The role of pseudo-cognitive authorities and self-deception

in the dissemination of fake news.

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Abstract

This paper draws together insights from a variety of fields (including philosophy, psychology, information studies, sociology, politics, and media studies) to synthesize insight into why fake news is created, disseminated, sustained and authorized so as to understand how and why it is successful and how it might be challenged. The premier case for analysis will be Trump, his supporters, his party and his media. Central to this issue is the role of cognitive authorities, a notion first articulated and developed by Patrick Wilson (1983).   Honest cognitive authorities have credibility and expertise and are regarded as trustworthy. Their knowledge, based on direct and verifiable knowledge, is sought, communicated and accepted, when an information seeker comes to them about a matter of which an information seeker has come to believe that they have expertise, credibility and knowledge. Pseudo- or false cognitive authorities appear to have the same qualities of credibility, expertise and trustworthiness, but on critical examination they fail in these qualities and strive to impose a partisan agenda irrespective of truth, evidence, logic or facts. Unfortunately, these conditions do not deter believers from accepting them. These authorities are of various types, such news programs or organizations, religious leaders, or social media sites, that create, propagate, authorize and legitimatize fake news stories, that partisan adherents are willing to accept and perpetuate through a form of collective self-deception and who will at the same time denigrate sources and cognitive authorities of genuine and verified information or knowledge.   Starting with the InfoWars, we proceed to discuss the nature of the forms of false information on the internet, and the role of deception, particularly self-deception, social self-deception, and collective self-deception in the acceptance real fake news, which is authorized and legitimatized by pseudo-cognitive authorities. In the process we contrast genuine cognitive authorities with dishonest ones, and show how the psychological factors, motivations, and collective self-deception feed each other into a reinforcing collective self-deception so strong it may be equivalent to a cult. This dialogical process (pseudo-cognitive authorities deceiving and self-deceiving themselves and their listeners, who in turn "validate" those authorities through word-of-mouth and seeking and associating with like-minded groups) is reinforced by repetition, the Dunning-Kruger effect, agnotology, and other factors. At the conclusion the roles of information professionals will be examined concerning the difficulties confronting fake news and fake news adherents and developing paths for successful strategies in coping with them.

Keywords: self-deception, social self-deception, collective self-deception, cognitive authority, pseudo-cognitive authority, fake news

Prologue: Infowars

World War III has started. While Alex Jones is wrong about many things, his "news" program's title, InfoWars, correctly indicates a global problem. The first major salvo of WW III was InfoWar I, the 2016 election of Trump. His continued propensity for lies – an average of 22 per day over the course of his presidency (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2019) – his administration, his political party, and uncritical supporters continues the war, and it is not trivial. It is for the soul of America and represents a threat to people all over the world. I call it a World War because it reflects the use of the internet throughout the world to inflame discord in most democracies to perpetuate the power of autocrats and fascists. Its insult to freedom lies not only in what is spread on the internet but also what it suppresses. In countries around the world there is a battle to continue to anchor political decision making in science, reason, evidence, fact, democratic values, and humanism. It is a war of disinformation, misinformation, lies, and obfuscation against the evidence and truth, and for power and greed trolling simplistic solutions to complex problems. While this paper will focus on the American InfoWar, has spread throughout the world, with Donald Trump's 2016 election part of the impetus (Booth & Birnbaum, 2017; Fischer, Heide, & Hoppe, 2018; Karp, 2018; Barel, 2019; PTI, 2018). This paper will consider how disinformation is created, disseminated and legitimized through a key case study, Trump, his administration, party and supporters.

The two sides of the American InfoWar have come to align with the political parties, although not all Republicans align with one side and Democrats are not without taint. Fox News, Sinclair Broadcasting, Russian trolls, conspiracy theorists, social media run amok with "alternative facts" and a president, an administration, and the Republican Party have committed to the destruction of democratic norms and the resurgence of racism, sexism, fascism, rampant corruption, and climate-change denial, among others. It is a systemic corruption from the top down (Waldman, 2018). CNN, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, social media, and the Democrats have aligned to stop them. There are at least two kinds of third parties, (1) the click-bait entrepreneurs whose allegiance is to making money and generally not to either side, though this allegiance leads them to be more likely to promoting right-wing ideology and (2) the disengaged, which by default tend to support Trump and his devotees, whether the Republican Party or his advocates, because lack of engagement, whatever its motives such as indifference or rage against the system tend to bolster the status quo. Attempts to treat the two sides in the InfoWar as equivalent can encourage these third parties to boost fake news.

The Problem of False Equivalences

The sides in the InfoWar are not balanced, for the one side not only spreads disinformation but actively challenges, abuses and attacks those who are committed to truth, evidence, facts, and logic. One side declares its opposition to have no valid grounds for its opinion; the other side seeks to provide evidence, logic and truth in political decision making. Pundits like Sean Hannity declare that all opinions are equal

but the right's opinion invalidates all others. Their opponents try to establish honest justification for their opinions. Thus these are not simply competing opinions. Indeed, false stories supported by the right are often launched on Web sites that make no pretense of following the norms or processes of journalistic ethics that create reliable information (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Outlets that claim to adhere to the norms of journalism, such as Fox News, then echo these stories without critical analysis. They leave critical analysis and traditional journalistic practices to the so-called left-wing media, and then condemn it as slanted. The difference between the treatment in the media of "Pizzagate," a conspiracy theory involving a pedophilia run by the Clintons and a claim that Donald Trump raped a 13-year-old girl in 1994 illustrates the difference. The left passed the latter story around the internet, and a civil lawsuit in the case was filed against Trump in 2016, but the plaintiff eventually dropped it. Without stronger support, the story vanished. The former story had not a shred of evidence, and it even relied on the existence of a basement in a building that has none. But Fox News dubbed the crime ring it described the "Lolita Express," and many right-wing outlets aired it many times until a believer fired a gun in the Washington, D.C. pizza shop supposedly hosting the crime ring in its nonexistent basement. As Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018) explain,

> Not one right-wing outlet came out to criticize and expose this blatant lie for what it was. In the grip of the propaganda feedback loop, the right-wing media ecosystem had no mechanism for self-correction, and instead [in the matter of "Pizzagate"] exhibited dynamics of self-reinforcement, confirmation, and repetition so that readers, viewers and listeners encountered multiple versions of the same story, over months, to the point that both recall and credibility were enhanced (p. 97).

Unfortunately, misinformation and disinformation are transmitted more quickly than information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). It seems the bigger the lie, the more rabidly and rapidly Trump's followers will embrace it. Corrections of disinformation do not eliminate it from rational thought and perception. Technology has brought misinformation and disinformation to a qualitatively superior level: it is now possible to make convincing videos showing people saying things they never said, using public footage such as is readily available, for example, making President Obama say that he used his intelligence agencies to conspire against the election of Trump (Warzel, 2018; Lyu, 2018).

Cognitive Authority and Second-Hand Knowledge

How do fake news stories take hold and how are they perpetuated? One of the major forces is that of pseudo-cognitive authorities and how they enable the creation and dissemination of real fake news (e.g., propaganda), primarily through collective self-deception, and how it discredits bona fide news. To start off, we must understand what

cognitive authorities are, the different forms they take, and the role such authorities play in our interpretation of the world.

A key issue is the difference between primary knowledge and secondary knowledge. Primary knowledge is information we can prove or observe. Secondary knowledge is information we learn from other people, trusting in their perception, logic, reasoning, or experience. This might include friends or acquaintances, medical professionals, teachers, academic experts, and the media, depending on who we consider to be cognitive authorities.

Patrick Wilson introduced the idea of cognitive authority in his book *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority* (1983). He points out that primary knowledge is rather limited, and thus most people rely heavily on secondary knowledge. Cognitive authority is different from organizational or administrative authority or authority that comes from power hierarchies. For example, in seeking information about the salary one can earn at a particular organization, one consults organizational authorities such as the hiring manager. In seeking information about whether the salary offered is fair, one consults cognitive authorities, such as colleagues on the job or in professional associations.

It seems probable that Trump's followers see Trump himself and Fox News and other ultra-right figures and associations as cognitive authorities. Are these cognitive authorities genuine? Do they have the properties and characteristics that we associate with real cognitive authorities? Or are they something that we might call pseudo-cognitive authorities or false cognitive authorities? If so, how do they differ from true cognitive authorities? And how do they operate?

Characteristics of Genuine Cognitive Authorities

Wilson (1983) notes several properties of cognitive authority: (1) Cognitive authority is related to credibility. A person who has cognitive authority on a particular subject is regarded as a credible source for that topic. A *bain marie* is a baking tool. Thus my friend who works as a chef is a credible source to tell me how to use it. Wilson writes that credibility consists primarily of "competence and trustworthiness." (p. 13). (2) Cognitive authority exists on a spectrum. A person may know a lot or a little about a subject. For example, my chef-friend has more or less expertise on the *bain marie* depending on whether she has worked in a professional kitchen that used one, and depending on whether she learned to use one in culinary school. Wilson notes that some cognitive authorities have so much knowledge that they become arbiters of settled opinion on a subject. (p. 18). The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* once played that role. Unfortunately, a steady campaign of false allegations has chipped away at many people's faith in these authorities. (3) Cognitive authority exists in relation to a sphere of interest. These spheres can be well-defined or ill-defined: an expert on the orchestral recordings of Beethoven versus a general expert in music. (4) Cognitive authority involves at least two people. One can have cognitive authority without being

an expert or at least a recognized expert. A person who owns a *bain marie* and has used it has some cognitive authority with respect to it, but likely not as much as my chef friend. A person may become a cognitive authority for a specific person or set of persons for a specific topic or set of topics. For example, we may have friends we ask for their movie reviews because we trust their judgment, but our friends are not professional movie critics.   (5) There are brands of expertise not related to knowledge, expertise that may not justify the qualification of cognitive authority. Wilson asserts:

> Not only are there brands of expertise, no longer regarded as corresponding to any real knowledge, there are numerous instances of competing brands all claiming authority in the same sphere, and the question arises which brand, if any of them, is the right brand to warrant cognitive authority. (p. 22).

Thus Wilson seemed to anticipate Fox News more than 10 years before its introduction, as the expertise of its pundits do not correspond to real knowledge.

Soo Young Rieh (2010), who has taken up and expanded upon Wilson's themes, writes:

> Rather than having one clear definition, credibility has been defined along with dozens of other related concepts such as believability, trustworthiness, fairness, accuracy, trustfulness, factuality, completeness, precision, freedom from bias, objectivity, depth, and informativeness. Most credibility researchers agree that credibility assessment results from simultaneously evaluating multiple dimensions. Among these, two key dimensions are identified: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness is a core dimension in credibility assessment that captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source. The perception that a source is fair, unbiased, and truthful contributes to the trustworthiness of information. Trustworthiness is, however, not a synonym for credibility because people also must recognize expertise in order to deem information credible. Expertise reflects perceived knowledge, skill, and experience of the source. Expertise is likewise an important factor given its close relationship to people's perceptions of a source's ability to provide information that is both accurate and valid. (pp. 1337-1338).

Traditional media, such as the *New York Times*, consist of credible and trustworthy reporters and managers, who exhibit expertise about the topics they report and journalistic ethics. Fox viewers *believe* this to be true of the reporters, commentators, and managers of Fox News as well. They believe that the news reported is believable, trustworthy, fair (compared to liberal bias), accurate, factual, complete, precise, free from (liberal) bias, objective, in-depth, and informative. They believe that conservative viewpoints are moral ones. Many treat Fox News and sites like InfoWars as their

primary cognitive authority on news events. In order to understand why, the next section will look at the kinds of false information that exist on the internet, and the phenomena of self-deception, social self-deception, and collective self-deception.

Varieties of False Information

Fox News, Alex Jones, Donald Trump, and many others provide many kinds of false information, misinformation, disinformation, omission, ignorance, paltering, and false statements that arise from self-deception. Misinformation includes Fox News' assertions about the failure of the Mueller investigation. Fox News' assertions that Rudy Giuliani succeed in defending Trump are disinformation. Omission occurs when Fox News discusses the Mueller investigation without with referencing the conviction of Paul Manafort or Michael Cohen's guilty pleas. A Fox News commentator who said in April 2018 that Japan was once a communist country most likely spoke out of ignorance (The Daily Beast, 2018). When Trump asserted that there had been zero admission of guilt in a 1973 federal lawsuit that charged his family's firm with housing discrimination, he was telling the literal truth, but he did so in order to falsely suggest that there was no legal recognition that Trump Corporation had committed housing discrimination, in spite of the fact that the conclusion of the suit included stipulations to desegregate Trump properties (McGregor, 2016). This was an instance of paltering, a common strategy of politicians. When self-deception prompts the sharing of false information, it may be unmotivated or motivated. The former occurs when a liberal chooses to read the *New York Times* as a reliable source of information. The latter occurs when people who have lived in an environment where Confederate symbols are normalized believe it is not a symbol of racism. Self-deception may explain Trump's supporters embrace of his lies and the lies of those who support him. The two types align with the distinction between explicit bias and implicit bias. All of us have implicit biases but for most of us, such biases may not interfere with our work. However, this distinction does not capture the range or nature of our biases.   In both motivated and unmotivated self-deception, we deceive ourselves about our motives, but one is more or less conscious of them. Sartre's notion of self-deception as bad faith, which says that we live out contradictions in our beliefs to evade our responsibilities, was the source of my original understanding (Froehlich, 2017) of the success of self-instilled disinformation in personal life. Psychology and political scholarship have fleshed out this notion, as the next section will describe. Self-deception in information seeking is instrumental to the (pseudo-) cognitive authority of fake news authorities, and it may also play a role in impressions of honest cognitive authorities. Fake news is a form of disinformation. A national poll delineated the meaning of fake news for most Americans: "Just 25% say the term 'fake news' applies only to stories where the facts are wrong. Most Americans (65%), on the other hand, say that 'fake news' also applies to how news outlets make editorial decisions about what they choose to report" (National…., 2018).   This paper takes the majority position.

Self-Deception as a Strategic Advantage

Contrary to past research (Froehlich, 2017) self-deception is not a form of false information. It is a method of *embracing* false information. This appears to be a widespread approach of Trump supporters in the Age of Disinformation, which dovetails with a form of a cognitive authority, or at least a false form of it. People on the left are also prone to self-deception, for example, when they willfully ignore evidence that some kinds of gun control legislation will not prevent the tragedy to which they implicitly respond. However, self-deception has become so widespread among Trump's supporters as to become a strategic advantage.

William von Hippel and Robert Trivers attribute three advantages to spreading false information with self-deception over knowingly spreading false information: (1) it "facilitate[s] interpersonal deception by allowing people to avoid the cues to conscious deception that might reveal deceptive intent"; (2) it "eliminates the cognitive load that is typically associated with deceiving"; and (3) "it can minimize the retribution if the deception is discovered" (2011, p. 1). It is questionable, however, whether Donald Trump suffers any cognitive load that is associated with deception. First, he has given no indication of possessing a conscience that might cause him to feel guilty about it. Second, he makes no real attempt to be consistent in his lies or to cover them up. He seems to believe that his deceptions will not lead to retribution. Fake news authorities likewise do not seem to have any concern about their deception being discovered. Von Hippel and Robert Trivers note that self-deception may support social status. For example, self-deception can help us convince others that we are better than we really are. Self-deception that involves self-enhancement or self-aggrandizement is likely an important factor in understanding the devotion to Trump by his supporters.

Varieties of Self-Deception

Von Hippel and Robert Trivers describe five varieties of self-deception: They are (1) biased information search; (2) biased interpretation; (3) misremembering; (4) rationalization; and (5) convincing oneself that a lie is true. Biased information searches can be biased because the actor does not search long enough to obtain multiple points of view, because he or she has searched in a way that only exposes information on one side of an issue, or because he or she ignores information that does not suit the preconceived narrative. Paying attention only to fake news authorities or friends who support their views is selective searching for information. Ignoring the Muller report's findings on obstruction and focusing on his findings on conspiring with Russia in election tampering amounts to selective attention.

Biased interpretation consists of maintaining one's point of view in the face of reliable information to the contrary. Von Hippel and Robert Trivers cite the case of two groups of people with strong, differing attitudes toward capital punishment. They were each presented with evidence on both sides of the issue with respect to whether capital punishment deters crime, but neither group changed their opinion at all (p. 9). Trump

supporters may employ this approach to the question of the success of the talks with North Korea about denuclearization; the renegotiated free trade agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada; the success of his tariffs on foreign made products, such as steel and aluminum; and the benefits of the new tax law. They—and their ideological opponents—tend to focus on the evidence that backs their original opinion.

Misremembering occurs when people forget or misremember information inconsistent with their current preferences (p. 9). The obvious example are all the Trump supporters who voted for and appreciated the presidency of Barack Obama have been converted into despisers of his programs and legislation that benefitted them: e.g., Obamacare.

Rationalization, according to von Hippel and Trivers, consists of "avoid[ing] telling oneself the whole truth by reconstructing or rationalizing the motives behind the original behavior to make it socially more acceptable" (p. 9). One can imagine a Trump supporter complaining about how Obama's record unemployment level was no match to Trump's (although in fact, many of Obama's strategies led to the latter's lower unemployment rate).

Convincing oneself that a lie is true appears to be rampant in the current political environment. Perhaps the most outrageous example was when Trump proclaimed at a rally on July 24, 2018: "Just remember: what you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening" (Holmes, 2018). The irony is that Trump, not the news media, lies constantly. Rudy Giuliani's assertion that "truth isn't truth" (Morin & Cohen, 2018) in a television interview, in explaining why Trump should not testify before special counsel Robert Mueller because of the strong risk he would commit perjury also exemplifies convincing oneself that a lie is true. As Lamba and Notyananda (2014) note, "Self-deceived individuals are better at deceiving others." Trump is an enormously self-deceived individual, as his claims during the election that he and he alone could solve monumental national and international problems suggest. In his defense of Trump, Rudy Giuliani has emerged as self-deceiving as well.

Social Self-Deception

While useful, von Hippel and Trivers's observations conceive of individuals in an atomistic approach to psychology. We are individual human beings, but our interpretation of ourselves and our world is thoroughly social. Self-deception is not only a learned behavior but a socialized and socializing one as well. As Roy Ding (2017) writes in a paper on "Social strategies in self-deception" that self-deception can be

> a process that is distributed across the social context of a self-deceiver…. Other people may be the means to our self-deceptive ends. That is, we may mislead other people, withhold information or straightforwardly deceive them, and all of these actions may be part of our self-deceptive endeavors. Many researchers would agree that what other people do, say, don't do or don't say is information that a self-deceiver can treat in a motivationally biased way. What has hitherto been neglected however, is

> the fact that we are able to influence what other people do, say, don't do and don't say. By determining what others do, say, don't do or don't say, we set up the possibility to deceive ourselves. (p. 16).

Ding defines self-deception as "(i) a process that originates in (ii) a motivation or intention…, which leads to (iii) a self-deceived end state (which can be the formation of a novel belief or the maintenance of an existing belief or other attitude)" (p. 17). In social self-deception, other people are a means to the self-deceptive process. Ding clarifies that failure to act and non-linguistic statements such as body language and facial expressions can aid in this process, as well as explicit verbal or written statements (Ding, 2017, p. 17). While self-deception need not depend on other people, it often does. Ding points out four ways that people can support their own self-deception: seek like-minded people for support, avoid people who disagree, try to convince others of their position, and withhold information that contradicts them. These final two are particularly common with fake news authorities.

With respect to choosing to associate with like-minded people and/or avoiding associations with ideological opponents, Ding argues that this strategy can be either intentional or unintentional. In a country where Democratic and Republican increasingly live separately, and a social media system that tends to expose people to points of view with which they agree, it can actually be difficult to associate with people with which one disagrees. But joining a group based on shared political perspectives is a different act from entering a neighborhood bar and finding everyone agrees with your political views.

Ding notes that persuading others to share one's self-deception

> seem[s] to be especially relevant [to] deceiving ourselves about ourselves, given that how we think about ourselves is often based of how others think of us. Persuasive social self-deception involves strategies in which we manipulate how others think of us, thereby indirectly manipulating how we think of ourselves. (p. 18).

The easy access to the internet and its many social media platforms make such strategies so easy to undertake: to find people who share the same disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories, etc., linking from reinforcing site to another and avoiding sites that provide evidence that conflicts with one's *a priori* biases.

Ding provides two frameworks, intentionalism and deflationism, that can guide our understanding of both self-deception and social self-deception.   In the former, we engage in self-deception and social self-deception through intentions that control our behavior. Thus it is a type of motivated self-deception. In social self-deception, we may convince ourselves while convincing others. A person arguing that the Trump tax cuts will benefit the average American, may convince

him or herself of this point of view. In deflationism, the notion of intention is not a requirement for self-deception or social self-deception. Dings asserts:

> [T]he most common kind of self-deception consists of a collection of psychological phenomena (such as confirmation bias and availability heuristic) that are influenced by desires or motivations…. On this approach, having a bias in our attention or evidence-gathering due to a certain motivation, which then leads to us to believe a certain proposition p, would suffice. (p. 20).

Deflationary self-deceivers convince themselves unconsciously to believe their peer group and its authorities, who in turn support the peer-group and its authorities as the latter support a group self-deception.

Collective Self-Deception

Dings acknowledges the notion of "collective self-deception," which DeWeese-Boyd (2016) developed. In the case of Trump's presidency, a group of individuals share levels of resentment about the status quo and share "the same belief for similar reasons and by similar means." Trump supporters share their beliefs in the success of his presidency with one another by watching the same media outlets (e.g., Fox News). DeWeese-Boyd explains:

> What distinguishes collective self-deception from solitary self-deception just is its social context, namely, that it occurs within a group that shares both the attitudes bringing about the false belief and the false belief itself. Compared to its solitary counterpart, self-deception within a collective is both easier to foster and more difficult to escape, being abetted by the self-deceptive efforts of others within the group. (DeWeese-Boyd, 2016, Section 7.1)

Group self-deception is a dialogical process where the group absorbs and perpetuates false beliefs, reinforced by its elements and the collective results.

DeWeese-Boyd writes that collective self-deception may be summative or non-summative. The former refers to "the holding of a false belief in the face of evidence to the contrary by a group of people as a result of shared desires, emotions, or intentions (depending upon the account of self-deception) favoring that belief" (DeWeese-Boyd, 2016). This is reminiscent of Stephen Colbert's concept of "truthiness," which refers to believing something to be true, despite clear evidence to the contrary (Truthiness, 2017). Non-summative collective self-deception takes its approach from the collective itself. As DeWeese-Boyd writes, members of a group "jointly commit" to the notion and collective self-deception occurs, although individuals within the group may dissent, at least privately. For example, the editorial board of a news outlet, might commit to a set of values

(e.g., Fox News's decision to support Trump in all his endeavors) without all of the individual members of the board concurring. As we have seen, non-summative collective self-deception (e.g., the editorial view of Fox News) can facilitate the summative collective self-deception of other groups (e.g., Trump supporters deceiving themselves through Fox News as they deceive their peers).

White evangelical Christians' support of Donald Trump constitutes a form of collective self-deception. The Public Religion Research Institute in March, 2018, found that 75% of white evangelical Christians (81% of men and 71% of women) had a positive opinion of Donald Trump and 22 percent held an unfavorable view (Burton, 2018). Yet in 2011, only 30 percent of white evangelicals said that "an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life" (Kurtzleben, 2016). The dramatic change is probably due to positive situating self-deception. That is, it seems likely that white evangelical Christians have found themselves among people and leaders who have reversed their position on the significance of immoral acts in private lives. For example, James Dobson, a prominent Christian conservative, wholeheartedly supports and supported Trump in spite of overwhelming evidence that Trump has been unfaithful to each of his wives (Dobson 2016). Likewise Pat Robertson, Jack van Impe, Jerry Falwell, Jr., Kenneth Copeland, and John Hagee have wholeheartedly supported the president. It seems clear that this is self-deception motivated by the expectation that Trump would appoint conservative federal judges and lead to the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, among other things. Trump is the savior who has removed the yoke of oppression from Christians (such oppression seems to lie in requiring Christians to provide goods and services equally to gay people, allowing transpeople to use their restroom of choice, and in being wished a happy holiday). They have begun to use the language of freedom of religion to describe these accommodations to others' freedom. Some describe him in messianic terms, predicting he will usher in the end-times where the true believers will be saved and the rest of humankind will be thrown into hell.

A related collective self-deception of the Christian right is of dominionism, centered on the erasure of the separation of church and state. Many Christian fundamentalist denominations advocate for Christians control of all political and cultural institutions, seeking to make the United States a Christian government as it was interpreted to be by certain Christian sects early in US history (Brockman, 2016). The supposed attacks on Christians' beliefs, support this narrative. Recent polling shows that 57% of white evangelical Protestants feel that they are persecuted for their beliefs, which is more than 30% of white mainline Protestants, 26% of white Catholics, 40% of non-white Protestants, 23% of those unaffiliated, and 66% of all Americans (Green, 2017). Proponents of freedom of religion seem to self-deceptively misremember the Constitution and engage in

selective evidence gathering about practices and beliefs at the beginning of the Republic.

Eighty-one percent of white evangelicals voted for a president whose personal life was more-than-allegedly everything they preached against in church — adultery, multiple marriages, divorces, a bizarre work ethic ("deals" and bankruptcies), broken promises, lies, racism, and sexual assault. In exchange for their principles, Trump gives them anti-abortion federal judges and the "freedom of religion" among other things (Mehta, 2017). Looking back to the New Testament, one cannot imagine Christ saying to his disciples, that the end justifies the means, and therefore the disciples could make shady deals with High Priests or Philistines to avoid imprisonment, or that Christ approved of Judas's betrayal of him because it would lead to his believers' salvation.

Many of the evangelicals rationalize their behavior, either by positive situating social self-deception—spending time with people who agree with them—or seeking positive persuasive social self-deception, such as finding "cognitive authorities" like James Dobson to support their pro-Trump views. Apart from dominionism and the view that Trump is saving evangelicals from persecution, Trump's evangelical supporters have based their enthusiasm on likening the president to Persia's King Cyrus II (the Great). Though a pagan, Cyrus was seen as an instrument appointed by God, as recounted in the Book of Isaiah, because he freed the Jews from captivity in Babylonia and returned them to Jerusalem so that they could rebuild the Temple and to restore Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E. He is celebrated for having allowed the people of the lands he conquered to retain their traditions. Like Trump, he was a powerful historical figure who is not a God or savior; indeed, Cyrus was not even a Jew. Like Cyrus, they assert, Trump is God's instrument and his actions as a strong leader fighting on the side of the righteous serve God's master plan, which will involve building the Third Temple on the Temple Mount. A thousand theaters in the United States screened *The Trump Prophecy* before the mid-term elections, which told the story of a former firefighter, Mark Taylor, who claimed that God told him in 2011 that Trump would be elected president. As the film reaches a crescendo, Taylor (represented by an actor) picks up a Bible and turns to the 45th chapter of Isaiah, which tells of God's anointment of King Cryus. The film was produced by professors and students at Liberty University, where Jerry Falwell, Jr. serves as chancellor (Stewart, 2018). For evangelicals as well as right-wing Jews, the greatest evidence of Donald Trump's connection to Cyrus is his defiance of conventional wisdom in Middle East politics, in particular his support of right-wing policies in Israel through moving the US embassy to Jerusalem as well as other actions. Trump has been quick to embrace and foster the comparison (Sommer, 2018). A *New York Times* op-ed reported that Ralph Dollinger, who leads a weekly Bible study frequently attended by the Vice President frequelty refers to

Trump as "King Trump." As the op-ed writer, who frequently reports on evangleicals, explained:

> The great thing about kings like Cyrus, as far as today's Christian nationalists are concerned, is that they don't have to follow rules. They are the law. This makes them ideal leaders in paranoid times…. Another important thing to understand about Cyrus is that he is not a queen. In the Christian nationalist world, legitimate political power is largely male power…. This isn't the religious right we thought we knew. The Christian nationalist movement today is authoritarian, paranoid and patriarchal at its core. They aren't fighting a culture war. They're making a direct attack on democracy itself. (Stewart, 2016)

In fact, careful reading of the Bible would clearly distinguish Cyrus from Trump. For example, Cyrus did not foster divisiveness, hatred, false accounts, or challenges to civil authorities or institutions to maintain his authority. Reviewing all the hard facts and evidence that have to be ignored, the amount of rationalization and motivated self-deception is astounding, particularly not only in excusing Trump's behavior before he became a politician but also his daily activity on the campaign trail and in the presidency.

Perhaps a more astounding case of motivated social self-deception, either situating or persuasive, was the attempted election of Roy Moore in Alabama to the US Senate. Despite the testimony of four women who accused Moore of predatory behavior and sexual assault against them when they were adolescents, his statements which did not tend to be exculpatory, and his two-time removal from the bench for infringements against the Constitution, his supporters claimed that any evidence of wrongdoing on his part was fake news or manufactured evidence, and that he would have represented God's will for the country in the Senate. They engaged in the selective avoidance of evidence and the selected presentation of evidence. Motivated self-deception sacrifices facts, reason, and evidence in the support of *a priori* beliefs (or illusions) of group think, or collective social self-deception, which at this point seem to be the posture of many right religious zealots.

The Cyrus comparison, dominionism, and similar religious views are illustrations of collective self-deception, fostered by "cognitive authorities," such as specific religious leaders, peer leaders, media spokesmen, and media organizations. The next section will look at why such people may be motivated to deceive themselves and others—and why some people are motivated to believe them.

Motivations for Deception, Self-Deception, Social Self-Deception, and Collective Self-Deception

Whether conscious or unconscious, motivation must exist for all of the methods and varieties of deception and self-deception. At the conscious level, many

Trump supporters are driven by hatred, lust for power, and/or greed. Certainly, the wealthy 1% seek to keep and expand their wealth. The same can likely be said of Republicans who hold political power. But the average Trump supporter may not have wealth or political power. Thomas Pettigrew's (2017) paper, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," shines a light on this group. Without dismissing the political factors that may be at work, he identifies an array of factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters' devotion: authoritarianism, social dominance orientation (SDO), prejudice, low intergroup contact, and relative deprivation.

Pettigrew documents that many Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian characters. Authoritarianism is characterized by such traits as "deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups [meaning any group with which the individual does not identify], a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experience" (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 108). Authoritarians see the world as dangerous and fear guides their response to it. While there is a debate among social psychologists about whether authoritarianism is a personality construct or a political ideology, Pettigrew argues that "there is no necessary conflict between these two perspectives" and that authoritarianism usually starts as a personality orientation which then leads to an engagement with right-wing political ideology. From an authoritarian view, motivation lies in fear, and the rhetoric of Trump provides fuel for the fire, which leads them to consider him to be a sort of authority of matters of American security, such as securing the borders against outgroups through such things as a border wall between the US and Mexico.

Pettigrew defines SDO is as "an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups" (p. 108). People who want to maintain the current social hierarchy have an SDO. They believe members of other groups are inferior to members of their own. People with a strong SDO are "typically dominant, driven, tough-minded, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power" (p. 108). Trump's assertions that he alone can solve the nation's problems and that those who oppose him are "losers" is a good example. Losers now include all newspapers and media who are critical of him, while Fox News, Republicans, and conservatives are winners. I would argue that the motivation behind this factor is a need for self-justification or self-righteousness, that people want to feel that the crowd that they have supported and which supports them is better than other people in the outgroups – that conservatives are better than liberals. We justify and self-deceive ourselves about the justification through our in-group who reinforce our and the group's self-justification.

The notion of rampant political corruption is related to this sense of superiority. Trump kept promising that he was "going to drain the swamp." Yet he has installed many Washington insiders and his administration has been remarkably corrupt. But his supporters do not seem to be concerned. Philosopher Jason Stanley argues that their notion of corruption differs from the conventional understanding. He writes that for fascist politicians, corruption exists in contrast to purity instead of in contrast to lawfulness.

> Officially, the fascist politician's denunciations of corruption sound like a denunciation of political corruption. But such talk [i.e., of corruption] is intended to evoke corruption in the sense of the usurpation of the traditional order. (Stanley, 2018)

Referencing Stanley's argument, journalism professor Peter Beinart asserted in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

> When Trump instructed Cohen to pay off women with whom he'd had affairs, he may have been violating the law. But he was upholding traditional gender and class hierarchies. Since time immemorial, powerful men have been cheating on their wives and using their power to evade the consequences.

Beinart contrasts conservative acceptance of Trump's behavior with their reaction to a case in Iowa in which a Latino was accused of killing a white woman. As he explains, it "signifie[d] the inversion—the corruption—of that 'traditional order.'"

> Throughout American history, few notions have been as sacrosanct as the belief that white women must be protected from nonwhite men…. For many Republicans, Trump remains uncorrupt—indeed, anticorrupt—because what they fear most isn't the corruption of American law; it's the corruption of America's traditional identity. (Beinart, 2018).

Beinart's approach at least partially explains why Trump's supporters ignore his administration's rampant corruption. It seems to underscore the orientation of the ingroup, while male privilege. Beinart earlier notes that this point of view trades in a *nostalgia* for a golden time when white men ruled and dominated in an attempt *restore* a time of American greatness (Beinart, 2014). Nostalgia, however misplaced, does seem to motivate many in the conservative sectors.

Nostalgia also plays a role in prejudice, Pettigrew's third pheomenon. Trump supporters are anti-outgroup generally as well as anti-immigrant. In the 2016 election, Trump launched full scale attacks on immigrants, Mexicans and Muslims. His actions in office have reinforced that stance: bans on Muslims

entering the country from certain Muslim countries, harsh restrictions on asylum, the separation of children from their parents at the border as a measure to discourage immigration, and claiming that some white nationalists are "very fine people." Support for Trump correlates highly with a standard scale of modern racism.

Pettigrew (p. 108) also observes that there is growing evidence that Trump's white supporters have little contact with groups other than their own. They have less experience with minorities such as Muslims, Mexicans, or even Black Americans, than other Americans. Low intergroup contact makes it easier to dismiss members of other groups as foreign, un-American, or inferior. Ignorance of others allows one to self-enforce negative stereotypes, as in Trump's references to immigrants as "animals" (Davis & Chokshi, 2018).

Pettigrew's fifth factor, relative deprivation, is particularly supportive of collective social self-deception. A myth arose after the election that Trump had won because he appealed to poor and unemployed people. However, Trump supporters were less likely than others to be unemployed, employed part-time, or looking for work. And those voters living in districts with more manufacturing were actually less inclined to vote for Trump. Yet the original narrative rightly identified a sense of deprivation. It just failed to identify that this was a perception of deprivation, not actual deprivation. As Pettigrew observed:

> Trump adherents feel deprived relative to what they expected to possess at this point in their lives and relative to what they erroneously perceive other "less deserving" groups have acquired. Rapidly rising costs of housing and prescription drugs have aggravated their financial concerns. Their savings may not allow the type of ideal retirements they had long envisioned. And hopes for their children advancing beyond their status and going to college are being dashed by rising tuitions. (p. 111).

Thus Trump supporters nurture resentment, which motivates their deception and self-deception. Hours of Fox News and social media sites denigrating "welfare queens," welfare programs, and the media's and advertising's version of what ordinary American home is supposed to be like are fanning the flames. Trump supporters feel impotent to change their lot in life, but feel they can gain potency through elevating their ingroup by supporting someone who promises to defend the existing social hierarchy. They feel that they are victims of the forces of politics, corporations, education, and demographic shifts and the president's focus on those themes makes them feel empowered. Trump's notion of self-empowerment ironically lies beside his claim that they have little power, but this irony appears to elude them.

The notion of resentment is also a key motivator for the self-deception of Trump supporters, and it may be one of the political factors Pettigrew acknowledges as working alongside the psychological factors he identifies. Salena Zito and Brad Todd wrote a book entitled *The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics*, which analyzes the behavior of those people who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and then for Trump in 2016 by examining 10 counties in 10 different states that switched from Obama to Trump. According to the authors, a key commonality in Obama/Trump voters was not trusting "big banks, big Wall Street, big corporations, the establishment of both parties and their lobbyists, and big media corporations." Their statements suggested they did not care about Trump's behavior or even his rhetoric; it was Zito (2016) who wrote the famous line, in a separate article that referenced the findings of the book, "the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally." Obama voters who voted for Trump did so to lodge a protest against the status quo in America. The fact that he is part of the one percent and that he lies constantly has no power to disrupt their support.

In sum a multitude of factors contribute to the motivation behind self-deception: fear, hatred, ignorance, the search for power and significance, resentment, nostalgia and greed, to name a few. Socioeconomic status may affect which factors dominate for a particular Trump supporter. We should note that Trump supporters are on a spectrum, from vaguely committed to fully committed. For many, politics exists at the periphery of their lives, and their engagement is minimal, and they are likely to be informed by casual hearsay. Yet many Trump supporters are fully engaged, and this likely reflects strong motivations for self-deception. There appears to be an emotional touchstone that drives Trump supporters.

Media and Cognitive Authority

Media of various sorts can take the role of a cognitive authority. It seems reasonable to assume that loyalty to a particular media source is a measure of one's belief in them as trustworthy and reliable. Loyalty is a matter not only of belief but behavior. The Pew Research Center did a study of the loyalty of consumers to media and they found the following (unless otherwise specified, findings do not differ by party affiliation; Mitchell et al., 2016):

- About half, 51% of Americans say that they are loyal to their news sources, while 48% say they are not particularly loyal.

- Nonetheless, 76% of Americans say they usually turn to the same sources for news. This would seem to contradict the belief of 24% who say they are not particularly loyal, as their behavior is quite loyal.

- The 46% who both describe themselves as loyal and go to the same sources repeatedly, are disproportionately old and female. This "very loyal" group is also more likely to follow news than other groups; 67% say they do. They are also more likely to think organizations do a good job informing people and to trust the information they provide.

- TV is the preferred news platform among loyal news consumers, as 54% favor it as a news source, while 15% favor news websites/apps, 13% favor radio, 12% favor print newspapers, and 5% favor social media.

- Despite digital advances, most still share news by word of mouth (85%).

- Young adults ages 18-29 are less enthusiastic about news than seniors 65+, but they are more likely to get their news online than seniors.

- Democrats are more trusting of information from the national news media than Republicans are, but moderate Democrats are about as likely to see bias as moderate, liberal Republicans.

- Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans are more likely to get one-sided news from family and friends online, but conservative Republicans are more likely to think that it is OK.

As Trump's presidency has continued, it seems likely that the bias issues have gotten stronger. The results of the Pew study show the diversity of media in play, the variety among news consumers, and their differing levels of loyalty to diverse media. The younger adults are more flexible in their choice of media and more skeptical in the use of traditional media. Yet, all rely on cognitive authorities for news, across the various pipelines in which they convey their message. Most news consumers share news, both fake and real, by word of mouth, meaning they provide attitude toward the content as well as the "facts" themselves. The question becomes how we contrast a reliable cognitive authority with a dishonest cognitive authority.

Authentic Cognitive Authority Versus Pseudo Cognitive Authority

Cognitive authorities include religious leaders, television news channels, newspapers, organizations, friends and ingroup associates, etc. It would be useful to discuss two specific instances of cognitive authorities, that are exemplary of the current (dis)information marketplace: MSNBC and Fox News. These outlets exhibit comparable levels of bias: on a scale of extreme left, left, left center, least biased, right center, right, extreme right, Media Bias/Fact Check rates MSNBC as "left" and Fox News as "right") so (MSNBC, n.d.; Fox News, n.d.).

With respect to news channels such as MSNBC, Rieh writes that "trustworthiness is a core dimension in credibility assessment that captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source"; and "trustworthiness is, however, not a

synonym for credibility because people also must recognize expertise in order to deem information credible." Trustworthiness implies that reporting is based on evidence or facts. If there is a question, it can be traced back to sources of evidence or facts, as they are known at the time of reporting. Factual reporting means that the disclosure of truth may be progressive or even regressive. The first details of an event may be sketchy, if not incorrect, and what matters is that the reporting is consonant with the latest details of an event, and that it is faithful to the evidence. MSNBC primarily relies on NBC reporters for their news, and while their factual rating is mixed, that is due to MSNBC's use of political pundits. Reliable cognitive authorities only change the facts they report if they actually change. When they discover errors in their reporting, they make corrections (MSNBC, n.d.). While experts are used, they appear to make appropriate assessments and judgments based on their experience and knowledge. However, many liberals may fall into self-deceptive and collective self-deceptive practices, if they believe MSNBC assessments, unless they independently verify the basis of such assessments.

Fox News, like MSNBC, claims to be trustworthy and have expertise (Fox News). They tout a lineup of daily reporters and experts who claim to be reliable and credible. They have instilled these beliefs in their viewers. But Fox News has primarily restricted what fact-checking they do to the *Wall Street Journal.* Their pro-Trump stories continuously report factually incorrect data. For example, Trump has declared that the Mueller Report completely exonerated him, and all of Fox News and its pundits echo this. But in fact, the Mueller report explicitly stated that he could not conclude that Trump was in fact exonerated. When reporting that a "witchhunt" had tarnished Trump's otherwise unblemished reputation, Fox News and its pundits rarely reference the number of indictments and guilty pleas that resulted from the Mueller investigation. Using a poll by Monmouth University, Fox News reported that 48% of the American public trusted CNN more than Trump while 35% trusted Trump more than CNN, and 45% trusted MSNBC more than Trump and 32% trusted Trump more than MSNBC. Fox reported that it had the lowest trust rating: 30% trusted it over Trump and 20% trusted Trump more than Fox (National…., 2018). It seems ironic that they reported their low trustworthy status.

While the overall trust is not great, this is not true for selected audiences. According to a Pew Research Center survey, "Fox News was the main source [of news] for 40% of Trump voters" during the 2016 election (Mitchell, Gottfried & Barthel, 2017). Another Pew survey summarizes, "When it comes to choosing a media source for political news, conservatives orient strongly around Fox News. Nearly half of consistent conservatives (47%) name it as their main source for government and political news" (Mitchell, Matsa, Gottfried & Kiley, 2014).

According to Eric Wemple, the influence of Fox News cannot be underestimated:

> There's simply no outlet that dominates any other part of the
> political spectrum in the way Fox News dominates the right. With
> that dominance, Fox News has done great damage. It's not as if
> Fox News's influence extends to only however many millions may
> be viewing in prime time. There's what experts call a "media
> ecosystem" out there, where people take nonsense uttered on Fox
> News, then share it on Twitter, on Facebook, with their neighbor.
> Nonsense has a high pass-around rate. (Wemple, 2019)

Some of the fake stories that Fox News has propagated include: fear mongering about caravans overrunning the southern U.S. border; a claim that rather than Russia, Seth Rich had provided emails to WikiLeaks, and then been murdered for it in Washington DC in 2016 (Wemple, 2019); the "deep state" conspiracy theory, which asserts that President Trump was a victim of a plot by the members of the national security establishment, now leading to an investigation by Attorney General William Barr to investigate such "spying" activity; and Hillary Clinton's responsibility for the Benghazi attacks. As noted at the beginning of the paper, Fox News lacks journalistic integrity in that publicizes right-wing conspiracy theories without factual basis. While they may retract such stories eventually, such retractions do not prevent them from having an effect.

Fox News fans believe the nonsense that it creates, propagates, transmits, and retransmits, despite the fact that, Politifact, for a time period that is not specified, estimates that of the statements "made on air by Fox, Fox News and Fox Business personalities and their pundit guests": 10% are true, 12% mostly true, 19% half-true, 21% mostly false, 29% false and 9% pants-on-fire false. (Fox's File, 2018). Thus a majority of statements, 59%, are less than half-true. It should be noted that Politifact's ratings are completely transparent; they document the statements that are uttered on the air and by whom and why they apply a particular score. A real cognitive authority would present stories that are consistent, cohesive, and coherent over time, with few inconsistencies or reversals (but not none). This description does not apply to Fox News (Zorn, 2018). Inconsistences abound in the network's news reporting: the diverse, inconsistent views of the president are repeated on the news without acknowledging such changes, and the conservative vision of not so many years ago seems to have disappeared as Republican leaders and administrators demonstrate a lack of moral character, a failure to implement fiscal responsibility, and, contradicting the libertarian wing of the conservative movement, increasing government intrusion in the form of the carceral state, interference with women's reproductive rights, and immigration restriction. Instead of promoting second-hand "knowledge," Fox News promotes second-hand opinion, opinion that could rarely, if ever, be converted into fact. It promulgates a cognitive state in which neither opinion, right opinion, or knowledge, but demonstrably "false knowledge," is paraded as fact. In short, it is primarily propaganda. The general aim of such news producers is deception—at best alternative opinions but at worst to substitute lies for knowledge. They promote deception, which facilitates their

and their audience's self-deception and collective self-deception. Deception comes in many flavors.

Don Fallis's "The Varieties of Disinformation" (2014) details the goals of deception. He cites Chisholm and Feehan's "The Intent to Deceive" (1977, pp. 143-159) to articulate four of these. The first two, which are achieved by positive deception (causing a false belief) are (1) creating a new false belief and (2) maintaining an existing false belief. The second two use negative deception. They are (3) causing the loss of a true belief; and (4) preventing the acquisition of a true belief. To illustrate based on recent events, in their attempt to discredit FBI agent Bryce Ohr, Republicans said he played a central role in the Obama Justice Department's investigation into Trump's 2016 campaign and had key ties to the infamous Steele dossier. Thus they created a new false belief. William Barr claimed that the Mueller report exonerated Trump, maintaining an existing false belief of Trump and his supporters. When Trump lies, he may cause the loss of a true belief. The claim that the White House staff runs interference with Trump, to prevent him from doing something reckless politically represents prevention of the acquisition of a true belief (Fallis, 2014, p. 140). While Fallis's classification scheme is enlightening for the aims of deception, as outlined above such deception is linked to social self-deception and collective self-deception: Fox News pundits convince themselves of their own lies while engaging/inflaming the collective self-deception of its viewers.

Fox News pundits promote a pseudo-orthodoxy: rather than "right opinion" (consistent with cultural, scientific, or ethical norms), it is conformity with the opinion of "our group" – biases against the human dignity of some groups, the discrediting of the past and ongoing contributions of immigrants, etc. All of this is reinforced though social media sites on the internet that do a great job of linking (and therefore repeating) disinformation, misinformation, etc. that sometime leads Fox News, as we have seen earlier, to use these sources for *their* fake news stories. These false cognitive authorities claim to be authorities for Fox News, itself a false cognitive authority, in a perverse inversion of Patrick Wilson's notion that librarians are authorities about authorities (i.e., they may not know the answer to a particular reference question, but they know which authoritative sources to use to answer that question). These false authorities reinforce each other. A fundamentalist minister endorses Fox News that refers to sites that reinforce and accelerate the same sound bites of disinformation. From president to fundamentalist preacher to news organization, to news channel, to politician, to political PAC to social media, all claim to be authorities about authorities. They echo each other, convincing and reinforcing each other of the same misinformation of their authoritativeness.   But they are false authorities promoting not the truth but typically propaganda. This leads to what I have labelled enhancers and accelerators of fake news.

Enhancers and Accelerators

A study entitled "Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news," reported that repeating information, true or not, increases its believability and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand). There is also the Dunning-Kruger effect that suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. To put it simply, people of poor intelligence lack the intelligence to recognize it (Dunning–Kruger effect, 2017). Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel. David Rapp's research on memory and learning reveals that our brains retain information without retaining its source and therefore we do not recall a key fact about its validity. He also finds that it is difficult to remember that information we had previously believed is false (Waters and Hargadon, 2017). This suggests the lingering effect of Fox News propagation of false conspiracy theories. Finally, Robert N. Proctor coined a word for the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, *agnotology*, identifying a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold (*Agnotology*, 2016). By way of example Proctor described the tobacco industry's use of advertising to generate doubt that smoking causes cancer or other illnesses. Climate change deniers, proponents of fracking, pesticide manufacturers, and opponents of allegedly "fake news" use a similar approach. The echoing of Trump's attacks on the justice department, the FBI, the Democratic party and other intelligence agencies on Fox News and alt-right social media plays the same role.

Genuine cognitive authority involves some intellectual assessment about credibility and trustworthiness of the authority. When one thinks of a *cognitive* authority, one tends to think of a rational process, gathering evidence about whether someone or institution is a real cognitive authority. In the case of Trumpism, it seems less a matter of cognition, but rather one of emotion. Rather than a cognitive authority, Trump and Fox News are emotive authorities presenting themselves as genuine authorities. In fact, the emotive part (based in power, greed, resentment, fear, prejudice, and other motivations mentioned above) enables Trump supporters to dismiss at the ultimate limit the meaning of the content of their message (e.g., Trump could kill someone on Madison Avenue and get away with it). That is, what is extraordinary is that the authority in the case of Trump overrides the content of the message: none of his supporters care if he contradicts himself, makes promises that he does not keep, or lies. Whatever the content of the current message, they cheer. Fox News and Trump possess a pseudo-cognitive authority that utters falsehoods and relies on collective self-deception, reinforced by tribal motivations, such as prejudice, fear, resentment, greed, power and anger, particularly about the status-quo, especially about the imagined status quo.

Summary

This paper attempts to synthesize various theories and data from diverse fields to understand how Trump supporters generate, accept, disseminate and legitimatize fake news, and how they fail to exercise any critical thinking ability about the president, his administration, the GOP, or his religious and media supporters. It began by assessing

the varieties of false information on the web, and how people can deceive themselves, first individually, then socially and collectively.   As an example of collective self-deception, I have referred to white evangelicals and some of their objectives: the defeat of the separation of church and state, the establishment of Christian governance over the United States, and the filling of the courts with conservative judges to achieve the overturn of Roe v. Wade, as well as other goals. Many fundamental religious leaders and their congregations have set the agenda, claiming God as the authority that has appointed Trump as his instrument and the price of not believing correctly is pretty onerous (i.e., hell). These cognitive authorities support each other: Religious leaders are supported by fundamentalist religious programming and their spiritual leaders who in turn support Fox News and similar media and social media. Beneath these cognitive authorities lie motivations of various sorts that seem to drive and anchor their strategies. These motivations are not all of one stripe: they include fear, anger, hatred, resentment, nostalgia, power, prejudice, feeling impotent but gaining potency through one's in-group, greed, among others. These motivations are aggravated and enflamed by cognitive authorities, including Trump. Depending on their place in the spectrum of supporters, members of Trump's base may vary in their trigger motivations. GOP senators or representatives trying to retain their seats have different incentives from fundamentalist leaders trying to retain their flocks, whose incentives differ from average supporters who feel resentment about their lot in life and nostalgia for a time when white male privilege was stronger. The psychological studies detail in social psychological terms the source of their motivations: prejudice, preference for one's ingroup, fear and rejection of outgroups, etc. From this context we build a characterization of good cognitive authorities contrasted with poor cognitive authorities, comparing the practices of MSNBC and Fox News, who are considered equally biased in opposite directions yet exhibit significantly different practices. The fake news stories, motivations and pseudo-cognitive authorities are enhanced and accelerated by such factors as repetition from diverse media echoing the same stories, culturally induced ignorance, the Dunning-Kruger effect, etc. All of these threads culminate in a spiraling, dialectical, self-reinforcing collective social self-deception. False cognitive authority succeeds because of self-deception, especially collective self-deception. Its authority is that of the crowds and leader, but false because it fails to be supported by evidence, facts, or reason. It is an authority based in emotion. It creates a bubble for its adherents that is difficult to breach, but not only that, they mock those who berate those who challenge their view of reality.   What is disturbing is that even without Trump this InfoWar will likely continue throughout the world, abetted by foreign meddling, no matter the country.

The Role of Information Professionals

How can information professionals respond to the Age of Disinformation? When Patrick Wilson (1983) wrote about cognitive authority, he suggested that librarians and information specialists were authorities about authorities (p. 179 ff.), that is, that they know which authorities to consult to answer a query. When the very notion of genuine authority comes under attack, this becomes complicated. It seems that librarians and

information specialists should become authorities about false cognitive authorities as well. Consider the first two precepts of the Library Bill of Rights:

> I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

> II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. (Library Bill of Rights).

There is a tension between the objective of providing enlightenment (i.e., genuine understanding based on evidence and reasoning) and providing materials representing all points of view, including apparently those containing disinformation or misinformation. Having said that, volumes of disinformation could be instructive about for example, hate literature, if a patron or information seeker has the critical thinking to evaluate it appropriately.

In relation to this tension, it might be useful to look at library policies, reflecting on a 1989 debate between John Swan and Noel Peattie detailed in book entitled *The freedom to lie: a debate about democracy* (Swan & Peattie, 1989). John Swan argued that role of the librarian is to promote access, and this includes access to all sorts of materials, including that which is intolerable. Thus he argued libraries should have copies of McCalden's *The Holocaust Did Not Happen*, a holocaust revisionist tract. Swan's main points include:

- Toleration is meaningless without tolerance for what some may regard as detestable.

- The librarian's truth is freedom, freedom of access.

- Librarians are caught in a dilemma: "We are committed both to the search for truth and the freedom of expressions of untruth."

- Given these assumptions, Swan argues that a librarian's "chief professional commitment must be to access rather than truth" (p. 16). This would include lies and misrepresentations. Denying access to them does not eliminate them — they still exist in the hearts and minds of those who believe them, and suppressing such ideas will not eliminate them. Librarians work against intellectual freedom when they deny patrons access to materials because "the ideas in the materials are too dangerous to tolerate."

Noel Peattie (1989) takes a more conservative view in response, saying that a library is under no obligation to collect such works, because truth does matter, as an important factor in making collection development decisions. He writes:

- Either we do know or do not know some matters of fact, and if we do, then we have no obligation to support lies, or to omit the notion that it is a lie from our consideration in whether to purchase a source or not.

- Either we know or do not know some matters of fact. The Holocaust did happen. Climate change is happening.

- Of the variety of truths in the library, the librarian can only hope, not know, that a reader has enough education, patience, and discernment, to engage in the sorting process and come out with the right answer.

- McCalden's views are lies, falsehoods deliberately uttered to deceive and hurt people, by a person who really knows the truth but deliberately denies or distorts it.

Their debate retains its relevance today. The nature of some of the lies and deceptions have changed, if not considerably enlarged. The American Library Association tends to take Swan's position, but, given the Age of Disinformation, Peattie's position may be more realistic. When reflecting on a library's policy for collection development, it is useful to reconsider a particular library's position on this issue, and whether it still fits the needs of contemporary patrons.

The Anti-Enlightenment

In many ways the Age of Disinformation is the Age of the Anti-Enlightenment, in which knowledge gained systematically and through careful observation of the environment is rejected and replaced by an arrogant anti-science, anti-humanitarian propaganda whose misinformation or disinformation is transmitted through cable broadcasting and social media. The Enlightenment (roughly starting in the 18th century Europe) encompassed a variety of ideas centered on reason as the primary source of authority and rightfulness, not church, royalty, or political or inherited rank. It advanced ideals of individual liberty, constitutional government, separation of church and state and religious tolerance. Many of these notions were and are institutionalized in the United States Constitution and in the structure of the US government. In the current environment, individual liberty is now claimed to support partisan politics (only *my* politics are true), to erase separation of church and state (America was established as a *Christian* nation), and to attack reason and evidence, so as to support intolerance of those whose views are different from my partisan view (intolerance of tolerance). My partisan framework has "the truth," particularly in political or religious matters. For Sr. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, the results of the Enlightenment have increasingly favored radical individualism and denigrated the common good (Landers, 2018). Its fruition lies in many examples of contemporary culture. It has become fashionable for

radicalized individuals to fail to see the role of public education or to want to contribute to it (no levies, no taxes even when the underfunding seems obvious) or to refuse to take insurance for the common good or to support the general welfare. The notion of a public good has been currently challenged by those who to see that, for example, education for all has benefits for all or that vaccination is a public good, not seen as a private matter, given that the unvaccinated pose risks of medical outbreaks, with serious consequences to public health (for example, the resurgence of measles). Another public good that is often denigrated is the library that has an important role in education.

Information Literacy Programs

Training library patrons in information literacy may enable them to distinguish reliable sites from unreliable ones to evaluate the quality of materials in the library. Most libraries and library associations, such as IFLA, provide basic information literacy guidelines (e.g., How to Spot Fake News, 2017).   Librarians are likely to find more success in these programs with political supporters at the margin, with citizens with low political engagement, or with those who have not been indoctrinated. However, they can teach something about the nature of the InfoWars and its importance, to arm their patrons and themselves with tools to cope with fake news seekers or substantiators and perhaps to deal more effectively with the warriors of arrogance and ignorance. However, most strong Trump supporters may be immune to information literacy programs, especially because they are so thoroughly consumed with the president. The problem is that Trump supporters are so enveloped with a collective self-deception, continuously reinforced by word of mouth by their ingroup, by the media they embrace, by the conservative religious leaders, media pundits, and political heroes who are their cognitive authorities. Even if they undergo deprogramming, the environment is so laden with the need to continue to belong to their in-group, that they revert easily to their pre-deprogrammed position, something close to an addiction (to anger, self-righteousness, hatred, power or whatever their core emotional touchpoint). Shaming them or bating them will not work, as most sociologists agree. Janja Lalich, who has studied cults extensively, suggests that

> members of "totalistic" cults—those that consider their ideology the one true path—share four key characteristics. They 1) espouse an all-encompassing belief system; 2) exhibit excessive devotion to the leader; 3) avoid criticism of the group and its leader; and 4) feel disdain for non-members (Jacobs, 2018).

In her view, Trump followers so heavily share these traits makes them practically a cult. Lalich notes that Trump's campaign rallies—he is the first president in history to begin campaigning so soon after his election—are "both a recruitment technique and a way to keep his followers happy."

Is there any chance to reach these people? Lalich suggests using dialog to ask questions and reinforce doubts, using testimonials of previous cult members, if

available. The Socratic method may be useful. Thus information professionals might act (1) as a benumber, such as an electric eel or gadfly (metaphors used to describe Socrates), helping the patron to learn something by stinging them into an awareness of their ignorance, the Socratic approach to "woking" or (2) as a midwife, setting a course for the individual to learn something for themselves by asking them challenging questions. If a Trump supporter came to the library seeking to authenticate Trump's lie that only a few persons in Puerto Rico were injured as a result of Hurricane Maria an information specialist might lead the patron to sites on both sides of the issue. If the client begins to see than an overwhelming number of sites show that Trump lied, then perhaps the first stage has been achieved. This could lead to elementary lessons in information literacy, i.e., teaching the patron to recognize how to recognize good from bad web sites. Rick Alan Ross of the Cult Education Institute suggests that if conversing with a Trump supporter, pick an emotionally charged issue, such as reproductive health rights, and explain that Trump supports defunding Planned Parenthood and holds outmoded opinions about women (Matthews, 2018). This might act as a benumbing moment, challenging the interlocuter into an awareness that her idol holds a position contrary to her beliefs. Ross suggests some other techniques. To sway a Trump supporter, one can start identifying persons that she respects, looking for people who have spoken in opposition to Trump. In this way, one can play the role of a midwife, by suggesting other high profile figures or sources, that the interlocuter respects. Ross indicates that "the key to introducing more critical thinking is pointing out ambiguity and nuance, rather than challenging core beliefs directly" (Matthews, 2018). For a Trump supporter, this might mean showing them evidence that a border wall is an ineffective method for maintaining border security and that separating children from their parents does not deter asylum seekers.

Information professionals, to the extent possible, can strive to be fair in providing balanced and truthful information to clients, and individually and professionally to help restore fairness in reporting in media. Because of the influence of such media as Fox News, it would be helpful if the fairness doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) were restored to challenge some of the propaganda pushed by such media. This doctrine was introduced in 1949 and required broadcast license holders to present both sides of issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced. It was eliminated in 1987 on the basis that it "restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters ... [and] actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public importance to the detriment of the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of broadcast journalists." (FCC Fairness Doctrine). In 1987 in an FCC Video, NBCUniversal, made the claim, "Today we reaffirm our faith in the American people. Our faith in their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction without any help from government" (FCC Fairness Doctrine, footnote 18 of *Wikipedia* entry). It seems obvious that many American people lack this ability. Furthermore, the current government's lack of transparency and its publishing misinformation or disinformation or withholding information that would enhance the

public good (for example, the real effects of climate change) aggravates the matter, by diminishing trust in government information.

As information professionals, we could encourage ourselves, personally and professionally, and others to take the Pro-Truth Pledge (https://www.protruthpledge.org/) where we promise only to share verified truth as completely as possible, to honor truth (to acknowledge and defend it) and to encourage truth (to ask for lies to be retracted, educate ourselves and others, and acknowledge genuine experts). It would help address and beat back the verbal pollution that exists in public space.

Given the ethical view that the information specialist should work with the client's view, it is difficult to see how the specialists could proceed when confronted with a fake news seeker or validator, except to politely profess ignorance for themselves or try Socratic methods. It is more likely that librarians can try to prevent willing, new, or regular patrons from falling prey to fake news, through lessons in information literacy, a commitment to competence, and lively engagement. This presumes that places like libraries and information centers will persist and continue to receive funding. Contrary to the belief that libraries can be or are replaced by the internet, they are even more now an essential bastion for democracy, as argued by such authors as Eric Klinenberg, in an article for the *New York Times,* "To restore civil society, start with the library."   He states, "Libraries stand for and exemplify something that needs defending: the public institutions that — even in an age of atomization, polarization and inequality — serve as the bedrock of civil society." He was particularly worried about the library as a public good, whose value was attacked by an economist in an ill-conceived article in *Forbes* magazine who argued that "libraries no longer served a purpose and did not deserve public support" and that they should be replaced by an Amazon-like operation as "a free-market option." The reaction was so strongly negative that *Forbes* magazine retracted the article (Klinenberg, 2018).

Hopefully, this research article has richly pointed out the problems of pseudo-cognitive authorities who seduce their believers into smug ignorance and the risks of having no authorities on the authorities, with no way to distinguish between sources, the honest and the dishonest ones. Libraries can create literate and critically thinking citizens, a serious antidote to fake news and their purveyors in the InfoWars in the Age of Disinformation.

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