

# FAKE NEWS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND NEWS TODAY

## HOW TO RECOGNIZE THEM AND FIGHT FOR LITERACY

Kyle Moody, PhD

Associate Professor of Communications Media

Fitchburg State University

[kmood4@fitchburgstate.edu](mailto:kmood4@fitchburgstate.edu)

Threads/Twitter/X: [@KylelsMoody](https://www.threads.net/@KylelsMoody)



WELL, THIS IS AWKWARD

This presentation may not even be fully accurate by the time you are seeing this, because it's changing that fast.

THIS PRESENTATION WAS SUPPOSED TO  
BE A BIT MORE LIGHTHEARTED



I WAS GOING TO DO A WHOLE SECTION  
ON WHETHER BIRDS ACTUALLY EXIST



(And maybe we'll actually get into it if we have time)

# FACT: WE CAN DRAW A DIRECT LINE BETWEEN FAKE NEWS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

**And unless we act to stop them, it will happen again**

This presentation is going to discuss how we can get better information and start talking about fake news, conspiracy theories, changing technologies, and how to move forward.

It's not always going to be fun, but democracy is real work, and hey, I've got pictures!



# THIS TALK WILL COVER

- Defining fake news and conspiracy theories
- Changing media consumption and production
- How we spread information conspiracy theories through social media
- Media literacy
- How to talk to family members about them
- What to do with “big tech” (don’t use this term) and social media platforms (a better term!)
- The future of fake news and big tech, including
  - Artificial Intelligence (AI)
  - New social media platforms (yay?) and owners (OH NO ELON)

## BIG TAKEAWAYS FOR THE DINNER CROWD (IF YA GOTTA EAT AND RUN)

- Fake news is one systemic problem of a decentralized information structure
- There's no easy solution, but there are tools we can use to fight it
  - Media Bias Chart, better reporting, subscribing to local presses
- Avoid sharing overly emotional news because it can create a negative feedback loop
- Vote with your \$ and your critical thinking skills
- Think more, share less - social media profit off you using these platforms for engagement
- The rest of us?

READY?

okay, here we go.



## SO, SOME RESEARCH BASICS TO START

- Develop a solid question and brainstorm keywords (search terms)
- Click restraint – ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT LINK?
- Scan the results, do cursory evaluation, consider changing your search in some way before just jumping into (and using) one of the top results
- Check outside the source, also known as [lateral reading](#)

Found at <http://fitchburgstate.libguides.com/fakenews>

# HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS



**CONSIDER THE SOURCE**  
Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.

**READ BEYOND**  
Headlines can be outrageous in effort to get clicks. What's the whole story?

**CHECK THE AUTHOR**  
Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?

**SUPPORTING SOURCES?**  
Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.

**CHECK THE DATE**  
Reposting old news stories doesn't mean they're relevant to current events.

**IS IT A JOKE?**  
If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.

**CHECK YOUR BIASES**  
Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgement.

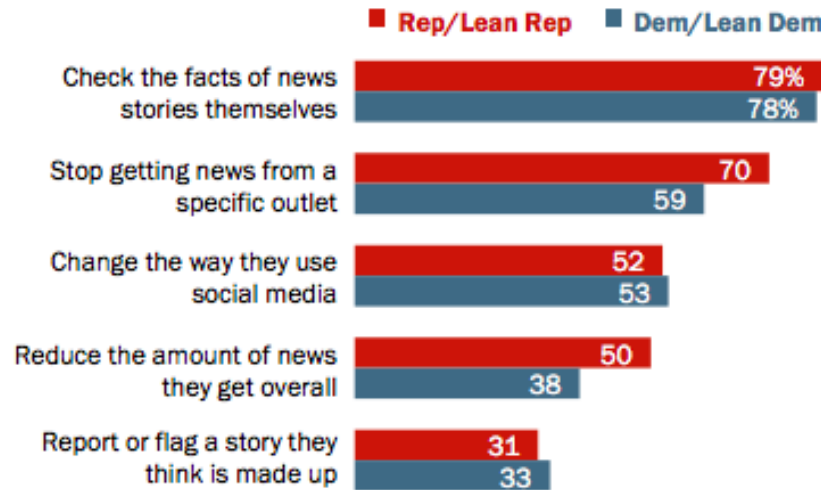
**ASK THE EXPERTS**  
Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

**IFLA**  
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions  
With thanks to [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org)

# WE HAVE A REAL FAKE NEWS AND MISINFORMATION PROBLEM

## Large majorities in both parties say made-up news and information led them to check facts in news stories

*% of U.S. adults who say the issue of made-up news and information has led them to do each action*



Source: Survey conducted Feb. 19-March 4, 2019.

"Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem That Needs To Be Fixed"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## WHAT IS FAKE NEWS, AND HOW IS IT USED TO SPREAD CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

- Well, it's complicated
  - Alice Marwick suggests that the actual quality of news has less to do with who **published** it than with the person/organization **sharing it**.
- Social media news stories that feature **sensational headlines** referring to **untrue information**. These stories are **produced by actors who are not mandated to do journalism** and are **remunerated by online ad networks**.
  - (Dan Faltesek, 2016, Medium.com; emphasis mine)

# WHAT IS FAKE NEWS?

- It takes the appearance of a legitimate news site
  - Headline, Image, Short description/Subhead, and a Story
- Created solely for “Clicks,” or to make money – **USUALLY PRIMING AUDIENCES WITH EMOTION**
- Hyperbolic, sensationalistic content – we’d consider it **low-quality content**
- It’s written like this!!! (Your eyes might have been drawn to this either first or second. Excitement breeds curiosity)
  - All Caps, Choppy sentences, qustionahbull spelleeng
- Contains a disproportionate amount of false information
- Almost wholly online, and spread through social media

# TEN WAYS TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

1. Check the Web Address/URL
2. Research the Name of the Site
3. Look for Visual Clues (changed logos, Photoshopped images)
4. Too many ads!
5. Does it look like a News Site?
  1. Date Stamp
  2. Byline
  3. Sources
  4. Consistency

## TEN WAYS TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

6. Check the “About/Bio” Page
7. Run the Main Photo through Google Images’ Reverse Image Search
8. Check Where and When the Site was Registered
9. Fact-check Specific Claims
10. Be Wary of Specific or Overly Sensational Headlines

# FIRST GLANCE: WHAT DO YOU SEE?



Are these different stories?



# ACTUALLY, THEY'RE NOT

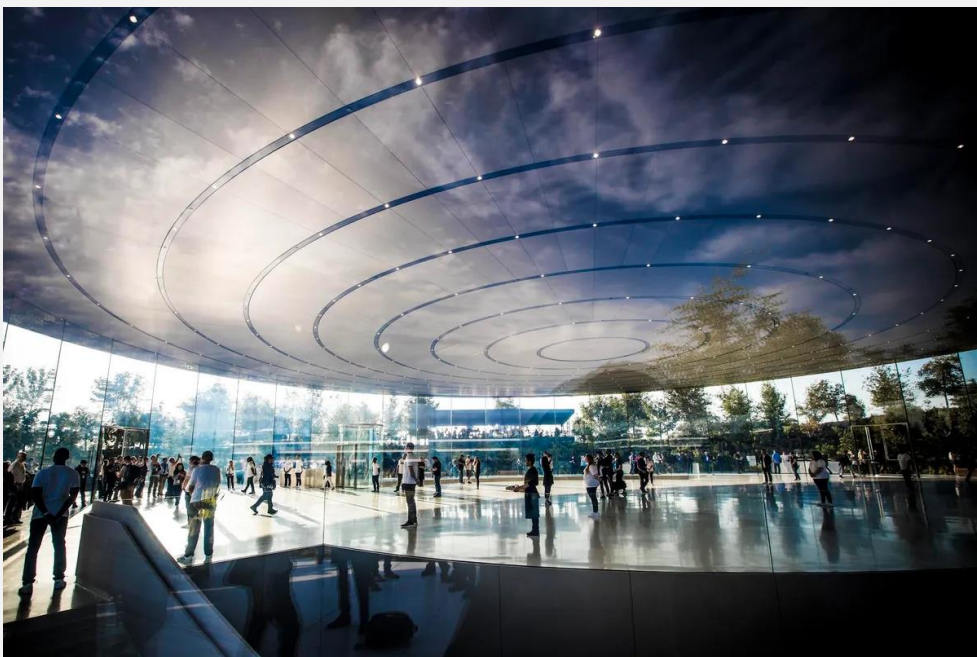


Both *Liberal Society* and *Conservative 101* are owned by the same Florida media company

## FAKE NEWS SELLS

- American News LLC of Miami owns the following sites:
  - *Liberal Society* (where the Conway story was more heavily shared on Facebook)
  - *Conservative 101*
  - *Democratic Review* (Liberal)
  - *American News* (Conservative)
  - *GodToday.com* (Religious focus)
- So who benefits from all these sites?
  - American News LLC of Miami, who receives all the ad revenue from the clicks

NOW, SPOT THE AI PHOTOGRAPH





DO IT AGAIN, THIS TIME WITH PEOPLE!





SO TELL ME WHAT YOU NOTICE HERE.

Can they also bring us...together?

Here is an AI deepfake video of Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden ranking *Super Mario Bros.* games (they get it wrong, though)

# WANT TO SEE HOW AI CHANGES HOW WE VIEW PEOPLE?

- [https://youtu.be/KHMNPjkd5-0?si=\\_g0wLVVv3CIF\\_FR8](https://youtu.be/KHMNPjkd5-0?si=_g0wLVVv3CIF_FR8)

# SO, WILL AI IMPACT US? YES AND NO

Argument	Explanation of claim	Presumed effect	Source
1. Increased quantity of misinformation	Due to the ease of access and use, generative AIs can be used to create mis-/disinformation at scale at little to no cost to individuals and organized actors	Increased quantity of misinformation allows ill-intentioned actors to “flood the zone” with incorrect or misleading information, thus drowning out factual content and/or sowing confusion	Bell (2023), Fried (2023), Hsu & Thompson (2023), Marcus (2023), Pasternack (2023), Ordonez et al. (2023) Tucker (2023), Zagni & Canetta (2023)
2. Increased quality of misinformation	Due to their technical capabilities and ease of use, generative AIs can be used to create higher-quality misinformation	Increased quality of misinformation leads to increased persuasive potential, as it creates content that is more plausible and harder to debunk or verify. This would either allow for the spread of false information or contribute (with the increased quantity of misinformation) to an epistemic crisis, a general loss of trust in all types of news	Epstein & Hertzman (2023), Fried (2023), Goldstein et al. (2023) Hsu & Thompson (2023), Pasternack (2023), Tiku (2022), Tucker (2023)
3. Increased personalization of misinformation	Due to their technical capabilities and ease of use, generative AIs can be used to create high-quality misinformation personalized to a user's tastes and preferences	Increased persuasion of consumers of misinformation, with the same outcomes as above	Benson (2023), Fried (2023), Hsu & Thompson (2023), Pasternack (2023)
4. Involuntary generation of plausible but false information	Generative AIs can generate useful content (e.g., chatbots generating code). However, they can also generate plausible-looking information that is entirely inaccurate. Without intending to, users could thus generate misinformation, which could potentially spread	Misinforming users of generative AI and potentially those with whom they share the information	Fried (2023), Gold & Fischer (2023), Ordonez et al. (2023) Pasternack (2023), Shah & Bender (2023), Zagni & Canetta (2023)



## REMEMBER: NOT EVERYBODY IS SUSCEPTIBLE TO FAKE NEWS

- Fear of gullibility of others – third-person effect
- We have specific safeguards set in place to dictate rules regarding false information narratives (Sylvia & Moody, 2018)
- The average user consumes very little misinformation or fake news
- The cost of reaching people with misinformation is relatively large, compared with the cost of creating it (Kapoor & Narayanan, 2023)



CERTAIN PORTIONS OF THE AMERICAN  
ELECTORATE ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO  
FAKE NEWS THAN OTHERS

- **Right-wing media consumers and Trump supporters are the largest consumers of fake/junk news**
- According to University of Oxford study, titled “Polarization, Partisanship and Junk News Consumption over Social Media in the US”

## CERTAIN PORTIONS OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO FAKE NEWS THAN OTHERS

- “On Twitter, a network of Trump supporters consumes the largest volume of junk news, and junk news is the largest proportion of news links they share,” the researchers concluded. On [Facebook](#), the skew was even greater. There, “extreme hard right pages – distinct from Republican pages – share more junk news than all the other audiences put together.”
- The research involved monitoring a core group of around 13,500 politically-active US [Twitter](#) users, and a separate group of 48,000 public Facebook pages, to find the external websites that they were sharing.

# FIRST: FAKE NEWS HAS REAL CONSEQUENCES (SEE JANUARY 6, 2021 FOR THE FULL IMPACT)

- Less informed populace
  - Rejection of existing “gatekeepers”
- Polarized debate
- Less ground for civil discourse
  - We might even see riots!
- The shaping of “reality”
- Our political future
- “Gaslighting”





## THERE'S MORE TOO

- Israel/Palestine War
  - Confirmation bias no matter what side you are on in this horrific conflict
  - Example: the hospital bombing in Gaza, and who started it, and why
- Russian/Ukrainian War
  - Ghost of Kyiv
  - Mariupol
- Fox News and Dominion Voting Systems
  - Actually, it's just funny to remind you that Fox News and Rupert Murdoch had to pay \$787 million to Dominion Voting Systems in a defamation lawsuit
  - But Dominion employees still face threats from Fox News viewers

# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MISINFORMATION

- We are more outraged than ever before
- Easier than ever to distribute thoughts and opinions
- Less investment in research on credibility, more opinion-validation
- Clicks determine ad revenue, and shocking/hyperbolic content drives traffic
- The fact that we are all stuck inside for longer periods means that we might be looking to validate or break through our boredom more often
- It also can spike our paranoia if we're not careful
  - Which can lead to one of our most insidious conspiracy theories today...

# SOCIAL MEDIA HAVE CHANGED, AND NOT FOR THE BETTER

- Facebook – choking ad revenue for news outlets
  - Poor tools for locating and reporting disinformation
- Twitter – shifted to X under Elon Musk
  - Platform user base has cratered
  - More fake news and misinformation meme accounts
  - But it is still viable for many journalists, especially those working with limited resources
- Instagram – poor reporting of fake news on their site
- Cory Doctorow – “ens\*\*\*tification”

# WHAT ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

- A belief/set of beliefs that some covert but influential organization is responsible for a circumstance or event
- These are different from actual conspiracies, which are proven, authoritative accounting of events





## THE SIX THINGS CONSPIRACY THEORIES HAVE IN COMMON

- ✓ A 'secret' plot
- ✓ A group of conspirators
- ✓ Supporting 'evidence'
- ✓ They suggest nothing happens by accident
- ✓ They assume the world is good or bad
- ✓ 'Someone' is to blame!



# WHAT ARE CONSPIRACY THEORIES?

- Why do people fall for conspiracy theories?
- Confirmation bias
  - Tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories
  - Filter bubbles
- Proportionality Bias
  - A huge event was caused by something equally huge

# Know how to spot a conspiracy theory.

Just because something  
can't be disproved doesn't  
mean that it's true.



[#NewsLitTip](#)



## WHY DO CONSPIRACY THEORIES WORK?

You can't prove them wrong!

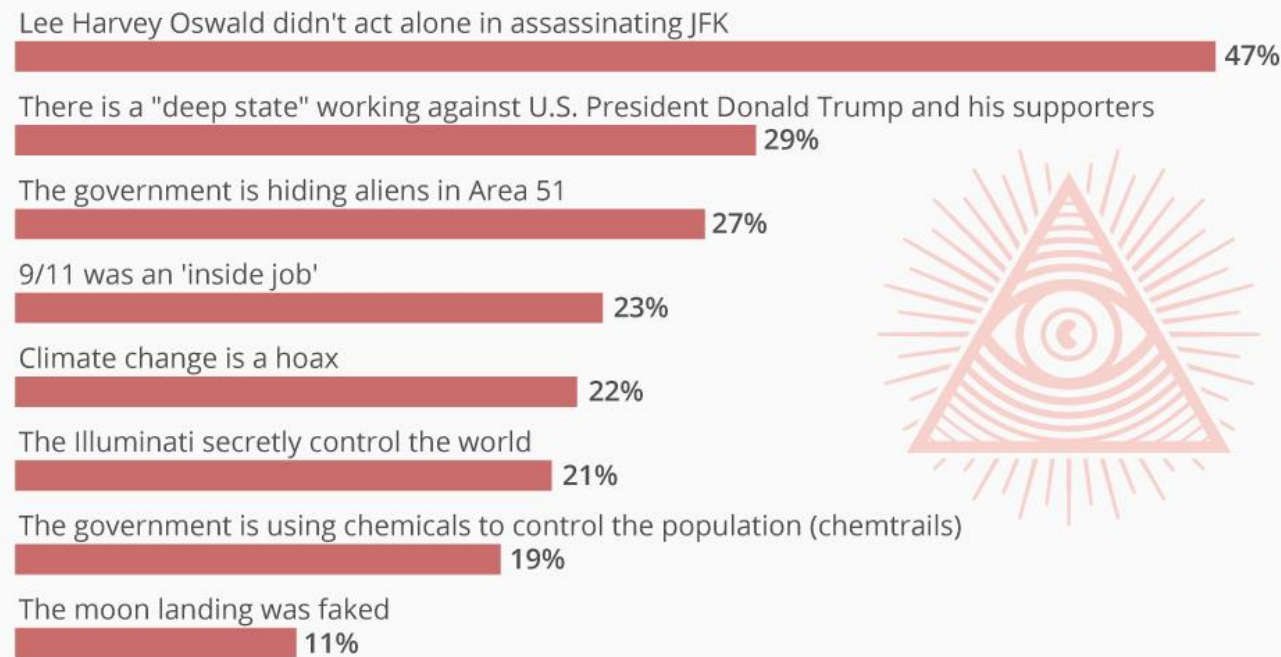
Also known as “affective reasoning”

Conspiracy theories/theorists

# CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE ENGAGING AND INVITING TO BELIEVERS

## Belief in Conspiracy Theories in the United States

% of U.S. adults that say they 'somewhat' or 'strongly' believe the following conspiracy theories



@StatistaCharts

n=1,220 U.S. adults. Conducted 15-16 January 2019.

Source: YouGov for Statista

YouGov® statista

## SOME CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE WORLD TODAY

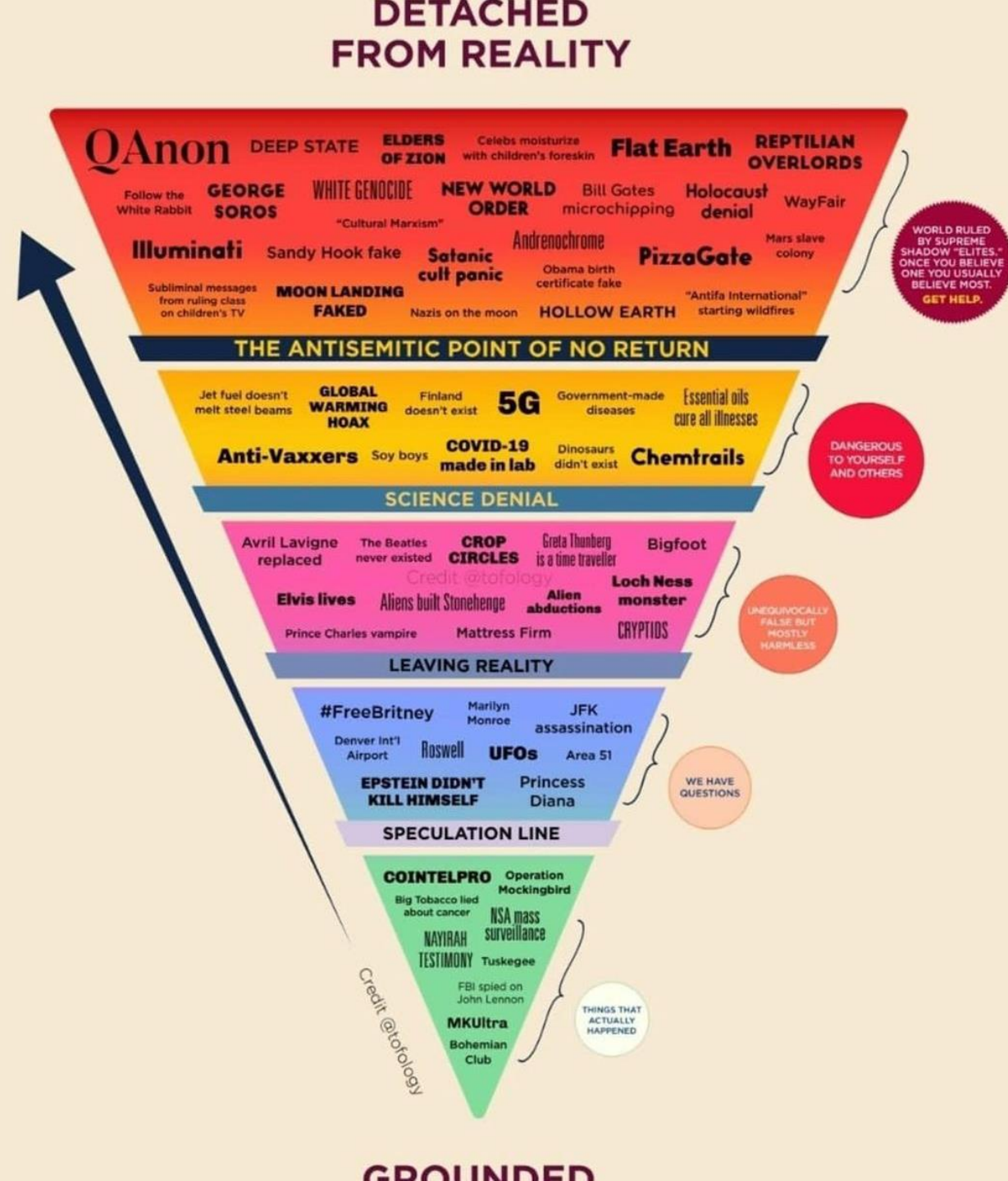
- Qanon and the Deep State
- Aliens and whether they exist
- Illuminati
- Pizzagate
- Gamergate
- Do birds actually exist? (Don't laugh, this hole goes deep)



# CONSPIRACY THEORIES TODAY

Please pay attention to the levels and how far down the rabbit hole they go.

We're not covering all of them, but it's important to understand that these are linked by disillusionment with the world and proportionality bias, along with mistrust of actors



PROPORTIONALITY BIAS ADDRESSES  
OUR NEED FOR SCAPEGOATS BIGGER  
THAN US

## PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION

Again, people want to believe a twisted  
conspiracy theory about CIA intervention

Oliver Stone even made a massive movie  
about it (see Kevin Costner,, right)

But it was just one man





## 9/11 TRUTHERS

An exploitation of anger and sadness because  
of the loss of control and national PTSD

Again, proportionality bias in effect

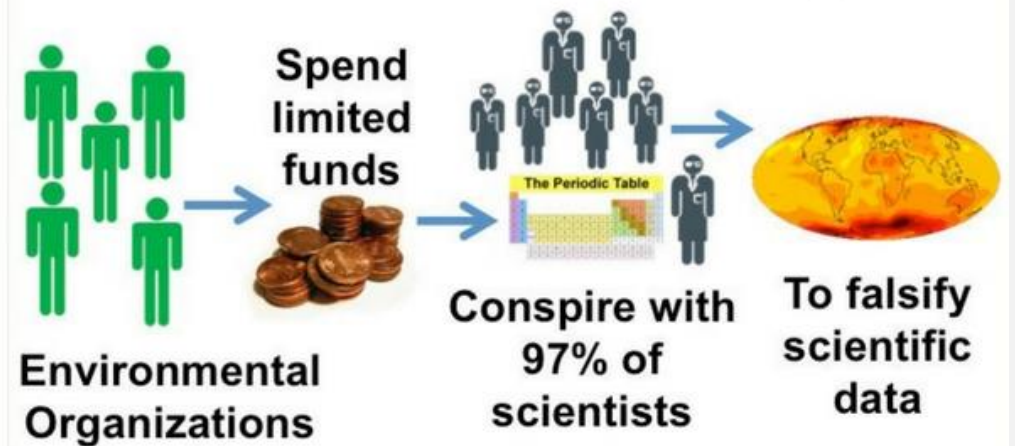


## CLIMATE CHANGE HOAX

For some readers and viewers, the truth about climate change and its impact on our world is just too big

There are also competing commercial interests that would not want any “green regulations,” like oil companies

## What is more likely?



# QANON

Shadowy internet-based organization

Believe that the world is run by a global cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles and child sex traffickers who are plotting against President Donald Trump and his supporters and that only Trump can save us.

Why are they scary?

Attempted Kidnapping

Attempted murder

Remember Comet Ping-Pong? That was them.

They also just attacked the Capitol Building

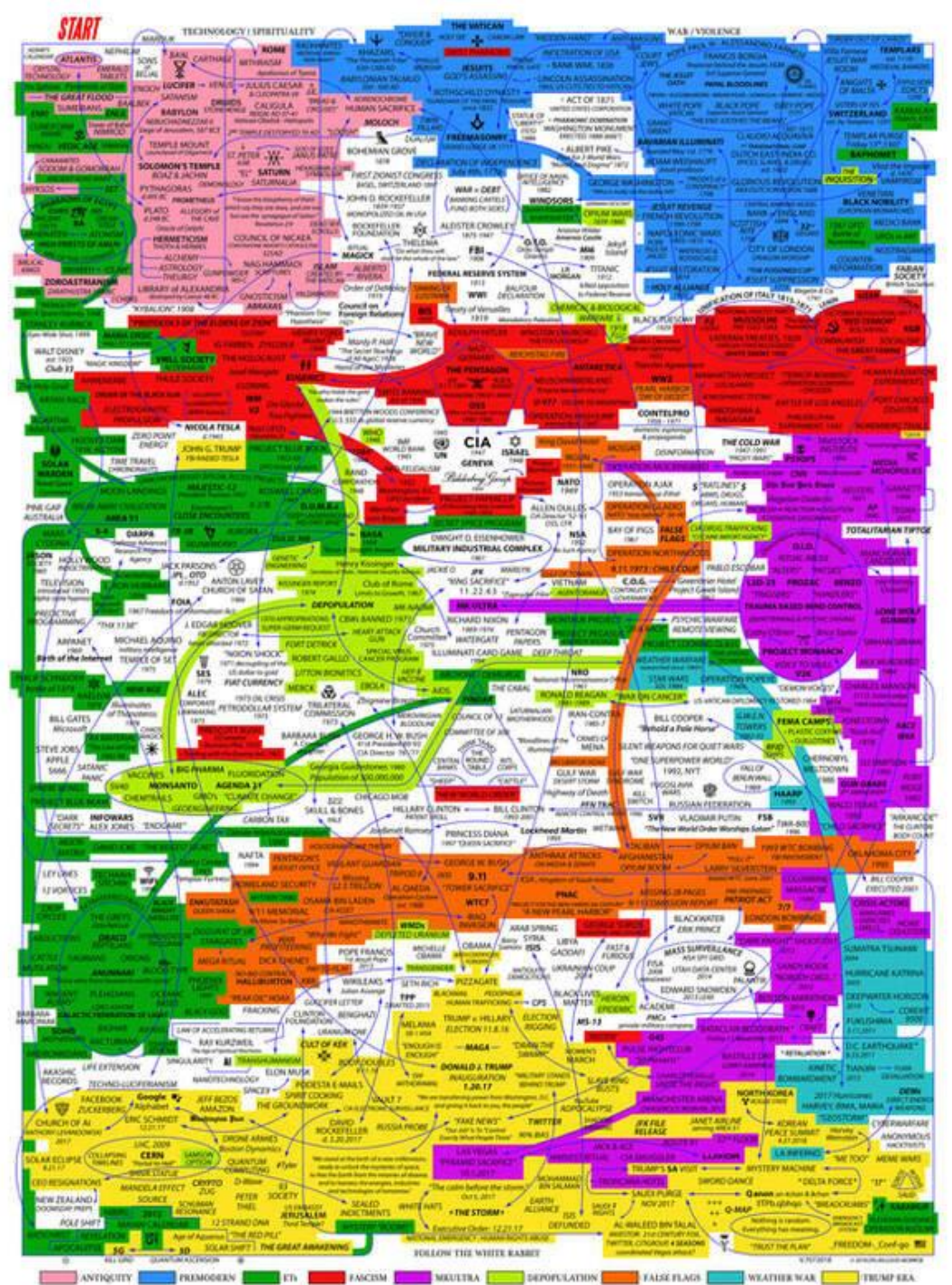




# THIS IS AN ACTUAL QANON BELIEF CHART

It's rewarding to the users to see how the world ties into their belief system, like forcing the world into their beliefs.

Somehow, this reflects order to users/believers

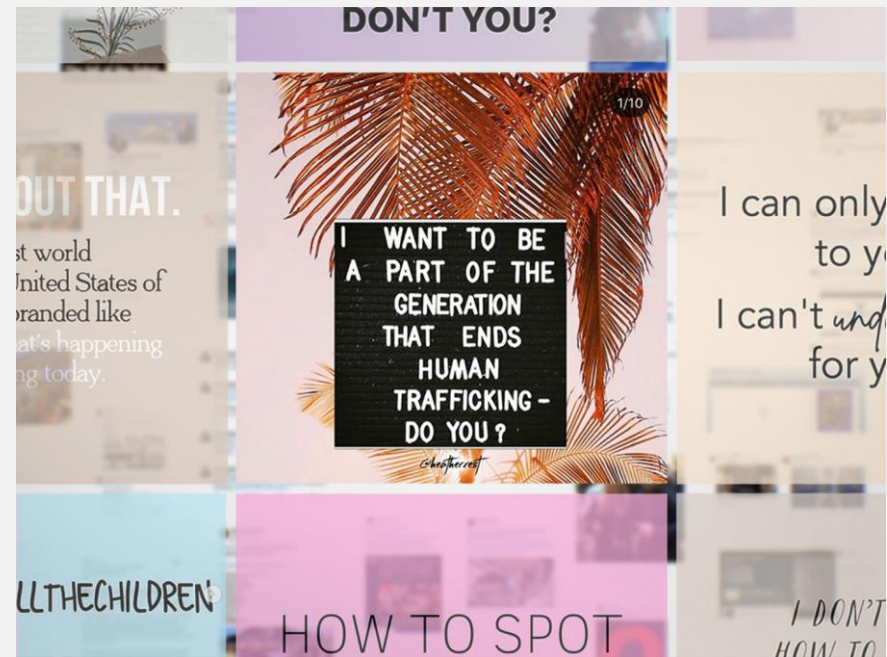


# BUT THE PROBLEM ISN'T JUST QANON'S BELIEFS

It's how the movement uses the internet, and how it links to other conspiracy theories.

## QANON SUCCEEDED BY LINKING ITS MESSAGE TO SEEMINGLY INNOCUOUS CONTENT, MAKING IT EASY TO SPREAD

- #SaveTheChildren
- Linking itself to pro-human, anti-trafficking content
  - Again, on the surface, very noteworthy
- QAnon took off from Pizzagate, thereby linking itself with an existing body of work
- It also linked itself to those who sell essential oils as a homeopathic remedy
  - Linked to anti-vaccination movements



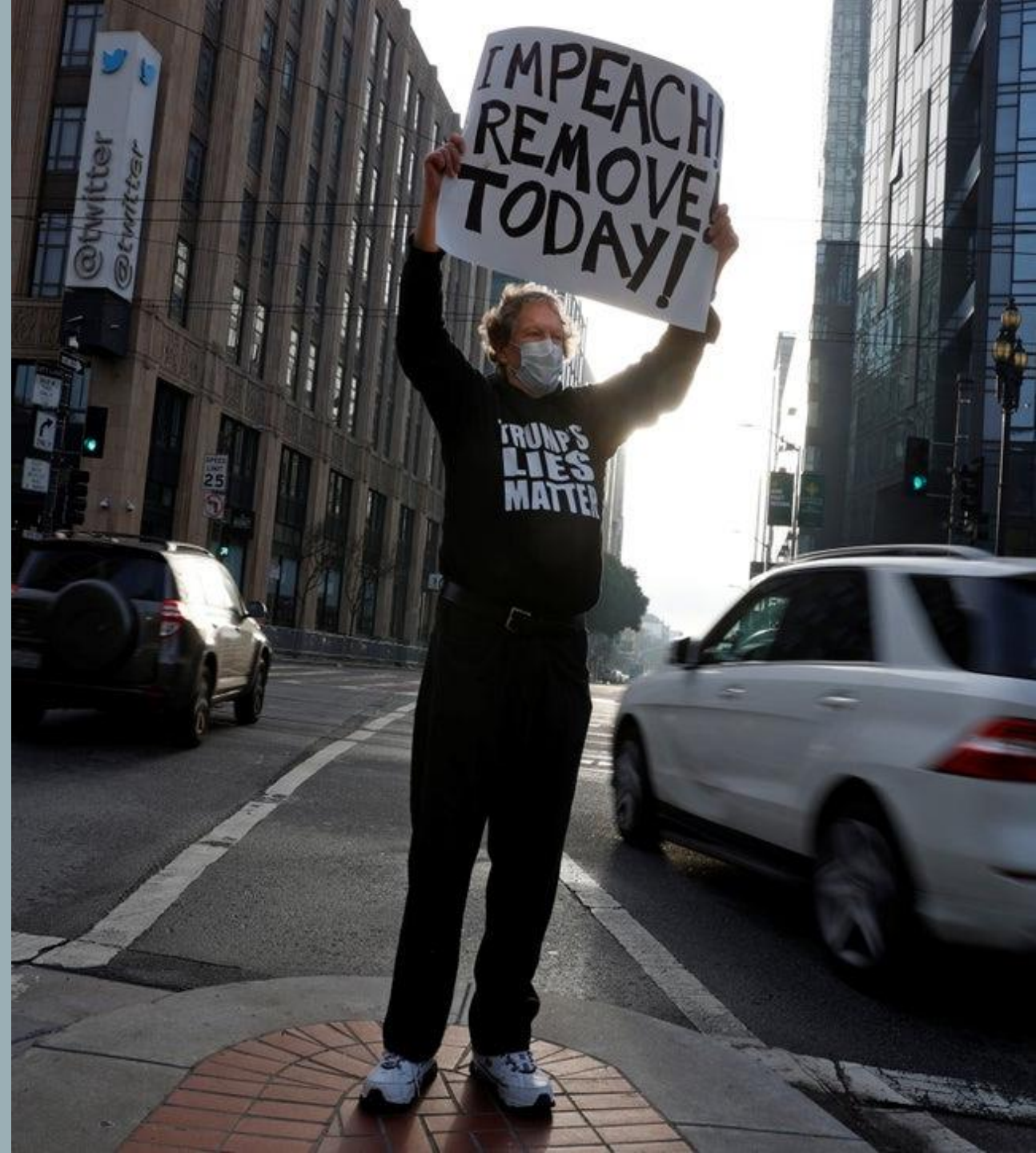


## QANON NOW HAS TWO MEMBERS WITHIN CONGRESS



## SO WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT QANON?

We're deplatforming it, along with other  
accounts that promote violence





# RECRUITMENT OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

- Video games
  - Gamergate
- Social media
  - Especially including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (LibsofTikTok, InfoWars)
  - People were particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Religious memberships
- Politically disenfranchised individuals
  - No previous experience or care for government engagement
- Eventually leading to white supremacy

# THE DEEP STATE

Fact: This doesn't actually exist, but is instead a political ruse that is meant to distract you from actual events taking place in your view as we speak.

# PIZZAGATE



This conspiracy theory is a prototype for Qanon

It imagined Democrats as part of a child trafficking cabal of pedophiles

What was notable about this is how it morphed through social media in 2020 (again, see boredom during a global pandemic)

# SO WHY DOES THIS KEEP HAPPENING?

Why are we so vulnerable to fake news as a population?

Glad you asked! Here's a few reasons

# POLARIZATION CAN LEAD TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES

This actually matches up with historical trends.

One major reason why people are more likely to believe in election fraud being committed by the “other side”

This also illustrates how disagreement results in a wholly Other world view

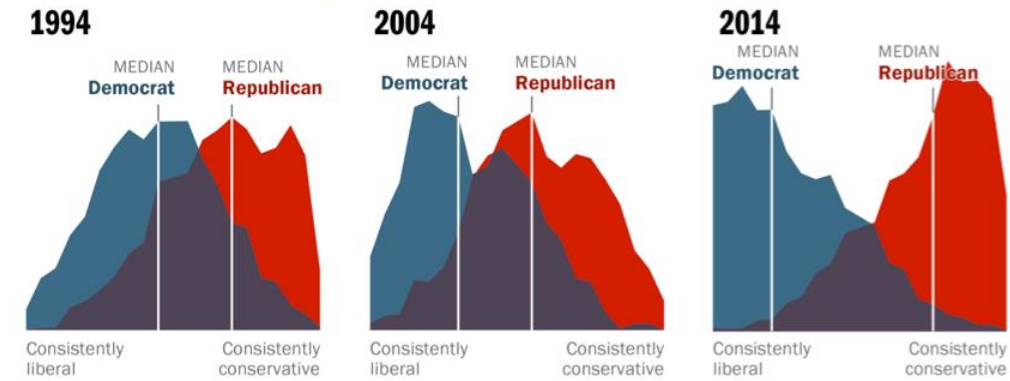
We are seeing this now during the lead up to the midterm elections

(exacerbated by bad actors looking for clicks)

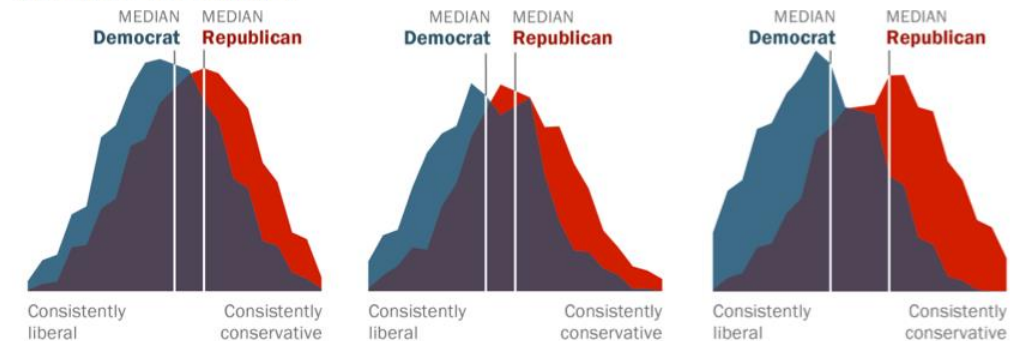
## Polarization Surges Among the Politically Engaged

*Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values, by level of political engagement*

### Among the politically engaged



### Among the less engaged



# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MISINFORMATION

- We crave news more than ever before
- Both sides of the broad political spectrum are served, *with limited overlap*
  - Progressive/Liberal
  - Conservative
- **Both sides can craft their own realities and filter bubbles, which are manipulated by search engine algorithms to deliver what we think we want.**

# SPREADING INFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

- Never been easier or cheaper to create, send, and view news and information
- Humans have not changed, we want
  - News quickly and with credibility
  - Stories
  - Fits within our paradigm
- This desire for content – coupled with the boredom brought on by the pandemic – has helped misinformation spread faster than ever
- Confirmation bias
  - Tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories
  - Filter bubbles
- Also known as “affective reasoning”
  - Conspiracy theories/theorists

## ELECTION FRAUD

There was none!

Until Donald Trump went looking for 11,780  
votes in Georgia, and that's just what we have  
on tape





## ERGO, THEY ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Hence the rise of GamerGate, Pizzagate, and Qanon, along with believing the lie propagated by now twice-impeached (and potentially criminally prosecuted )outgoing President Donald Trump that there was massive systemic voter fraud committed by Deep State Radical Democrats.

That's a mouthful...of lies



## TALKING TO OTHERS ABOUT FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- **Recommended by Steven Hassan, founder of the Freedom of Mind Resource Center**
- **Engage with the *person*, not the story itself**
  - Remember, people feel news reflects them, so talk to the person as a fellow person
- **Don't judge (this is hard, I know)**
  - Listen to what they have to say. This will help you follow the next crucial step...

## TALKING TO OTHERS ABOUT FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

- **Appeal to their sense of integrity, reason and conscience**
  - Orient the believer to the idea that if something is true, it will stand up to scrutiny
- **Suggest alternative information sources**
  - See the media bias chart
- **Create a team of trusted allies and friends**
  - We need all the help we can get
  - Because...

# FIGHTING AGAINST FAKE NEWS USING MEDIA LITERACY

- Ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create **media**.
- Better able to understand the complex messages we receive from (not comprehensive)
  - TV
  - Radio
  - Internet
  - Newspapers
  - Social Media
- Exposed to around 4,000 visual messages daily
- This is what we can do as *individuals*



# SUPPORT JOURNALISM!

- Just in the last two weeks, we've suffered the following losses:
  - *Sports Illustrated* – unable to make payments on its loan
  - Journalists at *Time* and *National Geographic* were laid off
  - *Pitchfork* laid off multiple staff writers and folded into *GQ* (really?)
  - The *Los Angeles Times* laid off 115 people, more than 20% of its newsroom
- Since 2005, almost 2,900 newspapers have closed or merged
  - Small weeklies
- So why is this important?
  - Look at this guy! Remember him?





## WHAT ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA?

- Twitter said that it had removed more than 70,000 accounts that promoted the QAnon conspiracy theory in recent days, widening its crackdown on content that could incite violence after barring President Trump from its service last week.
- Multiple social media services – Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to name a few – have removed the president from their sites
  - This is known as *deplatforming*.

# TECHNOLOGY IS CATCHING UP TO FIGHTING MISINFORMATION

- However, we must also depend on user reporting at this stage
  - Therein lies the problem
  - If users are used to declaring other sides as propagating “fake news,” how can we trust these users?
- Potential of “deplatforming”
  - Removing user access to content and distribution
- Dr. Melissa “Mish” Zimdars
  - Merrimack College
  - Google Doc – fighting fake news
  - Received death threats due to perceived attacks on credibility of sites
  - This also leads to...



# REMEMBER, THE LACK OF MODERATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA HAS ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS MOMENT

Access to communications channels have allowed groups to gather, particularly during the pandemic when all electronic communication was opened to try and head off viral transmission.

## CRITICAL MOMENT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

- We as consumers must demand accountability by platforms for highlighting extremism and *not enforcing their terms of service agreements*
- Look at possible legislation of tech companies as publishers, not platforms
- Will we see social media companies break up into smaller companies to attract more niche audiences?
- Will we also see companies engage in “off-ramping?” What might this mean for our access to information from private companies that may or may not serve the public good?

## HIT FAKE NEWS WHERE IT HURTS: THEIR WALLET

Picture of Alex Jones in civil court on August 3, 2022

A Texas jury has ordered Alex Jones to pay more than \$49 million in damages to parents of a boy killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.

Jones claimed that Sandy Hook was a “false flag” operation, and the bereaved parents of the murdered children were “crisis actors.”

Jones is an inveterate liar known for his conspiracy theories on his website InfoWars.

Also, reminder that Fox News had to pay \$787 million as a settlement for a defamation lawsuit

And former president Trump has to pay \$83.3 million to E. Jean Carroll for defaming her after he was found liable for sexual assault



# FIGHT FAKE NEWS? USE YOUR VOICE!

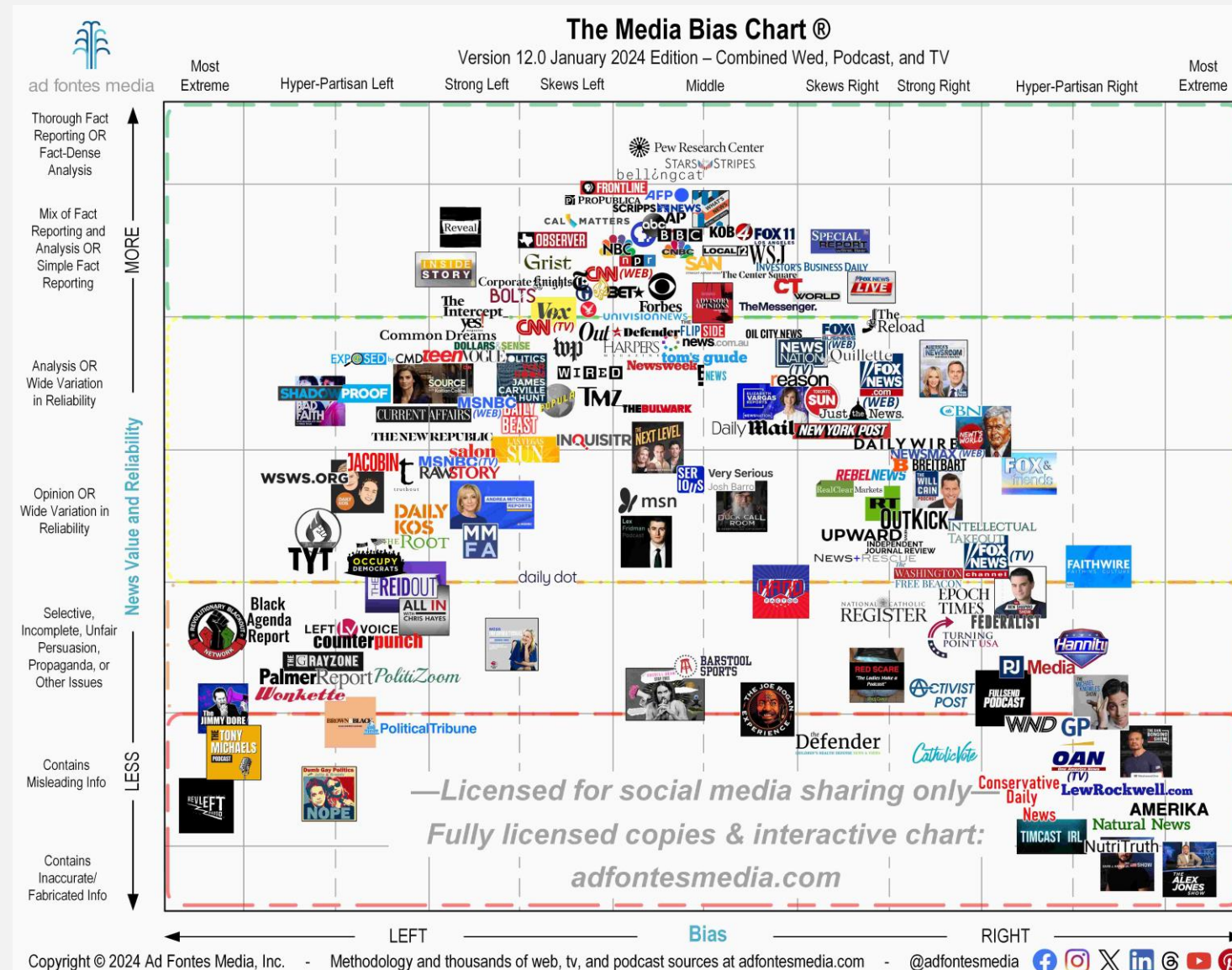
- Vote in your local elections
  - Make an informed decision.
- Vote with your dollars
  - Subscribe to outlets and pay for content
- Contribute to local newspapers
- Read and google before sharing
- Report abusive content or fake news
- Read outside your “filter bubbles”
- Tone down the rhetoric
  - Cooler heads are more likely to be heard





There are issues of **bias** and **ideology**, but those don't immediately make news sites fake.

Most recent version of this chart (I will repeat this slide again later if it helps).



# IN CONCLUSION

- We can fight against AI misinformation by
  - Paying attention to what we consume and like/Like
  - Listen to our own biases and use critical thinking
  - Looking for AI quirks
  - Considering the source
  - Hold publishers accountable for misinformation and falsehoods
  - Read more and often – use your libraries!
  - Go outside and touch grass

REMEMBER, WE'RE IN THIS  
TOGETHER

And with your help and  
work, we will win





## WAIT, I FORGOT TO COVER BIRDS AREN'T REAL!

Some people actually believe that birds aren't real, but are instead avian drones watching over us

It's also a marketing scheme that gamifies your paranoia



THANK YOU! QUESTIONS?

Feel free to contact me at

[kmood4@fitchburgstate.edu](mailto:kmood4@fitchburgstate.edu)

Twitter: @KylelsMoody

Listen to our podcast *Those Who Conspire*,  
available wherever you get your podcasts!

