

FEE's Essential Guide to

NAVIGATING THE NEWS



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to Navigating
the News

*Essays from the Foundation
for Economic Education*

FEE

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Introduction

Instant gratification is the norm. We stream movies on Netflix, we get 2-day shipping thanks to Amazon Prime, and when there's a coup taking place in Turkey, our friends on Twitter make sure we know about it within minutes.

Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter are wonderful services. But our demand as consumers for more and more information delivered at faster and faster rates has brought about the 24-hour news outlets we have today.

What sells? Doom and gloom. That's strange. We live amidst unprecedented prosperity. Why is this not news?

Instead of accepting these dreary reports as conventions, perhaps it's better for us to ask ourselves, is the world really so hateful, violent, and full of graft as CNN and Fox News would have us believe? Why are these the stories that are being fed to us? Are we maybe a bit too hungry for them? How should we navigate the news in this era of instant gratification?

Read on to find the answers to these questions.

Our Doom and Gloom Media Is Animal Farm in Reverse

Bryan Caplan

Orwell's **Animal Farm** parodies Soviet propaganda: On Sunday mornings Squealer, holding down a long strip of paper with his trotter, would read out to them lists of figures proving that the production of every class of foodstuff had increased by two hundred per cent, three hundred per cent, or five hundred per cent, as the case might be. The animals saw no reason to disbelieve him, especially as they could no longer remember very clearly what conditions had been like before the Rebellion. All the same, there were days when they felt that they would sooner have had less figures and more food.

The point: In a totalitarian state, there's a chasm between daily life and the media. Daily life is awful, but the media trumpets the glory of the status quo.

The West now has a comparable chasm between daily life and the media, but it goes in the opposite direction. Daily life is wonderful. Unless you actively hunt for outliers, you're surrounded by well-fed, healthy, safe, comfortable people enjoying a cornucopia of amusement. The media, however, uses the vastness of the world to show us non-stop terror, hate, fear, brutality, and poverty - not just in the Third World, but right here at home.

Why would the media strive to make audiences doubt their own two eyes? In the Soviet Union, the explanation is obvious: The Party used its media monopoly to brainwash its citizens into accepting, if not relishing, their wretched existence.

It's tempting to tell a mirror image story for the West: Hostile journalists seek to undermine a glorious world they hate. But even if

these cartoonish motives were operative, Western media is manifestly competitive, so you have to ask, “Why hasn’t competition stopped the brainwashing?” The only credible response is that media consumers like hearing about a world of terror, hate, fear, brutality, and poverty.

I can’t fathom why anyone would crave a daily dose of this intellectual poison, but see no other explanation for our Orwellian situation.

The Media and Trump Are Both to Blame for the Death of Truth

Julian Adorney and Sean Malone

The Washington Post recently **criticized** President Trump's Tweet storm about being wiretapped, mocking his claims as baseless. They argue that he's sowing dissent and making up facts to distract the media from important issues. The Post neglected to mention that the **FBI and other agencies** have been surveilling Trump's advisors, or that in October the FBI obtained a **warrant** to wiretap Trump's "associates."

While the wiretaps were directed at those in Trump's orbit rather than Trump himself, his accusations have more merit than the Post admits.

This is becoming a trend: the media is eroding its credibility both by publishing factually incorrect stories about Trump and by accusing him of lying even when he's telling the truth. In short, they're committing the same heresies against truth that Trump is.

Clear Biases

The NBC Fact-Checker, **for instance**, recently rated Trump's claim that there were 94 million people out of work as "False." As economics professor and FEE faculty member Steve Horwitz **notes**, however, his claim is true.

In similar fashion, when Trump argued that black unemployment was 59%, Politifact rated his claim "Mostly False." In fact, the numbers check out, as PolitiFact **acknowledged** when it rated a similar claim by Bernie Sanders as "Mostly True."

PolitiFact also **fact-checks** some of Trump's false statements 5-6 times. This matters because the organization uses aggregates to

determine how truthful a politician is and by quintuple-counting Trump's lies, they're giving an inflated view of his dishonesty.

One of the longer-lasting and harder-hitting media accusations against Trump has been that Russia manipulated the election in his favor. Yet after months of searching for evidence, not a thing has been found.

However, damage to credibility has already been done. In fact, the resulting public outcry has been so bad that even Democrats — including Michael Morell, former acting CIA chief and public supporter of Hillary Clinton — have been trying to **publicize the truth**.

Such unreliable reporting also occurs somewhat more subtly in exaggeration, as with Rachel Maddow's **recent reveal** of Trump's 2005 tax return on MSNBC. After nearly three hours of social media-fueled frenzy and monologuing leading to a general hysteria, Maddow disappointed everyone by sharing only two pages of Trump's tax return and merely stating that Trump did indeed pay an appropriate amount in taxes that year.

Media on both sides have been speaking out against Maddow and her network ever since.

Poor Credibility, Poor Society

Biased reporting should not come as a surprise. After all, the media is composed of human beings, and we all have biases that color our perspective.

It's just especially severe in the age of Trump.

As Glenn Greenwald **argued**, "That prominent journalists are overwhelmingly opposed to Donald Trump is barely debatable; their collective contempt for him is essentially out in the open."

When prominent media outlets rate Trump's true statements as false, or invent criticisms of him that leave out crucial facts, they diminish the credibility of legitimate criticisms. When Trump makes unfounded accusations or proposes bad policy, he can deflect criticism by claiming that the media's lying. This claim carries weight because it's often true.

Worse, the erosion of credibility within the media can also hurt our democracy.

Many claim that Trump is such a casual liar — lying about things that make little sense, like voter fraud in an election he won — because blurring the line between truth and fiction helps him gain power.

Hannah Arendt, author of [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#), argues that authoritarian regimes tend to prefer subjects who don't have a handle on the truth, because it leaves them unmoored and more reliant on the nation's leader for answers. The Economist [points out](#) that post-truth politics has been on the rise in Poland, Turkey, and Russia — none known as beacons of freedom.

To the extent that Trump is working from a similar authoritarian impulse, citizens who are growing weary of fact-checking everything are eventually likely to give up and check out instead.

But a media that sabotages its own credibility only makes things worse.

If journalists were more diligent in keeping their own biases in check — by slowing down, following up on extraordinary claims, limiting their reliance on anonymous sources and rumors, and generally approaching their job with extra skepticism when a story feels too good to be true — then it would be much more difficult to turn the United States into a post-truth nation. Instead, major news outlets would anchor us with their solid, high-quality reporting.

Creating a Post-Truth Culture

It is much easier to see a lie when only one party has a reputation for lying.

Unfortunately, the nation is rapidly separating into two camps, each with its own set of facts. This separation was happening before Trump, as user-controlled media consumption facilitated partisan bubbles. But it's made worse when each side can credibly claim the other is lying. Just as critics of Trump can point to his lies and distortions as evidence for

why he cannot be trusted, so fans of Trump can point to critics' lies and distortions as evidence for why they should not be trusted.

The result has been a steady erosion in the very values of truth and objectivity.

This erosion also deepens partisan divides. According to a [PEW research poll](#) in January, "Fully 86% describe the country as more politically divided today than in the past."

Bridging the divide would require common ground, and one way to establish that is with a common set of credible facts. However, when each side lies about the other, this common ground shrinks. Additionally, valid criticisms of both sides inflame the other by making their opponents look post-truth. When Trump supporters can point to bias on the part of fact-checkers like PolitiFact, it makes them less likely to trust these sources.

One core element of a civil society is the extent to which people who disagree ideologically can agree on basic facts. Truth, when it's accepted by people on both sides of the aisle, moors society and facilitates common ground. Its erosion has far-reaching consequences for everyone.

Our Political Religion Demands Scapegoats

David Gornoski

In order for an ancient tribe to successfully eat or purge a scapegoat, the community first had to scandalize their target with a lying accusation — that the victim was guilty of high crimes against the very social order of the land. This is what is behind the envious mobs and the media priests' daily work to tie Trump and any of his allies to rumors of “Russians hacking the election”: the election ritual is the life of the state and its order.

The established media and political hegemony are trying to stab as many pin pricks into Trump as possible with the goal of fashioning him into an agent of an enemy Other who is disturbing the essential sacred ritual of elections. This is all about setting him up for a great devouring to provide catharsis on the part of those who covet his power and the state of being they perceive it providing.

One does not have to share Trump's ideology to see this sorry human anthropological fact and pity all parties involved.

My question is: when will we all stop playing this game of hate and blame and realize how absolutely stupid the state makes us? I mean, not the state itself as some alien entity foisted upon us, but the sacred love of power we all tend to have and manifest into a monopoly on violence we call the state.

Mindless For, Mindless Against

The mindlessness of the rumors is embarrassing. The millions of Leftists now constantly hallucinating about Russian specters in the reflections of their socially aware soy lattes do not actually care about Russia all of a

sudden. They only know what the TVs, six multinational corporations, and their Internet extensions tell them: Russia hates gays. Russia loves Trump. Trump stands in the way of my vicarious identity avatar being in the highest symbolic seat of power in the world. Therefore, denial, anger, paranoia, hate.

Similarly, the Right's newfound infatuation with Putin is not based on any real knowledge of the man, but only that their chosen avatar indicates a friendly air towards him and that Putin foiled many of their past scapegoat's — Obama's — machinations.

Do you realize we could pick any country on the map and, with enough time of media cookie-cutter scandals and marketing words like "butcher," "threat to democracy," "thug," etc., we could get any of these tribes to support violently sanctioning said country, and with another few rumors and allegations, get popular support for violent meddling, a coup, or some other intervention?

Don't take my word for it. Ask Assad, he was just dining with John Kerry and his wife until his luck ran out in the face of our imperial cult's financial interests. The same goes for Gaddafi, Hussein, Mossadegh.

Groupthink

Most Americans knew very little of why they should support the murder of these individuals and the violent destruction of these foreign rivals. They fell under a trance of groupthink, an ecstasy of oneness that occurs when they are transported by their frustrated mundane lives to a higher plain of justice and blood vengeance for national greatness.

Still, support for acts of war like airstrikes, no-fly zones, and sanctions that starve millions of innocent families are always most fervent and forbearing with the party that shares a brand with the occupant of the presidency. They imitate their avatar's resolute righteousness often til the bitter end, even as the war high's diminishing trip reveals itself with photos of carnage coming in steadily with no accompanying tangible benefits from the mission.

Trump, for all his many foreign policy faults, has so far refused to play the standard

bipartisan script on targeting a new scapegoat in Putin. So it's given the media and Washington order, who didn't get the memo that the script had changed, an occasion to scandalize him. Just think, what would happen if a Rubio or Clinton was in office? Would any of the media question or work hard to daily scrutinize, challenge, and "fact check" the standard script of Russian intervention both perform? Of course not. And would much of the Republican base stand in opposition to increased sanctions against Russia and no-fly zones in Syria? Hardly.

Do we see the insanity of this whole ruse? People's passionate opinions are not really their opinions. They are just copying their ideological tribal peers so they can share the pleasure of hating and venting their frustrations onto someone else. That is not a defect in our modern democratic process. That is its masterful design working perfectly.

Humans have always found unity and satisfaction in finding a common villain to scandalize. This ganging up and shaming and pouring every ounce of wrath in oneself onto a common enemy is an ancient practice that dates back to the very origin of human culture. Evidence of ritual human sacrifice is as ubiquitous to archaic sites as tools and fire-making.

Sacrifice

Far from being an odd quirk, sacrifice was the fundamental glue that held these communities together. Tensions always build. Humans are always bound by jealousy and paranoia from comparing themselves to their neighbors. But that tendency to mirror our neighbor is also something that can spill out into a righteous blaming of a common enemy for all the strife, tension, and fear that consumes our daily lives.

By declaring "It is finished" on human sacrifice and imitating Jesus's love of enemy, Christianity has slowly eroded the effectiveness and raw brutality of human sacrifice. Western culture experienced the longest sustained infection of Christianity's anti-sacrificial leavening of strong

sacred structures and thus remains the only culture in the world today totally obsessed with self-flagellation of its own ethnocentrism and unfair treatment of minority interests in its history. The only one.

The problem is that our culture's guilt obsession with past mistakes betrays the ultimate conceit: that our public decrying of others' bad behavior makes us immune. This is a means of gaining power and advantage over others by using victims as a "human shield" of criticism. Jesus dealt with such victimism as such:

And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!
— Matthew Chapter 23 NIV

Victimism is the dominant state religion of the west. It always wails against its forefathers' abuses as a means of gaming for more power. So Trump can be torn apart by progressives — millions of whom marched in 2004-2006 against Iraq War lies — for daring to seek peace with Russia because he refuses to imitate the cool speech, self-criticism, and solemnity of the office taught in the education system by politician-approved history books.

In other words, he's been cast in their favorite show. The one that provides the best opium for the masses money can buy. And he's not playing it right. He's a bad actor for their sacred theater. He's not speaking in vague, eloquent, empty, sweet words. So his open self-obsession and Twitter rants sully the sacredness of the state and thus "turns the lights on" to the barbarity and ridiculousness of the whole enterprise.

People get enraged when you take their opium away.

Why "Sacred"?

By the way, why do I use "sacred" so much to describe the state, elections, and politics? Because sacred is that which is unquestioned. It is that which is not supposed to be seen or spoken. The sacredness of statecraft

is that it is the madness of crowds lusting after power. It is not needed to order society. But do not bother telling its fervent participants that: they need their obsessed rivalry with their enemy tribe, for, in it, they see themselves.

It's said we are not to discuss politics at dinner. It's also said we are not to discuss religion at dinner.

But I repeat myself.

The only way to understand politics and its never-ending scandals and hatred is to understand its religious structure.

In the meantime, that's me in the corner. Losing my religion.

The Problem with Alternative Facts

Antony Davies and James R. Harrigan

The world is going to hell. A glance at the evening news suggests nothing but violence, poverty, and rampant inequality.

But in reality, not only is the world not going to hell, it is getting better in almost every conceivable way. To see the truth, all that's required is a cursory look at the data and a willingness to ignore the media's perpetual gloom and doom storylines.

Nothing better illustrates the difference between woeful perception and wonderful reality than gun violence. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, over half of Americans believe that gun violence in the United States is growing worse. That's not even close to being correct.

According to the FBI, the rate of firearm deaths today is half — and the rate of non-fatal firearm crimes is one-quarter — of what they were just 20 years ago. Even with mass shootings, gun violence today is a shadow of what it was a generation ago.

The media tells us the world is descending into warlike madness. But this is also untrue. During World War II, 300 out of every 100,000 people on Earth died annually in war. During the Korean War, the number dropped to 20. Today, it is 1. There are still wars, to be sure, but they are much less numerous and much less deadly than they once were.

Humans are not only eradicating violence, they are also eradicating poverty. The number of people living in extreme poverty has dropped from 70 percent of all humans in 1900, to 55 percent in 1950, to 35 percent a generation ago, to less than 10 percent today. The only story here is one of magnificent improvement.

Want more? According to the International Labour Organisation, child labor rates worldwide have fallen by half since the 1950s. The United Nations' measures of longevity, education, and income around the world have risen almost 20 percent over the past generation.

Contrary to those who fan the flames of class warfare, the World Bank reports that over the past 20 years, global income inequality has fallen at the same time that inflation-adjusted, per-capita world income has risen 40 percent. For examples, look at life in the United States over the past generation. The fraction of households with cellular phones has risen from 35 percent to over 90 percent, with a computer from 20 percent to over 80 percent, and with a dishwasher from under 50 percent to over 70 percent.

Not only is the divide between rich and poor shrinking, so too is the divide between men and women. According to the United Nations, differences between women's and men's longevity, educations, and incomes have fallen almost 15 percent globally over the past 20 years.

These results point to a remarkably improving world. Our human family has made all these magnificent strides in income, education, longevity, child labor, equality, and peace at the same time that our numbers have grown by billions. The world is hardly in decline. And given the clear and obvious trends, humanity's best days lie ahead. This may not be the sexy story. But it is without question the true story.

Was 2016 Really So Bad, or Are You Too Caught Up in the News Cycle?

Dan Sanchez

On New Year's Eve, many said "Bye Felicia" (today's meme version of "good riddance") to 2016. Some called the year a dumpster fire. People I know expressed such sentiments on social media. Yet I know for a fact that many of them had splendid years: a new job, a new love in their life, a childbirth, etc. They had every reason to celebrate the good fortune of their past year, but instead looked back on it as an awful ordeal.

2016-haters dwell on a seeming uptick in celebrity deaths, ascribing homicidal agency to the chronological unit. And opponents of Donald Trump see his presidential election as a bizarre blight on the year. Then there was the turmoil and violence in America and around the world, much of which seemed to cluster in the summer of 2016: civil wars, geopolitical crises, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, police-related killings, mass protests, etc. I myself remarked on July 19, referring to a song by Billy Joel:

"You know things are bad when you could fill a whole "We Didn't Start the Fire" verse just with news stories from the past two weeks."

And indeed, for many people, especially those who didn't survive the events in question, things were bad. Yet, for many others, life was very good. Innovations in markets and technology continued to increase living standards throughout the world. I myself, in addition to being very fortunate in terms of my career, relationships, and health, possessed a number of useful and delightful new gadgets and apps that hadn't been available even to the ultra-rich just a few years ago.

They say “misery loves company,” and empathy certainly is important, but it does suffering strangers no good to be vicariously miserable along with them. Many of us are not fully appreciating and enjoying our blessings, because we live so much of our mental and emotional lives in the news cycle.

If the image that springs to mind when you think of 2016 is the face of Donald Trump, as opposed to the faces of your family or what you accomplished that year, you may have a problem. In 2017, you might resolve to follow the news less closely, or at least rethink your relationship with it. Resolve not to be distracted by things you have no control over. Resolve to instead dedicate that scarce attention to loving more, creating more, living better, and cherishing every day of your life.

Then next New Year’s Eve, you’ll have a healthier perspective on what transpired. And in the meantime, you’ll be more focused on making a year of your life worth celebrating.

FEE's mission is to inspire, educate, and connect future leaders with the economic, ethical, and legal principles of a free society.

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