

# "Fake News and the Fractured Media in the United States"

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF  
AUSTRALIA

Report from

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**CHURCHILL TRUST** report from Rafael Epstein "**Fake News & Fractured Media in the US**"

PROGRAMME

Washington DC

Peter Baker, Bureau Chief, *New York Times*

Gerry Seib, Editorial Director, *Wall St Journal*

Cameron Smith, former staffer to US Attorney General Jeff Sessions

Jonathan Chait, Correspondent, *New York Magazine*

Jonathan Swan, Correspondent, *Axios.com*

Nicholas Johnston, Editor, *Axios.com*

Maggie Farley, Adjunct Professor, American University

Ken Burns, documentary film maker, *Vietnam, Jazz, The Civil War*

Joe Hockey, Australia's Ambassador to the U.S.

Voters outside various monuments, museums and the White House.

Pittsburgh

Allegheny County Republican Committee

Voters in 14th and 16th Congressional Districts

Boston

Claire Wardle, Director of *First Draft*, at the Shorenstein Centre for Media, Policy and Politics, Harvard University

New York

John Dickerson, *CBS This Morning*, *The Atlantic Magazine*, *Slate Politics Gabfest* podcast

Julia Turner, Editor *Slate*

Andrew Marantz, Media Correspondent, *The New Yorker* magazine

Gabe Bullard, Producer *WUBU*, *NPR* Radio

Cameron Stuart, Correspondent, *The Australian*

Asha Rangappa, former FBI agent, *CNN* Contributor

Harlan Hill, *Trump 2020 Committee*, *Fox News* Contributor



## INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution is a challenge to the fundamental nature of the news industry. We know that speeding up the pace of news production and consumption changes the way we receive and make the news. What we don't know yet is how that speed changes the type of news we consume.

I went to the United States to find out how it has changed their news. Their media is bigger and more divided than ours and it is also the country whose media trends we are most likely to follow. Some of its journalism is the best that country has ever produced, yet it is also trusted less than at any time in its media history.

This is happening at a time when America's news has also been targeted by foreign governments, and they have used the weakness of division to maximum advantage. However, 'fake news' produced by malign actors is just a small part of a broader problem. For most people, they've never had as many questions about the reliability of the media. Neither journalists nor audiences have a good framework to consider what news they should believe and what news they should disregard.

We all have media outlets we trust. But even the people who produce the news feel as though their industry is in a crisis, with no clear solution to fundamental problems.

I spoke to journalists at some of American journalism's most revered institutions, like *The New York Times* and *The Wall St Journal*. I spoke to grass roots members of political parties, some of the best journalism academics, and some of the best practitioners of what seems like a long lost art; reporting that receives a consensus response from people with wildly divergent views.

We are all very familiar with the news, but very few of us readily have labels and concepts we can use to describe the problems already inherent in the news, and the new problems produced by the information revolution. We all need ways to talk about and understand this, because journalism is so fundamental to the functioning of a democracy.

## KEYWORDS

fake news, news literacy, media polarisation, information pollution, democracy, politics

## REPORT

"We've become two different worlds, it makes me insane to watch," says Claude, watching CNN in the lounge at JFK Airport in New York. He is the very first person I approach when my feet touch American soil. The longer I was in America, the more people repeated what this lackadaisical man from Connecticut was telling me; "You never know if anyone is telling the truth."

Coming to America to talk to its bewildered citizens about their media, I expected cynicism and tribalism. But I wasn't expecting the doom saying. I'm addicted to the news and I broadcast it every day, taking talk-back calls and burrowing into policy detail. I thought I knew what a fractured media landscape looked like, but then I landed in the U.S. Sitting on a couch, flicking between news channels in America, I was hit by a head-spinning divide.

"The President is a disgusting human being." CLICK "Democrats don't care about facts." CLICK "The media is President Trump's cocaine." CLICK "It's the beginning of the unravelling of democracy." CLICK "The mainstream media are almost treacherous." CLICK "The President's performance was nothing short of treasonous." CLICK "Immigrants are attempting to invade the country." CLICK.

I've been trying to decipher politics in Australia for more than 20 years, I've reported from natural disasters and foreign elections, so I thought I wasn't easily surprised. But I was shocked that so many Americans, from news makers to news consumers, now think their system is broken.

"That's what the world's all about now, isn't it?" Claude says with a resigned smile on his face before I've even had my passport checked. He welcomes me to his country and says, "you have to decide what you think is true, and what you think is false."

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On a warm summer evening, I'm outside the council chambers in Allegheny County, in Pittsburgh's southern suburbs. Outside, there's a marble memorial with the inscription "Sacrifice is Meaningless Without Remembrance," and the names of the soldiers go back to the Revolutionary War.

Inside, the local Republican Committee gathers for a quick prayer and the oath of allegiance in front of a large US flag. The rows of chairs are half-filled and the relaxed talk echoes off the marble floors. Surrounded by art-deco wooden panelled walls someone warns, "the Democrats are energised, organised and unified." The men wear white sneakers and button-down shirts, the women choose sensible slacks and simply patterned dresses. These are the people who knock on doors, mail pamphlets and make calls to get their representatives elected.

"You can't make sense of the media," Natalie Mihalek tells me with a laugh. "You can't if you're a rational person. You switch to the very next station and you're in a different country altogether." She's been a prosecutor, served in the Navy and at 39 years old, is feeling the "call to serve again." She's running to win a seat in the Pennsylvania State House, and while her focus is local, the back drop is national.

Republicans lost a Congressional seat here in March, despite the same suburbs voting overwhelmingly for the President just fifteen months earlier. They fear that if a Democrat can win here, in the equivalent of a by-election, what might happen when America votes for a new Congress in November?

I'm here in Pittsburgh to try and work out how a hyper tribalised media might be impacting on politics. Social media is the obvious starting point. And Natalie is not a fan of the President's Twitter activity - "on his own, in the middle of the night, from his bed." But she is thankful that "he's exposed the media for things that they've been doing, that we just weren't aware of."

Many people at this meeting tell me they've spent the last few decades avoiding outlets like *The New York Times* and *CNN*. It's not that they trust everything a channel like *FOX* is saying, but for these Republicans, it's pretty good. Natalie says, "it's very frustrating, it's hard to know who to trust," in the media. And so often, the distrust leads to darker fears.

The meeting is run by its endlessly cheerful Chairman, Joe Melaragno. Before we even meet his texts are enthusiastic; "I look forward to meeting you!" He smiles at the committee meeting even as he warns that the Democrats have, "a level of enthusiasm .. that we don't usually experience." But his mood turns late at night when everyone else has gone home.

We talk outside in the dark close to the marble memorial, on this warm evening. He is the first of many to reference the bitter and bloody Civil War. "We've had some dark times in our nation," Joe tells me. "We had slavery, which was an abomination, and we had to resolve it. But jeez, it cost us 600,000 lives to do that. We do not have a good history when two sides butt up against each other."

The quickest way to gauge an American's view of this political media conflict, is to ask which TV news channel they trust. Despite the fact most Americans don't watch a lot of *FOX* or *CNN*, nevertheless newspapers still uncover more facts and more people watch their local free-to-air TV news service. Online outlets have greater extremes and most people get their news from social media. However, the brand of your news channels has become shorthand for your politics, a sure marker of where you sit inside the fused world of America's media and politics.

A short drive from Bethel Park is the other side of Pittsburgh's political divide, in the suburb of Mt Lebanon. The picture postcard houses look the same, freestanding with plush lawns and no fences. But here the yards host Democrat posters, and churches display gay pride flags. In the upmarket Galleria shopping mall, I start chatting to a group of elderly Jewish women, seated at a table playing mah-jong.

"I don't watch Fox News, it makes me feel nauseated," laughs Joan Minski. She abhors the label 'fake news' so often used by the President about *CNN* and *The New York Times*. She trusts both outlets, "I believe in the news, I always have," she says. "But we never had a President that stood up there and lied about everything, about everything!"

The women speak rapidly, completing each other's sentences and laughing at their own jokes. One tells me, "we're usually more rowdy than this!" They've been meeting and playing mah-jong together for "fifty years, easy," says Joan wistfully. But the joviality shifts when I ask her friend Lois Balk about the President.

"He's telling them things they wanna hear, he's telling them he's gonna open the coal mines, no one is gonna open the coal mines!" says Lois. And then she says something that the polls show repeatedly; the

partisanship is personal. "Trump's followers are.. I don't want to say.. not a nice group of people, " an exasperated Lois tells me, "they're very much against what I think the average person feels."

Lois is not alone in seeing the other side as abnormal. Though the Democrats and Republicans are the only two fully functioning national political parties, each side's view of the other is distorted. And that distortion is most obvious on TV.

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"The left has gone and lost its mind.. they break the social fabric of our cities and towns," declared an exasperated FOX host. Watch any morning of cable TV and you'll quickly see the other half of the country labelled as extremists. On this day, FOX were upset that a Virginia restaurant had refused to serve White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders. At the time I was watching, young children were being separated from their asylum-seeking parents on the Mexican border. So for a regular CNN commentator there was justification in kicking a member of Trump's administration out of a restaurant. "People have seen the President do outrageous things," so for his press secretary, "there is a cost to being an accomplice to this cruel, deceitful human being."

FOX's broadcaster sneered that CNN's contribution was normal for "the mainstream media as the publicity arm for the Democrats." On the other left-of-centre station MSNBC, eyes rolled at the lack of Republicans reprimanding the President - his party has "devolved into a Trumpist cult." Which is what you expect from "an hysterical left," said one of President's favourite FOX hosts, "unwilling to accept the will of the American people." She added, "the left just doesn't care what the facts are!" This sort of furious disagreement is not confined to TV.

"Trump's corrupt," says Patricia's vehemently, "he's a liar, he's egotistical, he's a narcissist, I could go on and on." She is sitting with her partner Jim, overlooking the elderly mah-jong players in Pittsburgh. We're in a rather bland but expensive gastropub where this retiree couple are giving themselves "a special treat" - a sandwich and a beer for both costing \$AUD70. Jim and Patricia both served in the military and then met after their spouses died in the mid-90s. Jim smiles when he says, "we're not married, we don't want to ruin anything!"

Patricia is a committed watcher of MSNBC, a channel with similar political settings to CNN. "Trump's America," she says, "it makes me nervous, it's terrible where we're going as a country." Right now she's disturbed by Trump's "inhumane, unholy" immigration policy. And the divide in the nation is close to home. "I have family who voted for Trump, and we try not to discuss it," she says, "everyone becomes irrational, myself included."

The radically different opinions are common. One poll shows that more than half of American voters don't want their child to marry someone from the other party. (*Douglas Ahler and Guarav Sood, The Journal of Politics YouGov*) Another survey shows Democrats assume close to half of all Republicans earn more than \$250,000 per year, when the reality is 2%. Republicans assume that 38% of Democrat voters identify as LGBTQI, when it's just 6%.

The divide is not confined to voters. "If you go into a Democrat office, they've got CNN or MSNBC, and if you go into a Republican office, they've got FOX on," says Australia's Ambassador Joe Hockey, "and I'm not saying that off a sample of three, I'm saying that off a sample of two hundred."

Hockey is talking about his visits to Senators and members of Congress in Washington DC. An RM Williams clad foot is up on the coffee table, and his tie is a long way from being close to his neck. We're on couches in his office as Hockey labels the 24-hour news channels "fringe media," because more Americans watch their local news. Though he agrees, "it's really hard to find impartial media in the US." So, he says he has to "bake my own cake."

As Treasurer alongside Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Hockey was there when Australian politics became even angrier, and our media became more divided. "Politics here is far more polarised than even in Australia," he says. "People are particularly aggressive towards each other." He worries about Australia's journalism because, "I saw (our) mainstream media move from reporting the facts to opining on the facts." In both countries he says the credible journalists are those "that defy the company opinion, the ones who run counter to the brand of the business (they work for)."

The embassy - clad in a massive Qantas billboard when I visit - is less than two kilometers from the lawn of the White House. The Ambassador has a close enough relationship with the President to get a recent round of golf with Donald Trump, and the pictures to prove it are on display. The President smiles widely, his adviser Mick Mulvaney leaps for joy, and Fox News host Brett Baier grins wryly - all reacting as Hockey sinks a putt from forty feet.

No one has changed and challenged the US media like this President. But Hockey says Donald Trump is different in private, asking lots of questions, "always looking for information, there's a great sense of curiosity, that surprised me." He also admires Trump's use of Twitter - "not the regrettable language" - but the ability to cut through the media maelstrom. "He is an incredible communicator and it's amazing how much coverage he gets."

Hockey points to the President's character, something that makes Trump the perfect politician for a social media age. "He's emotional to some degree," the Ambassador says, "but is very visual and verbal, that is what drives him, as opposed to someone that deeply contemplates policy issues."

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The news is becoming increasingly bitter and partisan at precisely the moment when the media is being targeted by fabricated stories. So, it is important to note that at a crucial moment in history, the place where most Americans read their news, was posting stories that weren't true.

Fabricated stories were 'liked' and 'shared' on Facebook more widely than real news, in the final three months of the 2016 election. A widely reviewed analysis showed that articles pushing lies - like that the Pope was backing candidate Trump - were shared more widely on Facebook than articles from outlets like *FOX, CNN, The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. And that was in the three months leading up to voting day.

Cable TV news stations are enmeshed within the social media news cycle and they face similar problems. The facts of a story are often confined to the headlines or the banners that run across the bottom of the

screen. To understand the impact of that, one Tuesday morning I switched on TV and started taking notes at around 8 a.m. on MSNBC.

"Donald Trump fundamentally does not believe in democracy, he believes in autocracy," declared retired naval officer Malcolm Nance. His book accuses Trump of being an unwitting agent of the Russian government. "He will not betray Putin, he will not betray Russia." Less than ten minutes later on Fox News, Democrats were accused of "dehumanising the enemy, creating mob support, mob protest," by former Trump advisor Anthony Scaramucci. The small but vocal protests against Trump administration officials when they appear in public, are he said, "straight out of the Joseph Goebbels playbook." Neither reference, to Nazis nor autocrats seemed exceptional to the hosts on rival stations.

With social media proven to be unreliable, and with the talking heads on cable TV news stations constantly lashing out at each other, where does that leave political debate?

"The idea that public ideas should be debated by people of good faith, trying to reason to a conclusion using facts, is absolutely under assault," says John Dickerson. He is a Washington veteran turned co-host of CBS *This Morning*. In an Australian context imagine someone like the ABC's Barrie Cassidy co-hosting Channel 9's *TODAY* show. Dickerson believes the President has greatly accelerated something that was already happening; "it's just basically who can stack up the most assertions and has the least shame and doesn't feel compelled to actually make a case built on facts."

On Dickerson's glossy TV set, glass tables and exposed brick walls convey a freshly renovated New York loft. But the bricks are fake, and the food left out for the morning's guests remains uneaten and wrapped in plastic. But there is no artifice with the well-read and eloquent Dickerson, who writes for *The Atlantic* and produces podcasts and books on Presidential history.

Last year, President Trump cut off an interview with Dickerson in the Oval Office and gestured for the TV host to leave. Dickerson had repeatedly asked for evidence of one of the President's claims about Barack Obama. He is yet to be granted another Presidential interview.

Dickerson is worried that the absence of facts in news coverage is laying the groundwork for "some kind of disaster." He doesn't only blame the President and admits the media is a big part of the problem. For example he describes most election campaign coverage as "an abomination." "There are a lot of things we (the media) do wrong," he says, "despite the fact that it's very obvious that we're doing it wrong." He fears it adds up to a "basic system in real threat and peril."

Like many mainstream journalists Dickerson has concluded that the President often "says things that are not true and that he knows to be untrue." But Dickerson knows that even such a conclusion presents a problem. When some in the media fact-check the President, his supporters see that as more proof of bias or deliberate dishonesty.

"There's an overwhelming magnetism towards this intellectual dishonesty, not just among voters, but in the press," says Harlan Hill outside Fox News in midtown Manhattan. He's just come off an afternoon show on Fox, and despite the late afternoon heat, his suit and tie remain impeccably neat. While not targeting Dickerson personally, Hill disparages mainstream media, and dismisses criticism that Fox is too close to the President because "in the current media environment we need that sort of balance."

When I ask about whether the President's statements are too often fact-free, Hill blames mainstream media viewers. "You only wanna hear perspectives that align with yours," he says, "and you're resistant to the point of almost a tantrum to anybody that has a different point of view."

A Fox News regular, Hill was a former Obama supporter but is now the youngest member of the Trump 2020 Advisory Committee. Hill is already predicting that the President will win re-election "in a landslide," regardless of the investigation into Russia's 2016 interference. Trump and some on Fox continually attack that inquiry as a "witch hunt," initiated and warped by 'the Deep State.' This idea posits that a group of top level officials in various agencies like the FBI and the Justice Department is deliberately targeting the President for partisan reasons and has done so since before his election. The notion is dismissed by the mainstream media for lack of evidence. But not by Hill.

"I can tell you, that's a real thing," he says. "There are a lot of people in different agencies, and they are doing everything in their power to stop President Trump because they're ideologically absolutely at odds with what he's trying to do." Isn't that a conspiracy theory, I ask? "No, it's a real thing, I've witnessed it, I tell you," he says adamantly, "I won't name names, but I can point to people in the White House that are some of these deep state actors, it's not a conspiracy."

Recent publications have only muddied the water around the idea of a 'Deep State.' An anonymous Trump administration official wrote a recent Op-Ed in *The New York Times* saying there was an active effort from the President's staff to frustrate some elements of his agenda. And a recent book by Watergate journalist Bob Woodward cited specific examples of senior staff trying to divert the President away from some of his own policy proposals.

Hill's views about the 'Deep State' do not make him an outlier. Many elected Republicans agree with him publicly, and most Republican voters dismiss the inquiry being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. It is no simple task to start dissembling these fears because facts are hard to find. But in a digital media swamped by opinion, they are not the only facts that are hard to discover.

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What precisely happens to a particular immigrant family coming over the Mexican border? It depends where they crossed, whether they apply as refugees, which US agency deals with them, and which government directive is followed. What is the actual impact on any farmer of the President's moves on tariffs? What would any of the President's decisions do to the US government budget?

In some ways, facts have always been difficult to unearth, and some reporting has always been difficult to do. But now there is an added layer of difficulty. Finding out what happened can be like drinking from a fire hose, with any facts overwhelmed by a large volume of opinion and outrage. Because there is so much news, there is not only less consensus on facts, there is less agreement on which facts are important. It is another product of growing media fragmentation.

This all helps feed a gnawing fear in the US that our notions about journalism are outdated. After World War II and before Facebook, reporters could convince themselves that they were objective, able to observe their own biases, and could consult experts when needed. But that idea of how journalism works can fall apart in the face of increasing polarisation. In a divided media world what does work well is being emotional and focussing on the visual.

Australian journalist Jonathan Swan says President Trump watches TV "for large portions of the day," in the dining room next to the Oval office, in the White House residence and on Air Force One. "He is constantly watching TV and absorbing how they represent him," says Swan, "Donald Trump sees the whole world through the prism of media."

Swan swapped the press gallery in Canberra for the press pool in Washington DC. He now works for *Axios*, a website and social media feed, that isn't yet two years old. *Axios* compress the news into fifteen second, bite sized chunks of news, designed to be read on your phone without scrolling down the screen. They already have more daily readers than any Australian news site.

"Trump's always toggling between channels, and I've spoken to people who sat with him watching TV," Swan smiles. "He is alert to the graphics. He says this network has better graphics than that network." Swan says that Trump receives a daily briefing on what are called chyrons - the words splashed as colourful banners at the bottom of the TV screen. "He is obsessed with the media in every respect, that's not gonna change," Swan says. And, he adds, the President is often asking "are the chyrons unfair to him?"

What might be on those chyrons? When the news was in a frenzy over the separation of children from asylum seeking families, the political debate centered on one question. Was this a new policy from the Trump White House, or was it the implementation of an existing law? The chyrons on different channels gave contradictory answers.

CNN's chyron said, "CONTROVERSIAL POLICY OF SEPARATING FAMILIES AT THE BORDER."

FOX was the opposite; "THIS ADMINISTRATION DID NOT CREATE A POLICY OF SEPARATING FAMILIES AT THE BORDER."

Later, FOX blared, "MEDIA BLAMES TRUMP FOR SEPARATION POLICY"

CNN then targeted Republican voters, with its chyron saying, "58% OF GOP VOTERS APPROVE OF POLICY CAUSING FAMILY SEPARATIONS."

When MSNBC flashed up breaking news, "TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HOUSING HUNDREDS OF BABIES AND TODDLERS IN AT LEAST 3 FACILITIES IN STH TEXAS," their anchor Rachel Maddow was in tears.

In the same hour FOX had an image of the President emblazoned with the words, "PROTECTING THE BORDER, PROTECTING THE CHILDREN."

"What we're seeing is the challenge of doing journalism," says Clare Wardle, sitting in her office at Harvard University, "for the last century we've hidden behind this idea of impartiality as something that we can do, we just need to be balanced - and with the complexity of our politics now, it's very difficult to do that."

Wardle travels the world advising media organisations. "We think that we have a relationship with information that's rational. It's not," Wardle says, "because we are emotional creatures." She argues the new media's business model relies on your emotions, not your reasoning.

Social media hasn't only taken the advertising revenue from traditional media. It has also weakened old forms of news *because* it's social. Why do we expect an impartial and rational media when the filter is a 'like' button on Facebook or a 'favourite' button on Twitter?

The idea of media objectivity is relatively new. In the 19th century, American newspapers were unashamed political advocates, securing employment and contracts from people they helped elect. Between WWI and WWII there was a rapid growth in the number of newspapers and news started coming from the radio. Much of it was not what we would today consider to be impartial. It was only in 1947 that American radio and tv stations were required by law to be "fair." For many the media's high watermark of both a consensus view and objectivity were the crises around Watergate and Vietnam. But perhaps that was a rare interlude in a longer history. America's fair broadcasting law was challenged for decades and completely scrapped in 2011.

Despite any rules or even notions of them, Wardle's focus is now on the most viral of news items. "Everybody's focused on these fabricated news websites. I focus on memes. These visuals that get shared very, very quickly when they support our worldview," she says. "Why would you check (if it's true)?" she asks. "It's a visual. You trust a visual. Our brains react differently to visuals."

Her research at the Shorenstein Centre focusses less on who deliberately manipulates a news story and more on us, the people who pass them on. For her there is a key maxim about information pollution; there is no misinformation without amplification. "There isn't much we can do about the dodgy content," she says, "but whether or not we send it on is the crucial point."

Her understated office is not plush despite being on the Harvard campus in Cambridge. When I visited TV stations in New York there are gleaming foyers, and even the offices of online outlets in Washington DC have great views of the buildings of power, and shiny banks of TV screens. Claire Wardle might be close to the delightful and pleasant green lawns of Harvard, but the floor in the foyer is exposed concrete. With the carpet due to be replaced sometime, it's a university building recognizable to academics anywhere.

Wardle is concerned now about the murky regions of the web, places she says help manipulate the open nature of the traditional media. She explains that much of dodgy news is born in the murky regions of the internet. It surfaces on forums like FourChan and Reddit, and then moves to Facebook and Twitter, and then gets a hashtag trending. For Wardle, journalists are the crucial link at the end of this chain, and that's when they can make a mistake; "A journalist picks up the hashtag, and says 'Oh, this is interesting,' I'll write a trending story on it." That's a vulnerability that Wardle says is not being taught at journalism schools.

Two examples include the idea that Hillary Clinton was behind a child sex trafficking ring, and the online conspiracy theorists QAnon, who have recently received mainstream media coverage. Many news outlets have started talking about when to explicitly exclude reporting on a topic or group. Wardle believes this casual internal conversation needs to be formalised in some way; that media outlets need to talk with each other, to agree to not cover some stories. Wardle knows this sounds like censorship to some reporters and can be anathema to the principles of journalism. But she argues newsrooms have been here before, agreeing to not cover issues like suicide in a way that encourages more harm. And that for different reasons, the media is very careful about groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

Wardle says the rationale is simple, "we're not gonna give additional oxygen to them." Wardle says the media should more publicly discuss what they do report because, "when we write about it, we give them a stamp of approval." It is what Wardle calls 'strategic silence' and it's come about because of what has happened in American politics.

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Two years before the 2016 presidential campaign, a group of online researchers noticed an odd petition on the official website of the White House. The petitioners wanted to hand Alaska back to Russia, the nation from which it was purchased. It had very quickly gathered 39,000 online signatures.

Former FBI agent Clint Watts and his colleagues were trying to find out who was behind the petition. Previously Watts had been trolled online by hecklers for his views on Syria. The trolls appeared as English-speaking Europeans and Americans. They were aggressive and persistent, but Watts thought their speech patterns and synchronisation seemed unnatural. And the trolls who had targeted him seemed very similar to those wanting to hand Alaska back to Russia.

"That same group that we were following, or watching in 2014, shifted to American politics in 2015," Watts tells me. He's munching on a quick cake and spilling his coffee on a concrete bench in mid-town Manhattan. Watts was mapping these online trolls as they tried to rile up any disaffected audience with divisive messages. Active in places like Facebook, Watts says they aimed to tarnish not just democratic leaders but also democratic institutions. It was about undermining trust in civic society with a combination of commentary, real news, and distortions of news from legitimate sites.

"It's like throwing out fishing lines in lots of different parts of the ocean and you wait until you get a bite," says Watts. And with issues like Black Lives Matter or immigration, Watts could see, "they were getting bites in both the conservative and the liberal parts of the US, they just kept rallying those audiences."

Then in late 2015 and into 2016 Watt's says they turned their attention on the Republican and Democratic selection of their Presidential candidates. "The formula was pretty straightforward - everything was anti-

Clinton,” says Watts. When they finally aimed to split the Democrat vote, and increase votes for Trump, they’d been practicing for years. “They successfully layered it over about a three-year period,” Watt’s says, “so they could build up to that point. It didn't just happen overnight.”

Watts and I are on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, sitting between the studios of arch rivals MSNBC and FOX. While their news and views are worlds away from each other, these buildings sit almost opposite each other, close to Central Park.

When it comes to information pollution, what has changed is the source of the content used by malign actors – like Russia’s intelligence services – to influence audiences. While the news channels reflect their audience’s passions, within the murky feedback loop between audience and studio, malign actors are now looking to use real viewer content, to twist it and try to pollute the news.

“The best content to use is generated by the users in the audience you're trying to influence,” Watt’s explains. “The US is doing a lot of (media conflict) right now, we create a lot of divisive content that attacks democratic institutions, so all (Moscow and others) do is grab that content and amplify it.”

In 2016, one of Donald Trump's most repeated concerns was that the election was rigged. That lack of trust in America's democratic institution was also pushed by Russian proxies using fabricated news stories. As President, Trump repeatedly labels the mainstream media "fake news.. the greatest enemy of the people." That not only repeats a phrase used by Stalin and Mao, it echoes the distrust being sown by Russia. The President is saying the press are worse than Moscow's misinformation campaign, even as his hand-picked security officials say that Russia’s effort is ongoing.

Watts published his findings just days before Donald Trump won the Presidential election at the start of November 2016. A few months later, before Trump’s inauguration, the US intelligence community published their wide-ranging assessment. It confirmed what Watts had been seeing.

“We showed unambiguously that Putin had ordered the campaign before the election,” was the stark conclusion from James Clapper, President Barack Obama’s intelligence chief. “Russia used cyber espionage against US political organisations,” he wrote, “publicly disclosing the data they collected through Wikileaks (and others) and the entire operation had begun with attempts to undermine US democracy and demean Hillary Clinton.”

For years, Clapper was viewed with suspicion by the left when he ran security agencies at a time when massive leaks of sensitive information came from Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. Lately, Clapper has become a villain in the eyes of many on the right, especially when selling his book this year. In the book he goes further than the official view that Russia *tried* to influence the election. In his private view, they succeeded.

“Of course the Russians affected the outcome,” said Clapper, an analysis he says he came to independently of the intelligence community. “Surprising even themselves, they swung the election to a Trump win,” Clapper writes, “to suggest otherwise stretches logic, common sense and credulity to breaking point.”

It’s an incendiary claim, but it’s impossible to difficult to discuss in America’s hothouse media environment. Most journalists wouldn’t be able to pick apart the various views on Russia’s efforts, let alone the general public.

The first view is that Moscow tried and failed but didn’t favour either side. That’s the view held by Republicans loyal to Trump, who dominate the Intelligence Committee in the House of Representatives in Congress. The second view is that Russia did specifically try to help Trump. That’s the collective opinion of Senate Republicans on their Intelligence Committee. And the third view is that the Russians judge their efforts a success. That assessment comes from Dan Coates, chosen by President Trump to replace James Clapper as Director of National Intelligence. “There should be no doubt that Russia perceives its past efforts as successful” Coates testified, and the Kremlin, “views the 2018 midterm elections as a potential target for Russian influence operations.”

None of them goes as far as Clapper did. But very few Americans can parse those varying judgements on Russia's efforts. And that is the point, according to Clapper. “Getting its target audience to conclude that ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ are unknowable is the true objective of any dis-information campaign.”

In a judgement that could apply to the daily maelstrom in America’s media, Clapper sums up the difficulty; “If someone actually believes the falsehood that’s a bonus. But the primary objective is to get readers or viewers to throw their hands up and give up on facts.”

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Back in Pittsburgh Joe Maralagno is constantly called on to be a fact checker. “It's one of the things that frustrates me all the time,” Joe tells me. As chair of a local Republican committee he gets contacted constantly about the news. “I see friends post things on Facebook, I get countless emails of things,” he says, “and I have to stop and say, ‘Don’t you know this is wrong?’” He's quick to point out that he is more often calling friends to task than people he disagrees with.

He is not the only one constantly asked to check out outlandish stories. “There's always been wild stories, nutty or fringy, but they were usually in a super market tabloid and you could safely ignore them,” says Peter Baker. He’s talking to me in Washington DC, where he is Bureau Chief for the New York Times.

“Every day, you get emails or tweets from people saying, ‘Well, how about this?’” he says. Baker tells me almost all of them are not worth pursuing; “You pull the thread and eventually get to some place where it’s so distorted from what we actually know. And it's amazing how much that's out there.”

Baker has the air of man who is surfing a terrifying but exciting wave; reporting in the age of President Trump. A neat shirt hangs off his slight frame, and he talks with a can of Coke in hand. There is now so much information pollution, his bureau now employs a full-time fact checker. “We never used to have

that," he says, "there's more efforts to try to wrestle (the news) to the ground and figure out what's real and what's not."

"It feels schizophrenic from the inside too," is how he responds with a laugh, when I say how difficult it is to wrap your mind around America's stark media divide. "Look, the American system was designed for conflicts," Baker says, "now the question is whether anything good is coming out of it anymore."

He knows this is a moment of crisis and hopes it won't get worse. "People were caning each other on the floor of the Congress right before the Civil war. And then, by the way, we had a Civil War! We had the era of McCarthy, we had Vietnam, we had Watergate." In a digital world the corrosive debate means "you can't even stop and think," he says. "The question is whether that can change," he says, "and I'm not really sure, I don't know the answer to that."

Within this growing divide, most Republicans say the President suffers at the whims of the media, left and right. Baker disagrees, even as he sits close to the peak of one outlet that can still dominate a news cycle. "For his goals, and the way he wants to govern, the President is a master at the media," he says. "A lot of people find the way he uses the media to be objectionable, but I think he is doing exactly what he wants. He would love it to be more glowing, but he just wants to be the center of attention and he will do whatever it takes."

Jerry Seib agrees. Technically on the other side of the media's ideological divide, he has been at *The Wall Street Journal* for 40 years. He eases his wiry frame into a chair in his book lined office. Quick with his opinions, they seem well honed by years of deliberation.

"The President manipulates us, and we are manipulated by him every day, he wouldn't disagree with that," Seib says calmly. "He's proud of that, he is a master at controlling the narrative. That's what he does, he uses his Twitter feed."

The offices of both newspapers have the air of establishment organisations. Both are just around the corner from the White House. Both have reporters in wide rows, at well-resourced desks, quietly tapping away on keyboards. The tone is reinforced by framed campaign posters of presidents like Roosevelt, Kennedy, Clinton and Bush. Also lining the walls are framed front pages reporting on events like the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

"It's the most interesting time, it's not the most enjoyable," says Gerry Seib, about the relentless stream of news around the President, "it can be exhausting." For people making the news and for people reading it, "every day is a week, every week a month and every month is a year. That's the Trump era!"

Both papers are thriving. The newspapers are arguably producing better journalism than ever before. Crucially, for the first time in their history, more revenue comes from subscribers than advertisers. That is a big change from the days when a paper may have worried about offending a big advertiser but would shrug off an angry letter from a reader. It's part of a wider trend in the media, where the consumer has a much bigger role.

Seib is glad that's happened, he'd long predicted and hoped there would be what he calls a 'flight to quality.' However, he worries about the digital silos within social media and the news channels, that allow people to only read the news they like.

"They're not actually looking for truth, they stop paying attention to news organizations that tell them things they might not like," he says. "You can either have things the way you wish they were, or you can address reality. You don't have to have the truth, and that led the way naturally enough, to out and out 'fake news'. Here's something that you would really like if it were true, never mind that it's not true, it'll make you happy."

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For some perspective on where America sits right now, I turned to the documentary film maker Ken Burns. He's best known for his moving series on the Civil War, unique for a TV program because it used so few moving images, and relied so much on old photos.

"The media has a great, great tyranny that it imposes in any form," he tells me, "that this moment is the most important moment of all time, and the most complex moment and the most threatening moment."

He's just produced a remarkable ten-part series on the Vietnam War. That conflict produced new divisions in America, and for many is an era that helped define the media's role in public life. Burns spent a decade raising \$US 40 million and crafting a narrative that is fair to Americans both for and against the war. It also includes perspectives from many different sides of the conflict in Vietnam. "What I've tried to do, is be a bulwark against this kind of regressive, binary, uncivil discourse," Burns explains, "we spend far too much of our time saying you, 'there they go again.'"

He cites the parallels between Nixon and Trump as proof the news often echoes the past. Mass demonstrations, a tumultuous White House obsessed with leaks, a President that believes the press is lying about him, stolen documents destabilising the political conversation, and even accusations that a political party reached out to a foreign power during the time of a national election.

In his Vietnam documentary, people who were once vehemently opposed to each other, now find themselves unified by the way Burns deals with issues that once provoked stark division.

"By giving these complicated, nuanced and still at the same time, civil perspectives, you have an opportunity to sort of disarm the tendency towards that superficial binary preoccupation with everything," Burns says. He says the country is obsessed with labelling everyone else except themselves, "red state, blue state, rich, poor, black, white, all the things we do every single day, in order to describe the other, never ourselves."

So many in the media despair when news coverage becomes emotional. Burns suggest a new tack. That media when it's emotional, doesn't need to provoke prejudice or sentimentality, but can actually appeal to "what our founders called, higher emotions." It's something Burns has often aimed for; "the emotion, the improbable calculus, that at times one plus one, which we know in our rational world, always equals two, sometimes equals three. That a thing and the opposite of the thing, can be true at the same time."

Outside the White House one muggy afternoon, on the section of Pennsylvania Avenue shut off to cars. There is a continuous flow of school groups and other tourists like me. Everyone sweats in the Washington summer, and there are a few people wearing Trump's iconic caps bearing the words "Make America Great Again." Many of the cap wearers simply turn away at the sight of my microphone, but others are happy to talk as I ask them if they trust their media. Many are deeply pessimistic, but not all.

"I'm old enough to remember what it was like 50 years ago," Ira Jackson tells me, "and right here, where we're standing, I was demonstrating, and it was a pitched battle against the Vietnam War, this plaza was filled with tear gas." A former public servant turned academic, Ira has just come from a youth leadership conference. "You spend a day with young people in America, black, brown, white, rich, poor, and you're re-energised," he says. "They're idealistic, they're practical and they're energised," he says as people take selfies next to one of the world's most famous buildings.

Just before he strides away, Ira smiles and tells me, "so things have been worse, and things will get better again."

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## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My conclusions are both simple and complex. Audiences need to understand more about the way the news is made, so they can begin to assess the value and veracity of the news reports they consume. America's media is a good way to begin to describe the complexities of this issue, because their divide is bigger, and their media debate is more exaggerated than ours. It's also a salutary lesson in what we do not want to become.

It is as simple as explaining to an audience why the term *fake news* can sometimes shut down conversations. And why it can be a block to crucial conversations that help illuminate the ways that the media operates. Evaluating the news, you receive is a life skill; a task that never really ends. In a digital world, it becomes more complicated. Journalists and program makers need to be more transparent about how they source stories, and how they verify facts.

Audiences need to begin to understand what media literacy might mean. It used to be enough to read a newspaper article and catch some TV news. Now audiences need more education about the track record of the journalist and the outlet. And we urgently need more education about the realm of social media, and news that comes through other applications like WhatsApp.

I have already been discussing my reporting and my conclusions with ABC audiences. I have done four radio interviews; ABC Overnights (national audience), ABC Brisbane Breakfast, ABC Darwin Mornings, and ABC Melbourne Drive. A shorter version of this report has appeared on the ABC website. And I also delivered a version of this report at an ABC organised two-day conference in October, called *Navigating the News*.