leaders and journalists alike into starstruck courtiers.

As with everything else, Trump personalizes this, making his stories of buying Hillary’s presence at his wedding a part of his stump speech. A race against Hillary Clinton in the general, if it happens, will be a pitch right in Trump’s wheelhouse.

Later, Trump did in fact make it a point to describe Clinton and Jeb Bush as basically the same politician, only Clinton had even “[less energy](#).” In the general, he relentlessly [pounded NAFTA and the TPP](#) to hammer home the idea that he was the friend of the worker (this, from the same person who said [auto workers were overpaid](#) and threatened to move auto factories to union-hostile states). He [hammered Clinton](#) for her real ties to banks like Goldman, Sachs, in the same way he’d hammered Bush for his real ties to corporate donors.

It all worked. Were there other factors? Were racism and sexism huge themes that Trump exploited, perhaps more than any other? Of course. But he also explicitly ran against *us*, the flying backroom deal that was the campaign.

He ran against the unseen policing that for generations had carefully kept the presidency between mainstream Republican and mainstream Democratic poles. Whether it was intentional or not, it was highly effective. And the horror of the genteel press corps was, for Trump's voters, a major selling point.

The reaction by my colleagues was not to concede any of this, but to publish story after story trying to punch holes in the few true things Trump said. Progressive outlets suddenly started telling us that [NAFTA wasn't so bad](#). We heard that taking speech money from banks was legitimate because politicians are people too and need to make money. Moreover the same warnings we'd heard from people like Carville four years before about "complacency" were now absent. Carville himself came out in September 2016 and declared the race all but over, saying Republicans "continue to make a bad bet" on "non-college whites." This was the same political consultant who'd put Bill Clinton in the White House targeting... non-college whites.

In the summer of 2016, I lost my nerve. I let pollsters talk me into the impossibility of a Trump win. Like a lot of journalists, I started ignoring what I was seeing at rallies. Once Trump was President, I realized that I'd fallen for the con in my own business, which preached that all races are exciting and close – unless one of the candidates is somehow politically unacceptable.

I thought the failure of the press in 2016 would lead to a prolonged period of introspection and re-evaluation. Instead, we created an environment in which reporters are more committed than ever to the elite policing behaviors that won us Trump in the first place. To me the 2016 campaign was just a particularly dramatic demonstration of the "silencing" phenomenon, in which media content – not just news, but all content, entertainment included – is tailored for the consumption of highly individualized demographics.

The same news that for decades hadn't shown poverty on TV unless it was shirtless and being subdued by cops had discovered the ultimate cash cow in Trump, a billionaire who turned the presidential election into a pro wrestling-style ratings magnet. When it got caught clucking over how rich Trump was making them, big media was faced with a choice: cover him less, or find a way to justify covering him more.

We chose door number two. The rhetorical trick we employed was an openly adversarial stance, supposedly a bold new step. The papers will tell you this was

an ethical/political choice. Perhaps it was, in some cases. But as much as anything else, it was a business decision. Most outlets, whether they admitted it or not, basically chose to double down with half the news audience, rather than concede all of it.

Trump won because the media can't resist a hot-selling story. When this quirk turned out to have disastrous consequences, we invented a new approach to selling Trump that just seemed less irresponsible. In this new environment there would only be two acceptable takes in the press: pro-Trump and anti-Trump. Both takes would sell extremely well, in respective venues. But this formalized our descent into a sportslike coverage paradigm, which had been building for decades.

Two data points stood out after 2016. One involved those polls that showed confidence in the media dipping to all-time lows. The other involved unprecedented ratings. People believed us less, but watched us more.

We are now eating into the profits of the entertainment business. Completing a decades-long slide, the news has become a show, and not just in campaign years, but always.

What went wrong? When did this start?

The Ten Rules of Hate

Pick up any major newspaper, or turn on any network television news broadcast. The political orientation won't matter. It could be Fox or MSNBC, the *Washington Post* or the *Washington Times*. You'll find virtually every story checks certain boxes.

Call them the ten rules of hate. After generations of doing the opposite, when unity and conformity were more profitable, the primary product the news media now sells is division.

We of course also do content that's just plain stupid, what a TV producer friend of mine calls the *Isn't This Weird?* effect. ** But the easiest media product to make is called, *This Bad Thing That Just Happened Is Someone Else's Fault*. It has a virtually limitless market.

I know this because I've created a lot of that content. Over the years I became increasingly uneasy about feeding readers' hate reflexes. I tried to get around this by only picking stories about things that were genuinely outrageous, but eventually you start to feel the tail wagging the dog. In recent years I started to hear from other reporters who'd begun doing the same thing. You'll hear from some of them below.

The problem we all have is the commercial structure of the business. To make money, we've had to train audiences to consume news in a certain way. We need you anxious, pre-pissed, addicted to conflict. Moreover we need you to bring a series of assumptions every time you open a paper or turn on your phone, TV, or car radio. Without them, most of what we produce will seem illogical and offensive.

The trick is to constantly narrow your mental horizons and keep you geeked up on impotent anger. It's a twist on *Manufacturing Consent's* description of an artificially narrowed debate.

The Herman/Chomsky thesis in the mid-1980s highlighted how the press "manufactured" public unity by making sure the population was only exposed to a narrow range of political ideas, stretching from Republican to Democrat (with the Democrat usually more like an Eisenhower Republican). So long as you stayed on that little median strip, you accepted a broad range of underlying principles that never popped up in the sanitized, Nerfball version of debate the op-ed pages exhibited.

The difference now: we encourage full-fledged division on that strip. We've discovered we can sell hate, and the more vituperative the rhetoric, the better. This also serves larger political purposes.

So long as the public is busy hating each other and not aiming its ire at the more complex financial and political processes going on off-camera, there's very little danger of anything like a popular uprising.

That's not why we do what we do. But it *is* why we're allowed to operate this way. It boggles the mind that people think they're practicing real political advocacy by watching any major corporate TV channel, be it Fox or MSNBC or CNN. Does anyone seriously believe that powerful people would allow truly dangerous ideas to be broadcast on TV? The news today is a reality show where

you're part of the cast: *America vs. America*, on every channel.

The trick here is getting audiences to think they're punching up, when they're actually punching sideways, at other media consumers just like themselves, who just happen to be in a different silo. Hate is a great blinding mechanism. Once you've been in the business long enough, you become immersed in its nuances. If you can get people to accept a sequence of simple, powerful ideas, they're yours forever. The Ten Rules of Hate:

1. THERE ARE ONLY TWO IDEAS

There are only two baskets of allowable opinion: Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, left or right. This is drilled into us at a young age. By the time we hit college, most of us, roughly speaking, will have chosen the political identity we'll stick with for the rest of our lives. It's the Boolean version of politics, pure binary thought: blue or red, true or false, zero or one.

Open up a *New York Times* op-ed page if you want to see the contours. The spectrum of ideas is narrow. There is no Paul Goodman preaching revolutionary pacifism. There's no Thoreau, denouncing the spiritual bankruptcy of our work-centric lives, urging us to reconnect with nature. There are no Twains telling us that to "lodge all power in one party and keep it there is to ensure bad government." There are no Bierces or Swifts helping us laugh at the rich and powerful and pompous.

There is, however, always a Bret Stephens or a Ross Douthat representing the Republican side, along with the standard lineup of Paul Krugmans and Nick Kristofs repping the blue side. The *Washington Post* has George Will and Max Boot. "Intellectual diversity" in a major news outlet means "someone from both parties."

You will connect with one or the other. It doesn't matter which one.

2. THE TWO IDEAS ARE IN PERMANENT CONFLICT

It was a joke in the seventies, with *Saturday Night Live's* "Point/Counterpoint." The *Saturday Night Live* news show pitted Dan Akroyd and Jane Curtain viciously railing at each other over issues no sane person could possibly care about. "[Jane, you ignorant slut!](#)" seethed Akroyd, in a "debate" about actor Lee Marvin's palimony case. The skit was hilarious precisely because normal human

beings don't dress up in suits and ties to yell insults at each other over issues that have nothing to do with their actual lives.

This joke became a formal part of the news landscape not long after. It began with shows like *The McLaughlin Group* on PBS, then continued more famously with *Crossfire* on CNN.

Crossfire solidified the idea that politics is a fight and Democrats and Republicans not only must not come to an agreement about things, but debate to the end in a sports-like forum.

Some of the early *Crossfire* shows on CNN with Pat Buchanan (“from the right”) and Tom Braden (“from the left”) were confused duds in terms of format. There were actually episodes where the “left” and “right” positions were weirdly in agreement, almost like human beings can share common-sense reactions to certain things.

Take, for instance, the show when [both Braden and Buchanan blasted Pan Am Airlines](#) for not warning passengers of terrorist threats before the Lockerbie disaster.

But the show quickly settled on the never-agree format that would make it a hit. Buchanan and Braden would duke it out to the end, often over cultural issues. An episode in which they debated the propriety of a Dan Rather interview of then-Vice President George H.W. Bush shows Buchanan in [a preview of early anti-press populism](#).

A dynamic to the show that was perfectly predicted by *Manufacturing Consent* was that the “from the left” actor usually spent most of the show sniveling and begging for compromise, while the “from the right” actor was always attacking. This sent the message to audiences that lefties were, basically, weenies.

Journalist Jeff Cohen, who would end up cast in a later version of the show and wrote a terrific book about the experience called [Cable News Confidential](#), described it this way: “The libs were like boxers who didn't know how to punch.”

Future debate shows like *Hannity & Colmes* and one I've been on, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, also depended on the theater of conservatives endlessly duking it out with liberals.

Much like TV shows like *M*A*S*H**, which habituated viewers to the Orwellian idea that Americans were always at war far away with some Asiatic enemy somewhere (this was why the director of the *M*A*S*H** movie, Robert Altman, [hated the popular TV show](#)), *Crossfire* trained us to see our world not just as a binary political landscape, but one permanently steeped in conflict.

Cohen was cast as the “liberal” opposite the likes of Buchanan and comedian Ben Stein (Cohen writes humorously about the rattling discovery that Stein’s nasal delivery turns out to be his actual voice). He was soon so weighed down by the cross-sniping format that he set as his goal trying to “say something unconventional, to stretch the limits of debate,” at least once per episode.

Even that turned out to be extremely difficult. The shows are not designed to expand mental horizons. They’re about two things: reinforcing the notion that the world is split in half (what Cohen calls the “two and only two” message), and the spectacle of combat.

“These TV debates are not about ideas or solutions or ideology, but simply partisan sniping and talking-point recitation,” Cohen says now. “I enjoy a genuine right-left philosophical debate, when it’s between serious analysts or journalists – as opposed to Democrat vs. Republican BS artists, and party hacks.”

Cohen in his book referenced an old joke: *What do pro wrestling and the U.S. Senate have in common? Both are dominated by overweight white guys pretending to hurt each other.* He said, “The intellectual level of cable news is one step above pro wrestling.”

Cohen wrote that over a decade ago. Today the news is *at* the level of pro wrestling. This is one reason we have a WWE performer in the White House. It’s the ultimate synthesis of politics and entertainment, and the core of all of it is the ritual of conflict. Without conflict, there’s no product.

Once you accept the “two and two only” idea, we basically have you. The only trick from there is preventing narrative-upsetting ideas from getting onscreen too often. Hence:

3. HATE PEOPLE, NOT INSTITUTIONS

Trump is not just the perfect media product, he’s a brilliant propaganda

mechanism. Though most of our problems are systemic, most of our public debates are referendums on personality. Not many people can be neutral on the subject of Trump, so we wave him at you all day long.

Meanwhile, a vast universe of systemic issues is ignored. We've been steadily narrowing that field of view for decades, particularly in investigative reporting.

In the late nineties there was a series of high-level efforts by journalists to take on major corporate interests. One, the *60 Minutes* download of Big Tobacco whistleblower [Jeffrey Wigand](#), was made into a feature film called *The Insider*, starring Al Pacino and Russell Crowe.

A second involved the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, which did a sweeping investigation of anti-labor [practices at the Chiquita Banana company](#) (including paying millions to designated terrorist organizations and death squads in countries like Colombia). A third involved married TV reporters Steve Wilson and Jane Akre at WTVT-TV in Tampa, a Fox affiliate. They prepared a huge [expose on Monsanto](#) and its use of Bovine Growth Hormone.

All three big-swing exposes ended in actual or threatened litigation, and disaster. *60 Minutes* famously screwed their source, Wigand, over fear of being sued by tobacco firm Brown & Williamson, a moment that was an Alamo for press credibility. From that moment, sources could never be sure if they were making a deal with reporters, or reporters' lawyers.

The Chiquita reporters were denounced for using a voice-mail code given to them by a source to access Chiquita communications. This is an offense that seems to pale in comparison to helping death squads intimidate workers, but it won the headlines in the end. The paper ended up paying \$10 million to Chiquita.

Just as *Manufacturing Consent* talked about with Vietnam – where in the aftermath of our loss we regularly debated the propriety of war journalism, but more rarely discussed apparently less-important subjects like invasion, occupation, bombing civilians, and so on – we still regularly examine the behaviors of investigative journalists. Chiquita was a story about the very worst kind of corporate misbehavior, but in the cultural memory it's become a story about dicey journalism.

The *New Yorker* in a headline years later described the story as the "[Chiquita](#)

[Phone-Hacking Scandal](#),” as opposed to, say, the “Chiquita buys AK-47s for death squads” scandal.

Akre/Wilson were bluntly told by their new masters at Fox, “We paid \$3 billion for this station, we’ll decide what the news is,” then fired. After losing wrongful termination and whistleblower suits when they protested being let go for doing their jobs, Akre and Wilson were counter-sued for damages.

“We ended up paying them for the privilege of having our story killed,” recalls a seething Akre.

In the years after *Manufacturing Consent* came out, big corporate conglomerates bought up most major media outlets. Station directors and publishers without reporting backgrounds suddenly became common. Now when you went to your boss to press for an important story, you were often talking to someone who looked back at you the way an auto executive might at an engineer pushing production of a car with a super-cool optional exploding-tire feature. As in, why the hell would we *try* to get sued?

The biggest outlets learned there’s no percentage in doing big exposés against large, litigious companies. Not only will they sue, they’re also certain to pull ads as punishment (this was a big consideration in the Monsanto case, as Fox ** had 22 stations that could all have used NutraSweet ads). Why make trouble?

Also, news audiences by then had been being trained to not value this kind of work the way they once had. It was easy enough to sell something else instead – better weather graphics, celebrity news, faster delivery, etc. Papers and stations that had their own correspondents abroad or in Washington increasingly shuttered those offices and relied on the wires. Nobody much cared.

The message to reporters working in big corporate news organizations was that long-form investigative reports targeting big commercial interests weren’t forbidden exactly, just not something your boss was likely to gush over.

“I don’t know if it was my case or just common sense, but there are some things you just know,” says Akre. “Like if you want to work in TV in Florida, you’re not going to do exposés on Disney.”

“Consumer reporting” instead increasingly focused on softer targets.

“What you get instead is an exposé about some little Vietnamese restaurant. Because they won’t fight back, obviously,” says Akre. She drops her voice as she imitates a consumer-report VO: “You know, it’s ‘*We’ll take you... Behind the restaurant door...*’”

Akre, who was asked by her boss if she was sure a Monsanto expose was the “hill” she wanted to “die on,” never worked in TV again.

The reason these tales are important is that, when media companies aren’t doing the right stories, they start self-sorting for the wrong ones. You could call this the *Worthy and Unworthy Targets* principle.

Worthy targets are small-time crooks, restaurant owners with rats, actors, athletes, reality stars, and other minor miscreants. In the nineties, to this list of worthy subjects, we added two more: “Either of the two approved political parties.”

Akre was present for the birth of this innovation. She worked at early Fox stations that had the look, but not yet the politics. “Chandelier earrings, shoulder pads, giant blown-out hair,” she laughs, describing the costume of female anchors at a Miami affiliate where she’d worked in the early nineties. “They had the outrageousness, but not yet the slant.”

It was after the Monsanto episode that Fox ** struck gold with the Lewinsky story and the Clinton impeachment. Roger Ailes, the new CEO who’d helped kill the Monsanto piece, was learning to cash in by terrifying elderly audiences with images of evil hippie power couple Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Hillary denigrated *baking cookies* while letting her husband run around with his pants around his ankles. Thanks in large part to Lewinsky and the Starr probe – stories Fox ** rode to riches as white hat/black hat soap dramas – the network went [from launch to top of the cable market](#) in less than six years.

Fox nailed the formula of the modern news story. Forget just doing a cable variety show with conservatives and liberals engaged in ritualized fighting. Why not make the whole news landscape a rooting section?

It would be a while before other networks embraced Fox-style open political slant (and when they did, they did it in a different way). But Ailes quickly had a lot of imitators when it came to the blame game, because:

4. EVERYTHING IS SOMEONE ELSE'S FAULT

Here's how we create political news content. Something happens, it doesn't matter what. Donald Trump nominates Brett Kavanaugh. A hurricane hits Puerto Rico. The financial markets collapse. Bill Clinton is impeached for perjury over a sex act. A massive humanitarian crisis hits Syria. Whatever it is, our task is to turn it into content, quickly running it through a flow chart:

BAD THING HAPPENS

Can it be blamed on one or the other party?

YES (we do the story) NO (we don't do the story – see rule #5)

The overwhelming majority of “controversial news stories” involve simple partisan narratives cleaved quickly into hot-button talking points. Go any deeper and you zoom off the flow chart.

We like *easy* stories. This is another reason why Trump has been such a savior to the news business, no matter how much Brian Stelter [wants to deny it](#). Every narrative involving Trump is perfect: easy enough for the most uneducated audiences to digest (it has to be, because Trump usually has to understand it), and pre-packaged in crude binary format.

“Trump [lied about 3,000 deaths](#) in the Puerto Rico hurricane” is a story you can put in almost any big-city newspaper. If your audience is conservative, you can go with the flipped version, about how the media is out to screw the Donald: “No, it was Democrats who [lied about the numbers!](#)”

And what about Donald Trump's [border policies separating families](#)? Aren't they inhumane, literally [concentration camps](#)?

Concentration camps on our border? Yes, say some outlets.

But Trump [says it was Obama's policy](#)! Not so, wrote the *New York Times*, [denouncing](#) Trump in a “fact-check” for “again wrongly claiming Democrats are responsible.”

But, actually, yes, it [was the fault of previous administrations](#), sort of, said *McClatchy*, noting that Obama even had “tent cities.” No way, [said Politifact](#), a

fact-checking site preferred by liberal audiences.

Well, sort of, way, said Obama's former Homeland Security Chief Jeh Johnson, who went on Fox ** and "[freely admitted](#)" the Obama administration did jail families and separate children in what he called a "controversial" policy.

If you weren't watching Fox ** but MSNBC, which ran "horrifying" details of new DHS reports of "[just plain inhumane](#)" conduct, you'd be right back where you probably started if you belonged to their target demographic: outraged by a brutal Trump policy.

In the days when we had a [public interest standard](#) that mandated companies using the public airwaves produce at least some non-sociopathic, non-commercial content, or when we had a [Fairness Doctrine](#) that required that reporters seek out credible representatives of different viewpoints, all of this back and forth would typically be weighed in one story.

Part of the reporter's job was to put aside the fault question and just describe the factual picture. The thornier the issue, the harder that job was. Immigration is a classic example of a story where blame for widespread misery and suffering is almost always diffuse and systemic, and very difficult to lay on any one politician or party.

Trump's "zero tolerance" gambit stands out because part of the intent of the policy seems to have been to dial up the inhumane aspects of enforcement bureaucracy to send a message. Moreover it comes from a president who's used lines like "they're bringing rapists" to rally anti-immigrant sentiment for political reasons.

But it is true that immigrant children were routinely separated from their parents long before Trump. Moreover the entire enforcement system is, and long has been, draconian and inhumane in a way that would shock most non-immigrants.

Also, it's not as if this problem was entirely created by American border officials. The numbers are lower today, but we've had years where nearly 70,000 unaccompanied children tried to cross the southern border. Is there a *good* way to handle that? Administrations of both parties have had differing levels of failure dealing with this, but it's almost never looked good.

The best news stories take issues and find a way to make readers think hard

about them, especially inviting them to consider how they themselves contribute to the problem. You want people thinking, “I voted for *what?*” Most problems are systemic, bipartisan, and bureaucratic, and most of us, by voting or not voting, paying taxes or not, own a little of most disasters.

But we veer you off that mental alley, and instead feed you stories about how someone else did the bad thing, because:

5. NOTHING IS EVERYONE’S FAULT

If both parties have an equal or near-equal hand in causing a social problem, we typically don’t cover it. Or better to say: a reporter or two might cover it, but it’s never picked up. It doesn’t take over a news cycle, doesn’t become a *thing*.

The bloated military budget? Mass surveillance? American support for dictatorial regimes like the cannibalistic Mbasogo family in Equatorial Guinea, the United Arab Emirates, or Saudi Arabia? Our culpability in proxy-nation atrocities in places like Yemen or Palestine? The drone assassination program? Rendition? Torture? The drug war? Absence of access to generic or reimported drugs?

Nah. We just don’t do these stories. At least, we don’t do them anywhere near in proportion to their social impact. They’re hard to sell. And the ability to market a story is everything.

Nomi Prins used to be a banker for Goldman Sachs. She left the industry prior to the 2008 crash and became an important resource for all Americans in the years that followed, helping explain what banks were doing, and why, from an inside perspective.

In recent years she became increasingly alarmed by central banking policies around the world. In Europe and the United States, she zeroed in on programs like Quantitative Easing that overworked the money-producing powers of the state and pumped giant sums of invented money into the finance sector. She called this a “massive, unprecedented, coordinated effort to provide liquidity to [the] banking systems on a grand scale.”

These policies are a kind of permanent welfare mechanism for the financial sector, and have had a dramatic impact around the world. They’ve accelerated an already serious financial inequality problem and addicted the banking sector to

an unsustainable subsidy.

There's only one problem, at least in terms of editors. You can't sell this story as any one party's fault.

"It is a purely bipartisan situation that things are as fucked up as they are," laughs Prins.

The central banking policies have been supported by what we think of as the entire range of allowable political thought in America, i.e. from Bush-era Republicans who signed off on the original bank bailouts through the Obama Democrats who followed.

Prins' new book on the topic, [Collusion](#), describes a classic systemic problem, one that ought to have deep interest to "both" camps. For liberals, it's a story about an obscene subsidy of the very rich, while for conservatives, it's a profound story about the corruption of capitalism.

But TV bookers have struggled to figure out how to market Prins. She tells a story of a TV host who quizzed her off air in a troubled voice.

"It was like, 'I can't tell if you're progressive or conservative.' And I thought, that's good, isn't it?"

In the Trump era, Prins has faced an even steeper uphill climb. Not only did she write a book called *Collusion* that isn't about *that* collusion, she's writing about a topic that really has no direct Trump angle. Although her book does explicitly talk about how central banking problems contributed to political unrest that led to both Brexit and Trump, that topic is not a popular one on lefty media.

Prins figures she's ended up [appearing more on Fox](#), which now sells Fed criticism in the "conspiracy of elites" vein Trump used to great effect in 2016. Traditional left-leaning media has been less interested, with the [exception of Ali Velshi](#) on MSNBC, who just happens to have some expertise and understanding of these issues.

When Velshi interviewed Prins, he made sure to tell viewers that her critique was different from the "secret society" conspiracism right-wingers often toss the Fed's way. He asked her why viewers should care about the issue. She talked about how banks take Fed largesse and use it to buy back their own stock and

feed asset bubbles, creating danger and accelerating inequality.

All important – but no partisan angle, not really. The one partisan take you could point to is Trump taking credit for a soaring stock market when a lot of it is central bank dope in the economy’s veins. But the larger problem is a constant reaching back a decade or more.

Nonetheless (and I’m sure this wasn’t Velshi doing this), the taglines during the Prins interview were almost all about Trump:

TRUMP SET TO REMAKE FED TO REFLECT POLICIES

TRUMP LIKELY TO LEAVE LASTING FINGERPRINTS ON FED

AUTHOR: TRUMP’S FED MOVES COULD LEAVE GLOBE DEVASTATED

“If it’s not either for or against Trump, you don’t get airtime,” Prins says. “You kind of have to pick one side.”

This is the WWE-ization of news, incidentally encouraged by Trump, who has striven from the beginning to inject himself into the news. The problem is that this has paid off tremendously for him, and for commercial media across the political spectrum. But it hasn’t necessarily been good for us.

The notion of a crisis caused by a bipartisan confluence of powerful interests doesn’t fit in the way we cover news today. It would be hard to do a story saying conservative higher-education profiteers like the DeVos family are gorging themselves on non-dischargeable, over-available federal student debt of the type congressional [Democrats pushed](#) for decades. This might be the truth, but it cannot be marketed, because it doesn’t compute, not for modern news audiences. It upsets the format:

6. ROOT, DON’T THINK

By the early 2000s, TV stations had learned to cover politics exactly as they covered sports, a proven profitable format. The presidential election especially was reconfigured into a sports coverage saga. It was perfect: 18 months of scheduled contests, a preseason (straw polls), regular season (primaries), and playoffs (the general), stadium events, a sub-genre of data reporting (it’s not an

accident that sabermetrics guru Nate Silver fit so seamlessly into political coverage).

TV news stations baldly copied visual “live variety” sports formats for coverage of primary elections, debates, election night, and soon enough, Sunday “discussion” shows like *Meet the Press*. If you’ve noticed the sets bear an eerie resemblance to [NFL pre-game shows](#), there’s a reason for that.

“Panels are typically two conservative advocates versus two mainstream reporters/analysts who are obviously moderate libs but not allowed to admit it or strongly advocate much of anything,” is how Cohen, formerly of *Crossfire*, puts it. Chuck Todd is Chris Berman is James Brown is Wolf Blitzer. The professional talker stands on one side of the panel and tosses to the various energetic advocates for and against the team’s chances (Ana Navarro is Terry Bradshaw is Steve Mariucci is Van Jones), then mediate the blather when everyone agrees and it all breaks down into [conventional wisdom](#).

By the election of 2016, virtually all the sports graphic ideas had been stolen. There were “[countdown to kickoff](#)” clocks for votes, “[% chance of victory](#)” trackers, “[our experts pick](#)” charts, a “[magic number](#)” for delegate counts, and a hundred different graphic doodads helping us keep score in the game. John King fiddling with his maps with Wolf Blitzer [on the “magic wall”](#) has become as much a part of our election mindscape as watching ex-athletes like [David Carr](#) or [Jalen Rose](#) chart football or hoops plays with civilians like Zach Lowe or Rachel Nichols.

You could wallpaper the Grand Canyon with debate-coverage boxing clichés. Try this in the 2020 cycle. See how often you read/hear one or more of these words in a debate story: “[spar](#),” “[parry](#),” “[jab](#),” “[knockout](#),” “[knockdown](#),” “[glass jaw](#),” “[uppercut](#),” “[low blow](#),” “[counterpunch](#),” “[rope-a-dope](#),” “[rabbit punch](#),” “[sucker punch](#),” “[in the ring](#),” “[TKO](#),” or any of about a dozen other terms. It will be shocking if future debates don’t have weigh-in ceremonies.

Actually, they already *do* have weigh-in ceremonies for debate shows. Watch this super-loathsome [special event](#) re-uniting *Crossfire* grads Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson at the Conservative Political Action Conference, in which an announcer introduces the two:

Weighing in with years of experience as a commentator for CNN, standing

tall beside Bill and Hillary Clinton, Paul ‘Big Government’ Begala!

(Begala here actually entered the “ring” with a triumphant raised-hands pose, as in, yes, call me “Big Government” Begala)

*In the right corner... standing tall as the founder of the Daily Caller...
Tucker “Cut it all” Carlson!*

(Carlson enters, and the two men sit at seats with boxing gloves draped over them.)

This nonsense has all had the effect of depoliticizing elections and turning them into blunt contests of tactics, fundraising, and rhetorical technique (CNN even pioneered the use of real-time dial surveys of focus groups, to [help “keep political score” in debates](#)). It also hardened the winner-take-all vision of politics for audiences.

By 2016 we’d raised a generation of viewers who had no conception of politics as an activity that might or should involve compromise. Your team either won or lost, and you felt devastated or vindicated accordingly. We were training rooters instead of readers. Since our own politicians are typically very disappointing, we particularly root for the other side to lose. Being an American in the 1% era is like being a Jets fan whose only conceivable pleasure is rooting against the Patriots. We’re haters, but what else is there?

The famous appearance of Jon Stewart on *Crossfire* in 2004 unmasked the conceit of all of this. The comedian blasted Carlson (from the right!) and Begala (from the left!) for “partisan hackery” and nailed them with a simple request: stop fighting and say something nice about an opposing-party politician.

Carlson was clever enough to say, “I like John Kerry, I care about John Kerry,” which made him sound human-ish – until he spent the rest of the segment trying to hound Stewart into admitting he was a “butt boy” for Kerry.

(A central fixation of the right-wing media universe Carlson occupies involves forcing every coastal intellectual to admit he or she is in the tank for the Dems. But he was wrong about Stewart. The uniqueness of the *Daily Show*, what made it funny, ** was that it ridiculed both parties. The Bush administration just happened to be more absurd than the Democrats at the time).

Meanwhile, when Stewart turned to Begala and asked him to say something nice about George W. Bush, Begala could only say, “He’ll be unemployed soon.”

Audiences today will cheer that, but it was a lousy answer. In the show format – “emphasis on show,” as Cohen says – Begala, a former Clinton advisor, wasn’t allowed to break character. Even I could probably think of something nice to say about George W. Bush, his family, his voters, something. But in this business, everyone is on a side, and we’re always fighting, never looking for common ground. It ruins everyone’s suspension of disbelief it we do.

7. NO SWITCHING TEAMS

That symbolic moment when Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson were unable to find something nice to say about each other has since spilled into all news coverage. The concept of “balance,” which used to be considered a virtue, has been twisted all the way around to mean a taboo trade practice, a form of dishonesty.

Roger Ailes at Fox ** started this. He made the whole concept of “balance” an inside joke on right-wing media. It’s the reason the preposterous slogan, “Fair and Balanced,” was so effective, both for recruiting conservative viewers and infuriating liberals.

Ailes [used to say](#): “The news is like a ship. If you take hands off the wheel, it pulls hard to the left.” Translation: you needed to pull hard the other way to achieve “balance” overall.

“Fair and balanced,” in other words, was a rip on the idea that standard dull third-person *New York Times*-style media already *was* balanced. Twenty years before it would become a popular rallying cry on the other side, Roger Ailes was essentially using an argument about “false balance” to market Fox.

In recent years, but especially during the 2016 election, an array of Soviet-sounding terms started appearing to describe a new brand of thoughtcrime. Reporters had always taken lots of criticism from right-wing audiences for showing bias. In the last election, those same criticisms started to come from college-educated, liberal-leaning audiences.

They started to throw around terms like “[false balance](#),” “[false equivalency](#),” and “[both-sideism](#).”

In late 2016, *New York Times* public editor Liz Spayd started to get lots of angry mail about “false balance.” Mainly, they were accusations that the *Times* over-covered Hillary Clinton’s emails and legitimized Clinton Foundation stories. There was enough of this that she felt a need to [respond to charges](#) in the paper.

“The problem with false balance doctrine is that it masquerades as rational thinking,” she said, adding: “What the critics really want is for journalists to apply their own moral and ideological judgments to the candidates.”

She added a hypothetical:

Suppose journalists deem Clinton’s [use of private email servers](#) a minor offense compared with [Trump inciting Russia to influence an American election](#) by hacking into computers — remember that? Is the next step for a paternalistic media to barely cover Clinton’s email so that the public isn’t confused about what’s more important? Should her email saga be covered at all? It’s a slippery slope.

Spayd probably had no idea that the “slippery slope” argument was also on its way to [being delegitimized](#) as well, but that’s another topic.

While Spayd was pushing back on the “false balance” controversy, the *Times* was embracing a significant change internally. The Jim Rutenberg editorial calling for reporters in the Trump age to rethink old “norms of objectivity” was a significant step. He wrote his piece in August, right as Spayd was beginning to engage readers on the balance issue.

Rutenberg argued we should re-imagine “objectivity” in a way that would “stand up to history’s judgment.” This was basically code for accepting the argument about making political judgments about impact before running stories, even newsworthy ones. Was it a major step for the *Times*? I know I thought so, and a few other reporters did. So did Spayd. “I thought it was,” she says. “And didn’t they put it on the front?”

They did: the Rutenberg clarion call about “norms of objectivity” ran on their page A1, the choicest real estate in American media. This said a lot about what the paper was thinking.

After Trump won, Spayd made what many considered the unforgivable offense of going on Tucker Carlson’s TV show. Carlson opened by brandishing the [day-](#)

[afterTimesheadline](#) about Trump's win:

DEMOCRATS, STUDENTS, AND FOREIGN ALLIES FACE THE REALITY OF A TRUMP PRESIDENCY

The *Times* of course is not obligated to celebrate a Trump presidency, but this headline was a major stylistic departure. It was less reporting than audience signaling, a blunt list of demographics: "THE SANE AMONG US BRACE FOR TRUMP PRESIDENCY."

Spayd pushed back when Carlson called this "advocacy," and said it was something more subtle and maybe worse: an "unrecognized point of view that comes from... being in New York in a certain circle, and seeing the world in a certain way."

In a classic example of the always-attacking style of TV conservatives, Carlson didn't accept the olive branch Spayd was trying to offer. Instead, he just kept pounding away.

He quizzed her on reporters' political bias. Spayd had protested that the paper's reporters tried hard to be fair and professional, but Carlson scoffed. "I would believe you," he said, "except that I know for a fact it isn't true."

He then read off a series of horrified anti-Trump tweets written by *Times* line reporters. Liam Stack's "[The electoral college was meant to stop men like Trump from taking office](#)" was an example. "Are you kidding me?" Carlson snapped.

Spayd nodded and said, "Yeah, I think it's [outrageous](#)." This was a line that would be much [howled over](#), because it gave pro-Trump types and people like Carlson a talking point, another unforgivable offense.

But Spayd's point was not that having political views is bad, or that too many reporters are liberals. Rather, she was saying a reporter airing personal political views in public was unseemly, at least according to that's paper's venerable standards.

She noted we all have personal political beliefs, but "they ought to be personal," and "when you sign up to be a journalist, that's what you ought to be."

I watched the Carlson interview of Spayd after colleagues insisted I click to "see

how awful” she was. I did and was shocked. I thought reporters misunderstood. Spayd was taking a view that ten years ago would have been completely uncontroversial. It was very old-school *Times*, and in a way, very pro-reporter.

In the age before social media, most reporters didn’t have to expose their political opinions to the world. Today everyone is effectively an op-ed writer. Spayd’s take was, this isn’t necessarily a good idea, and exposes both reporters and papers like the *Times* to accusations of bias in ways we never had to worry about before.

Spayd today recalls that summer with dismay. She was no fan of candidate Donald Trump, but felt she couldn’t say so in her position. She also knew that opening a discussion about “false balance” was dangerous.

“I knew I was poking the bear,” she says now. “I figured the bear would probably poke back.”

But she did it because she felt it was important to argue a general principle, “trying to hold on to that value.” By “that value,” she meant the very old *Times* principle of reporters at least pretending to stay separate from the topics they covered. In the new environment, however, arguing this was only understood as doing something for the other side.

“It’s just a way of disguising the argument, to say, ‘Oh, she’s a Republican,” she says.

Not only did the *Times* end up firing Spayd, they ** eliminated her position. Even journalists of long experience cheered her dismissal, in terms that were remarkably harsh. *Gizmodo* called her “incompetent,” the *Daily Beast* said she was “failed,” while *Slate* went with “failing.” Spayd, [wroteVox](#), was “so bad at her job that the elimination of her role might be seen as an improvement.”

This is another feature of the new media environment: conventional wisdom is now capable of doing full U-turns virtually overnight. Spayd was taking heat essentially for defending an approach that less than a year before had been industry standard: “objectivity.”

The neutral-sounding third-person tone we used to understand as “objectivity” was itself primarily a commercial strategy.

In the early days of mass media, the big press enterprises operated in artificially scarce markets. Limited numbers of FCC licenses for broadcasters and the gigantic expense of maintaining and building distribution networks for newspapers meant most media outlets were only taking on a competitor or two. Big daily newspapers had gravy trains of captive local advertisers. TV and radio shows could charge fortunes for scarce ad time.

What this meant for journalism was a stress on inoffensiveness. Radio broadcaster Lowell Thomas, who at one point was the [source of news](#) for over 10% of the country, once said that his first radio sponsor, the *Literary Digest*, insisted that he report everything “down the middle.”

Thomas became famous for his opening line: “[Good morning, everybody.](#)” The appeal to an “everybody” audience became the template for commercial success. (Contrast this with Roger Ailes once bragging about making a network for people “55 to dead,” or even the *Times* headline after Trump’s victory that was aimed at Democrats, students, and foreigners). The normal voice was even, unemotional, and “above the fray,” in a way that was often easy to lampoon.

But the fact that “objectivity” was less about principle than money, and stylistically silly, and moreover easily manipulated into helping hide all sorts of awful political realities (historically, from racism to American military atrocities abroad), didn’t mean it was worthless.

“Objectivity” above all was great protection for reporters. Having no obvious political bent was a prerequisite for taking on politicians. If you announced yourself as an ally of one party or another, you lost your credibility with audiences.

“Balance” didn’t mean having to quote science-deniers. It was mainly a way for journalists to stay out of unspoken political alliances. Once you jump in that pit, it’s not so easy to get out.

Two years ago, unnerved by a lot of the same comments about “false balance,” [I wrote](#): “The model going forward will likely involve Republican media covering Democratic corruption and Democratic media covering Republican corruption.”

This is more or less where we are now, and nobody seems to think this is bad or dysfunctional. This is despite the fact that in this format (especially given the individuated distribution mechanisms on the Internet, like the Facebook news

feed) the average person will no longer even see – ever – derogatory reporting about his or her own “side.”

Being out of touch with what the other side is thinking is now no longer seen as a fault. It’s a requirement, because:

8. THE OTHER SIDE IS LITERALLY HITLER

Shortly after 9/11, Fox ** began a long streak atop the cable ratings. [Beginning in the first quarter of 2002](#), the company would stay #1 for over fifteen years straight.

A crucial part of its success was its reaction to 9/11. Post-attack America was afraid and needed someone to blame. Fox ** and its minions were more than happy to comply. They began using language about liberals that was extreme even by their standards,

Their fellow Americans, leading conservative thinkfluencers told them, were not just lily-livered suckups who pretended to be enlightened. They were actively in league with al-Qaeda. Murderers. Traitors. Not wrong, but evil.

Fox ** promoted Sean Hannity as their perfect vision of conservative manhood. The rectum-faced blowhard was celebrated for his daily fake victories over the intellectual Washington Generals act that was Alan Colmes.

Unlike Rush Limbaugh, who in his early days was a serviceably witty top-40 disc jockey in Pittsburgh, Hannity was charmless. He was not literate like William Safire or Bill Buckley, nor was he an entertainingly unstable wreck like Glenn Beck, nor could he talk volubly about Marx and other thinkers like Michael Savage, a person who clearly has read more than three or four books.

Hannity wouldn’t know the difference between Marcuse and a cucumber, the Frankfurt school and a frankfurter. He won fake arguments, preened, and spewed constant aggression. After 9/11, one of his signature attack lines was that liberals were in league with terrorists.

He wrote a book called *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism* that came out in 2004. It was a paint-by-numbers hate-your-neighbor manual whose blunt cover was just Hannity’s coiffed head floating under the Statue of Liberty’s armpit.

The main argument was that liberals, by refusing to accept the existence of terrorist evil, were themselves part of the nexus of wrongdoing. They were insufficiently stoked about the capture and hanging of Saddam Hussein and, let's face it, wimps. He held off for two whole pages before bringing up Neville Chamberlain.

Many others chimed in. Ann Coulter's redundant classic was *Treason: Liberal Treachery From The Cold War to the War on Terrorism*. Savage's windy effort, *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Schools, Faith, and Military*, contributed the key word "enemy." He would later go with *Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*.

If you're keeping score at home, Americans were being told they were surrounded by millions of people who were in league with homicidal terrorists, plotting to overthrow free enterprise and install a dictatorship of political correctness. They were also insane.

Glenn Beck would take Hannity's Neville Chamberlain thread and run lap after lap with it, pioneering the "Your neighbor is literally Hitler" movement. Beck was *awesome* at this. Al Gore was Hitler. Obama was constantly Hitler.

The National Endowment of the Arts was Hitler! ("It's propaganda... you should look up the name 'Goebbels.'"). ACORN was Hitler. The bailouts were Hitler (well, they actually were a little bit Hitler). Comedian Lewis Black had a hilarious [Daily Show freakout](#) when Beck even compared the Peace Corps to the SS!

As Black put it, it was "Six degrees of Kevin Bacon, except there's just one degree, and Kevin Bacon is Hitler!"

Beck was a mixed-metaphor enthusiast who was capable of calling a target both fascist and communist, Hitler *and* Stalin, in the same telecast. But his money gimmick was Hitler. It won him a huge audience, until it sort of also ruined him.

His Fox ** show was canceled in 2011 after he said Barack Obama had a "deep-seated hatred for white people." Within two years he was [apologizing for being divisive](#) – but still carrying around a napkin that supposedly contained Hitler's bloodstains.

There's nowhere to go from Hitler. It's a rhetorical dead end. Argument is over

at that point. If you go there, you're now absolving your audiences of all moral restraint, because who wouldn't kill Hitler?

You can draw a straight line from these rhetorical escalations in right-wing media to the lunacies of the Trump era. If you can believe the Peace Corps is the SS, then why doubt Muslims in Jersey City were cheering 9/11, or question the logic of an anti-rape wall across the Rio Grande? Stupid is stupid.

When Donald Trump ran, he posed serious problems for anyone conscious of [Godwin's Law](#). As Chomsky [points out](#), Trump's campaign was a familiar authoritarian pitch: "Go after the elites, even while you're supported by the major elites."

His stump speeches hit a lot of notes to which history professors quickly perked. He preached that modern life was a decadent failure (this from a man whose personal life was a monument to tacky consumption). He told of a once-proud society in ruin, surrounded by mongrel assassins. "They kill us," he said in his opening speech. "They're laughing at us, at our stupidity... They're killing us."

A strong hand was needed to help our return to national values. He attacked left and right ideologies. Democracy was undemocratic, an aristocratic trick, rigged. In a debate with Hillary Clinton, he threatened to jail his opponent, a stunt that would have impressed Mobutu.

Anyone with an education saw the parallels. But Trump was legally winning elections, and he was aided by the fact that his riffs on corrupt elites rang true with audiences.

The financial bailouts had been an extraordinary betrayal of the population by the political class, which is why Trump scored when he painted Ted Cruz and Hillary Clinton as creatures of Goldman, Sachs. *Citizens United* meant bribery on a grand scale was legal, and this theme helped Trump knock out Jeb Bush and Cruz and Marco Rubio.

He ripped the Koch Brothers, and [denounced his primary opponents as sockpuppet fronts for corporate PACs](#). Then he did the same to Hillary Clinton. These clowns are just fronts for someone else's money, Trump told voters. With me, I *am* the money.

Trump, like all great con artists, depended upon true details to sell lies.

The major challenge for reporters in covering Trump was to explain him. There were a million reasons, beginning with the billions in free coverage he received. He certainly played on racial panic and feelings of loss of status – this was a dominant theme of his announcement speech, how low we’d sunk, how we never win anymore, etc.

The failures of decades of policy, [with little real wage growth since the Nixon era](#), were surely also a factor.

It was complicated. You couldn’t say it wasn’t. There were 4Chan crazies and elderly church ladies alike in the Trump coalition. Trump was a vote for anyone with a grudge, and in America, there is spectacularly wide ** spectrum of grudges. I met one voter in Wisconsin who said the following: “I usually don’t vote, but I’m going Trump because fuck everything.”

Sometime in the spring in summer of 2016 I started to notice blowback every time I mentioned the economy in connection with Trump voters. Very quickly (it’s amazing how fast these trends coalesce in the social media age) the use of the term “economic insecurity” became a meme-worthy offense on social media.

Greg Sargent of the *Washington Post* [posted](#) quotes of Trump voters saying “Build a wall, kill them all,” “Trump that bitch!” and “Kill her!” above the punch line:

Can’t you just feel the economic insecurity and desire for disruption?

All of this roughly coincided with Clinton saying in September that “half of Trump’s supporters” [were](#) “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it,” what she deemed a “basket of deplorables.”

Most outsiders recognized this as a political mistake on par with Romney’s 47% gaffe. According to the book *Shattered*, it was her “first unforced error of the fall,” as her staffers were said to have thought. **

But the “unforced error” soon became gospel in the press. *Saturday Night Live*’s [“Racists For Trump”](#) skit from earlier in the year, which showed Trumpers in swastika armbands and Klan hoods and so on, became the go-to, exclusive explanation for Trump’s rise.

The conventional wisdom was that Trump was Hitler, effectively, even before he

got elected. “Is Donald Trump a fascist?” was the *Times* book review headline shortly before the vote (several authors said yes).

After Trump was elected, a whole new line of rhetoric was unveiled in connection with Russiagate. It became common, encouraged even, to use words like “[traitor](#)” and “[treason](#)” in headlines.

After the fiasco of Charlottesville, when Trump couldn’t bring himself to denounce open racists and said “both sides” were at fault, the term “white supremacist” and “white nationalist” became common to describe Trump’s tenure.

It was one thing to apply the terms to Trump, who deserves all of these epithets and then some. But his voters? Did it really make sense to caricature sixty million people as *racist white nationalist traitor-Nazis*?

The supposed sequel marches to Charlottesville (one in Boston, another one a year later in Washington) were jokes: a handful of mental health cases surrounded by thousands of protesters and reporters.

But scary photos of these loons became fodder for the new party line, which is that we could turn off the thinking mechanism and move to pure combat. Charles Taylor of the *Boston Globe*, [in a column](#) under a scary photo of a man waving a swastika, summed it up when he scoffed:

Those bent on understanding Trump supporters — as if there is something deep to understand — wonder how his working-class acolytes can vote against their own economic interests. What they refuse to see is that all Trump supporters, from the working class to the upper class, have voted their chief interest: maintaining American identity as white, Christian, and heterosexual.

Before you can argue the justice of this point, realize what it means. If we’re now saying all ** Trump supporters are mainly bent on upholding the supremacy of white, Christian, heterosexuals, that’s miles beyond even Hillary Clinton’s take of just half of Trump supporters being unredeemable scum.

It’s a sweeping, debate-ending dictum. There is *us* and *them*, and they are Hitler.

When I first started to hear this talk among reporters during the 2016, I thought it

was just clickbait. *Of course* race was a dominant factor in Trump's rise. Virtually all Republican politicians from the Goldwater days on (and all Southern Democrats before) made race a central part of their pitches.

The appeals were usually coded, but whether it was Goldwater blasting urban "marauders" or Reagan's "welfare queens" or Willie Horton, or Jesse Helms and his "white hands," the messages weren't exactly subtle.

Trump blew past those parameters, of course, and his lunatic inability to renounce the KKK or Nazis surely dragged us all to new depths.

But racism as the sole explanation for Trump's rise was suspicious for a few reasons. It completely absolved either political party (both the Republican and Democratic party establishments were rejected in 2016, in some cases for overlapping reasons) of having helped create the preconditions for Trump.

Trump doesn't happen in a country where things are going well. People give in to their baser instincts when they lose faith in the future. The pessimism and anger necessary for this situation has been building for a generation, and not all on one side.

A significant number of Trump voters voted for Obama eight years ago. A lot of those were [in rust belt states](#) that proved critical. What happened there? Trump also polled 2-1 among veterans, despite a horrific record of deferments and insults of every vet from John McCain to Humayun Khan.

Was it possible that his rhetoric about ending "our current policy of regime change" [resonated](#) with recently returned vets? The data said yes. It may not have been decisive, but it likely was one of many factors. It was also common sense, because this was one of his main themes on the campaign trail — Trump clearly smelled those veteran votes.

The Trump phenomenon was also about a political and media taboo: class. When the liberal arts grads who mostly populate the press think about class, we tend to think in terms of the heroic worker, or whatever Marx-inspired cliché they taught us in college.

Because of this, most pundits scoff at class, because when they look at Trump crowds, they don't see *Norma Rae* or *Matewan*. Instead, they see *Married With Children*, a bunch of tacky mall-goers who gobble up crap movies and,

incidentally, hate the noble political press. ** Our take on Trump voters soon was closer to Orwell than Marx: “In reality very little was known about the proles. It was not necessary to know much.”

Beyond the utility “it’s all racism” had for both party establishments, it was good for that other sector, the news media.

If all ** Trump supporters are Hitler, and all liberals are also Hitler, this brings *Crossfire* to its natural conclusion. The *America vs. America* show is now *Hitler vs. Hitler*. Think of the ratings! (The ratings [are incredible](#)). The new show leaves out 100 million people who didn’t vote at all (a group that by itself is nearly larger than both the Clinton and Trump voters) but this is part of the propaganda.

Non-voters are the single biggest factor in American political life, and their swelling numbers are, just like the Trump phenomenon, a profound indictment on our system. But they don’t exist on TV, because they suspend our disbelief in the *Hitler vs. Hitler* show.

We don’t want you thinking about anything complicated: not non-voters, not war fatigue, not the collapse of the manufacturing sector, not Fed policy, none of that. None of what happened in 2016 is your fault: it’s all the pure evil of white nationalism. For conservatives, it’s the opposite: don’t believe anything in the *New York Times*, don’t think about the impact of upper-class tax cuts and deregulation, just stay in your lane. Remember, you are surrounded by determined enemies, out to destroy the traditional family, redistribute your income, take your job, remove your president by any means, legal or illegal.

It’s a fight for all the marbles. Politics is about one side against another side, and only one take is allowed now, pure aggression:

9. IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HITLER, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

Cohen’s take on *Crossfire* was right. The early staged TV battles depended for their success on a propaganda trick. The networks clearly didn’t want to encourage constructive political activism, so the “fight” always involved a ferocious, deregulation-mad, race-baiting winger pounding the crap out of a spineless, backpedaling centrist masquerading as a “leftist.”

Cohen’s Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) did a [“field guide to TV’s](#)

[lukewarm liberals](#)” that explained how this works. Michael Kinsley, probably the most famous “from the left” voice, once described himself as a “wishy-washy moderate” and added, “There is no way... that I’m as far left as Pat Buchanan is right.”

Cokie Roberts played the “liberal” on *The Week*, but her main liberal credentials were that she was a woman who’d been on NPR. Her advice to Bill Clinton after the midterm losses of 1994: “Move to the right, which is the advice that somebody should have given him a long time ago.”

Crossfire even once hired corporate lobbyist Bob Beckel, who called Gulf War protesters “punks,” to play the “from the left” role.

If your only experience of life was watching these shows, you might conclude that the chief problem of American politics is one of tactics. Why does Paul Begala let Tucker Carlson just pound away at him like that? Why is he such a *pussy*?

When you watched these shows, you were always looking at an aggressor and a conciliator. “From the right” always looked more confident because it was representing a real political agenda.

When Tucker Carlson denounced unions, he meant it. When Paul Begala blathered that unions were “All-American, essential for democracy,” he looked like he was spouting pat gibberish because he was: he had worked for the administration that passed NAFTA and pioneered the Democrats’ move toward big-business cash to support campaigns, and away from union money and union infrastructure.

After years of this phony debate, along came Trump, who could easily have been a *Crossfire* actor (although the [nineties version of “very pro-choice” Trump](#) probably would have played “on the left”).

The modern Trump is basically exactly Buchanan, right down to the race views and the appropriation of trade issues, only he’s better at playing the heel. For most of liberal America, the election played out like an old *Crossfire* episode.

Trump pounded away at Clinton, and refused to take back even the most shameless behaviors. Meanwhile Clinton tried to observe decorum, apologized for her “unforced errors” like the “deplorables” comment, and was unrewarded

for her efforts.

Years ago, when John Stewart went on *Crossfire*, he did what most liberal TV watchers had been waiting for someone to do for ages: he called Carlson a dick. Hugely satisfying! Great TV!

But that's all it was: great TV. The solution wasn't to create more satisfying entertainment. The solution was to have better politics. Or, better to say, real politics. Something that was not a staged fight.

Begala's problem wasn't that he was a weenie and insufficiently aggressive: it was that he didn't stand for anything. This was Stewart's larger point about how the phony combat was "hurting America." It wasn't educational, it wasn't political in any meaningful way.

After Trump won, though, another consensus formed. Liberal America had to be less polite. Samantha Bee was a pioneer, calling Ivanka Trump a "[feckless cunt](#)." Creaky old Robert De Niro (He was tough! He once played a boxer!) won the Internet when he said "[Fuck Trump!](#)" at an awards show.

When a restaurant owner in DC [refused to serve Sarah Huckabee Sanders](#) in the wake of the Trump-immigration mess, and cadaverous [Trump aide Stephen Miller was called a "fascist"](#) by a protester at a Mexican restaurant, this quickly triggered a farcical media debate about "civility."

Politicians were asked to chime in. Maxine Waters was one of the first to endorse the "yes, you may bother assholes at restaurants" idea. Hillary Clinton, who once insisted, "when they go low, we go high," had had enough and co-signed.

Clinton [said](#), "You cannot be civil with a political party that wants to destroy what you care about." She added, "civility can start again" when Democrats re-take the White House.

Before long it was a media trope that civility was actually a regressive thing, a balm to fascism. Incivility was a requirement, a show of solidarity. "[Fuck civility](#)" was the *Guardian's* take. "Trump officials don't get to eat dinner in peace – not while kids are in cages."

Before long, it was typical for once-staid media figures and elected officials

alike to swear like sea captains in public. *Harper's Bazaar* didn't just call Trump's claims about Obama's border policies wrong: they were "bullshit." Even the headline [read "bullshit"](#)! In *Harper's Bazaar*!

By the time the Kavanaugh debate rolled around, the floor of the U.S. Senate sounded like the set of *Goodfellas*. Senator Mazie Hirono, on Senator Chuck Grassley: "That is such [bullshit](#) I can hardly stand it."

Senator Lindsey Graham, to Senator Bob Menendez: "What [y'all have done is bullshit](#)." (That was on TV). Menendez, tweeting on the FBI investigation of Kavanaugh: "It's a [bullshit investigation](#)."

Watching all of this had me weirded out, among other things because I was infamous for my own bad language and had been trying for years to weed it out of my work. I thought: *now this is okay?*

The trend toward nastier language was based on a faulty syllogism:

Civility got us nowhere.

The uncivil Donald Trump won.

Therefore, we must be uncivil to win.

Actually, none of those three things have anything to do with one another. Democratic voters were nowhere after 2016 for a lot of reasons, and very few of them had anything to do with being insufficiently rude.

Trump was uncivil, and did win, but about the last thing in the world any sane person would advise is following his example.

During the race, I kept trying to imagine how someone like Martin Luther King would have responded to Trump. I don't think the answer would have been, "We need to start saying *fuck* more."

Does Stephen Miller have the right to enjoy an enchilada in peace? I have no idea. Probably not. Is this a question of earth-shattering importance? Also probably not.

The incivility movement is not about politics. It's about money and audience. In

a hyper-competitive media environment where a billion pieces of content per day are created on platforms like Facebook, one has to work overdrive to win eyeballs.

Which headline is the Hawaiian Democrat going to click on first: “[Ballast Discharge Measure Won’t Protect Hawaii’s Coastal Waters](#)” or “[11 Times Marie Hirono Had Zero Fucks To Give](#)”?

Scatological blather scores shares and retweets, and now that there’s no ideological or commercial requirement to avoid pissing off the whole audience – no more “Good morning, everybody” – there’s no disincentive to using the strongest language.

That’s why this stuff is coming out in factory-level amounts on both sides now. It’s why Samantha Bee at this very moment is searching the Internet for a word worse than “cunt,” and why ostensibly devout Christians will love it in 2020 when Donald Trump calls his Democratic opponent a cocksucker or a whore, just as I watched them cheer in New Hampshire when he [called Ted Cruz a pussy](#).

Meanness and vulgarity build political solidarity, but also audience solidarity. In the Trump age, political and media objectives align.

The problem is, there’s no natural floor to this behavior. Just as cable TV will eventually become 700 separate 24-hour porn channels, news and commentary will eventually escalate to boxing-style expletive-laden pre-fight tirades, and open incitement of violence.

If the other side is literally Hitler, this eventually has to happen. It would be illogical to argue anything else. What began as *America vs. America* will eventually move to *Traitor vs. Traitor*, and the show does not work if those contestants are not offended to the point of wanting to kill one another.

10. FEEL SUPERIOR

Hunter Pauli is a young writer based in Montana. He started as an intern at the *Montana Standard*, which at the time was doing hardcore local investigative work, often on environmental issues. Pauli got into this line of work because “punching up seems like the only worthwhile thing to do in journalism.”

When the *Standard's* crime beat opened, Pauli took the job and soon found that he was being asked to pump out an endless stream of stories about poor people doing stupid things.

Pauli soon found himself feeling uneasy. He was in one of the worst gigs in journalism: a local crime beat. His job mostly consisted of getting details from a public official like a police spokesperson, who would give him the state's version of low-rent arrests.

Few think about this, but the press routinely puts the names and personal information of people arrested in newspapers, on TV, and, worst of all, online, where the stories live forever. Yet these people have not been convicted of crimes, merely arrested or charged.

"I was getting third-hand info from someone like a public information officer, and we were routinely publishing stories without getting the point of view of the person it affected most," Pauli recalls. "In this kind of crime reporting we typically don't even take the most basic steps. Even the idea of seeking confirmation from a secondary source."

It's a poorly-kept secret that crime in America has been [dropping precipitously](#) for decades. If you asked the average American if he or she believed that, most would say no, largely because we make sure to keep the news filled with crime stories. We need you freaked out and scared, but also need to constantly produce protagonists for you to look down upon.

"I wasn't out there covering murders every single day," Pauli recalls. "There just wasn't a lot of crime. Maybe someone goes running down the street naked because they can't afford their meds, or shoplifts from a Wal-Mart because they're broke..."

Sometimes, there would be nights when nothing at all would happen.

"So I'd tell my editor, 'Hey, nothing happened.' And he'd say, 'Just find something.' Because he can't afford for there to be nothing."

Pauli began to be conflicted, particularly about putting information about people's arrests online, which would prevent them in the future from getting jobs and affect them in all sorts of ways. He tried to pitch his paper on more important subjects, like abnormally high rates of lead in the blood of children

born in Butte. But it was no go.

“I had three sure-fire investigations in a row spiked,” says Pauli.

Things came to a head after he ran a story about a guy who escaped from custody after a mental-health evaluation. Police called the man “Dickface” because of an unfortunately-shaped tattoo.

The “Dickface” story went viral, and Pauli began to think about leaving the job. He began self-editing, leaving out stories about people shoplifting from Walmart “despite how frequently it happened and how much readers loved laughing about it.”

Looking back, he explains: “There are people in the world worth laughing at. They’re called politicians. But these people?”

Pauli ended up quitting journalism, [writing about his decision](#) in *The Guardian*.

What’s remarkable about Pauli’s story is how rare it is. Pauli happened to be in one of the worst corners of the game, covering crime, which is a genre significantly wrapped up in needlessly stoking class/racial fears on the one hand, while making people feel superior on the other.

But the core dynamic of his job was not much different from what most of us do. We’re mainly in the business of stroking audiences. We want them coming back. Anger is part of the rhetorical promise, but so are feelings righteousness and superiority.

It’s why we love terrible people like Casey Anthony or O.J. as news subjects a lot more than we’d like someone who spends his or her days working in a pediatric oncology ward. Showing genuinely heroic or selfless people on TV would make most audiences feel inferior. Therefore, we don’t.

It’s the same premise as reality shows. The most popular programs aren’t about geniuses and paragons of virtue, but instead about terrible parents, morons, people too fat to notice they’re pregnant, people willing to be filmed getting ass tucks, spoiled rich people, and other freaks.

Why use the most advanced communications technology in history to teach people basic geography, or how World Bank structural adjustment lending

works, when you can instead watch idiots [drink donkey semen for money](#)? **

Your media experience is designed to nurture and protect your ego. So we show you the biggest losers we can find. It's the underlying principle of almost every successful entertainment product we've had, from *COPS* to *Freakshow* to, literally, *The Biggest Loser*. We're probably just a few years way from a show called, *What Would You Suck For a Dollar?*

This dynamic was confined to the entertainment arena for a while, but it became part of political coverage long ago.

People forget that as far back as 1984, the Republican Party was urging people to vote Reagan because Walter Mondale was a "[born loser](#)." On the flip side, the name of [George McGovern became so synonymous with "loser"](#) that it birthed an entirely new brand of "Third Way" politics, invented by the Democratic Leadership Council and people like Chuck Robb, Al From, Sam Nunn, and Bill Clinton. The chief principle of the new politics was that it had a chance of winning.

The media started following along. We invented the "[Wimp Factor](#)" for George H.W. Bush and saddled Dan Quayle with the "bimbo" tag. This was propaganda, of course, as the idea was that politicians could only not be losers by bombing someone. But we were also telling audiences that a loser was someone who didn't attack.

In the early nineties, the *Weekly Standard* [wrote](#) that Republicans wanted Quayle to "dispel his bimbo image" by "showing some teeth, Spiro Agnew style."

Agnew is one of the biggest disgraces in the history of American politics, a blowhard with no discernible ideas beyond the promiscuous use of every conceivable form of political corruption – yet in the American consciousness, he's not a loser. He's an aggressor.

Presidential campaign coverage as far back as the early 2000s was basically *Heathers* on an airplane. We developed lots of words for "loser," and spent countless hours developing new methods to tell audiences which candidates were in that category.

Dennis Kucinich, who was constantly ridiculed in the press plane for both his shortness and his earnestness, was dubbed the "[lovable loser of the left](#)." The

contravening kind of story was usually about the abject dumbness of Republicans. I actually won an award for such an effort, an article about Mike Huckabee called, “My Favorite Nut Job.”

Pauli is right: politicians should be fair game. But the obsession with winners and losers runs so deep in the press that it has become the central value of the business.

It’s not an accident that Trump won the presidency on “winning” and spent much of his political career [calling people “losers”](#) – from Cher to Richard Belzer to Graydon Carter to Rosie O’Donnell to George Will to Michelle Malkin.

Trump sells the vicarious experience of being a “winner” compared to other schlubs. His lack of empathy is often cited as evidence of narcissistic sociopathy, and maybe it is, but it’s a chicken-and-egg question: was he always like this, or did he become *more* this way because among his other weaknesses, he’s clearly addicted to the worst kind of political media?

When you look back at the generation of *Heathers*-style coverage, the evolution toward Trump starts to make sense. We can excuse almost anything in America except losing. And we love a freak show.

Trump was the best of both worlds, as far as the press was concerned: an Agnew-style attacker on the one hand, and a lurid and disgusting monster-freak for audiences to look down on on the other. There is no better commercial situation for the American media than a president about whom a porn star can write, “*I had sex with that, I’d say to myself. Eech.*”

Leo Tolstoy, in a story called the *Kreutzer Sonata*, once described a character who visited a PT Barnum circus in Paris. The character went into a tent promising a rare “water-dog,” and paid a franc to see an ordinary canine wrapped in sealskin.

When he came out, Barnum used the man to sell more tickets, shouting to the crowd:

'Ask the gentleman if it is not worth seeing! Come in, come in! It only costs a franc!'

And in my confusion I did not dare to answer that there was nothing curious to

be seen, and it was upon my false shame that the Barnum must have counted.

We count on your shame in the same way. We know you know the news we show you is demeaning, disgusting, pointless, and not really intended to inform. But we assume you'll be too embarrassed to admit you spend hours every day poring through content specifically designed to stroke your point of view. In fact, you'll consume twice as much rather than admit you don't like to be challenged. Like Tolstoy's weak hero, you'll pay to hide your shame.

It took a while for the news reporters to deliver the same superiority vibe that you get from reading local crime blotters or watching bearded-lady acts like *Fear Factor*, *Who's Your Daddy?* and *The Swan*. The idea behind most political coverage is to get you to turn on the TV and within minutes have you tsk-tsking and saying, "What idiots!"

We can't get you there unless you follow all the rules. Accept a binary world and pick a side. Embrace the reality of being surrounded by evil stupidity, and do not commune with it. Feel indignant, righteous, and smart. Hate losers, love winners. And during the commercials, do some shopping.

Congratulations, you're the perfect news consumer.

NOTE: The rest of this book is both incomplete and partially behind a paywall.

Next: [The Church of Averageness](#)