

How Trump Is Creating a Propaganda State

The president is taking conservative media to its evolutionary endpoint. Is there any way to stop him?



Joe Raedle/Getty Images; illustration by the New Republic.

-Sarah Jones, TNR, Augus 2017

It was the combination of her voice—a kind of chipper monotone—and the patriotic theme music that gave the lie to the words that were actually coming out of Kayleigh McEnany’s mouth. “Thank you for joining us as we provide the news of the week from Trump Tower here in New York!” she declared on the [August 6 episode of Trump TV](#), against a blue backdrop that looked like a Trump-Pence lawn sign. “Overall, since the president took office, President Trump has created more than one million new jobs, the unemployment rate is at a 16-year low, and consumer confidence is at a 16-year high—all while the Dow Jones continues to break records. President Trump has clearly steered the economy back in the right direction.” Next to her face, a small screen showed various images of Trump speaking to stadiums packed with adoring fans; underneath the images blared the word “Jobs.”

Trump TV was quickly dubbed as [“state TV”](#) by many critics, and for good reason. It is run by Trump’s [daughter-in-law Lara Trump](#), and is broadcast from Trump Tower. It brands itself as

“real news,” a motto that really only makes sense if it stands in contrast to “fake news,” the label that Trump has slapped on virtually every legitimate news organization in this country. And it perpetuates an entirely false narrative that glorifies Donald Trump. Trump, it tells us, has personally created a million jobs and rescued the economy from some ill trajectory. The banal truth is that his administration has been content to ride a tailwind that began many years ago during the administration of Barack Obama.

For now, Trump TV is a small operation, cheaply produced and disseminated through Facebook. But the creation of an official broadcast in which Trump mouthpieces repeat the Trumpian line is just one of several developments that suggest the Trump era has brought conservative media to its evolutionary endpoint: sheer propaganda, stripped even of the veneer of professional journalism that traditional Republican Party organs like Fox News (“Fair and Balanced”) have cultivated since the end of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. It can be seen in the National Rifle Association’s new video channel, where the conservative provocateur [Dana Loesch](#) calls on followers to come together in a “clenched fist of truth” to defeat America’s liberal enemies. It can be seen in the growing Sinclair Broadcast Group, whose viewers are breathlessly updated about threats to the homeland through its [“Terrorism Alert Desk.”](#) And it can be seen in a constellation of right-wing websites—Breitbart, The Federalist, The Daily Caller, Townhall—that traffic in xenophobia, homophobia, racism, and social Darwinism.

Most influentially, it is evident in the way the White House uses the bully pulpit and social media to make direct appeals to supporters who are not looking for a press release, but for a powerful person to voice their own prejudices and fears, their hatreds and ambitions. All of this has contributed to an environment that bears the hallmarks of a budding propaganda state, in which mass media is used to make nakedly emotional appeals to a perpetually inflamed electorate, and marginalized communities (immigrants, people of color, Muslims, trans people) are targeted as national scapegoats. There is not even a pretense of respecting fact, reason, and argument—there is only a fiction told over and over until it becomes real. The lie is not the goal. Rather, propagandists hope to create a world where lies no longer matter.

And conservative propaganda has not been confined to the right-wing echo chamber. McEnany rose to prominence as a contributor to CNN. And a day after her Trump TV debut, she [announced a new job](#), as the spokesperson for the Republican National Committee.

America is not virgin territory for propagandists. In fact, an American helped pioneer its contemporary usage. “The mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale is propaganda, in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine,” Edward Bernays argued in his 1928 book [Propaganda](#). The nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays amassed wealth and influence by popularizing deceptive advertising, and is considered a founding father of the contemporary public relations industry. On the subject of propaganda and its potential saturation, he proved prescient: “With the printing press and the newspaper, the railroad, the telephone, the telegraph, the radio and airplanes, ideas can be spread rapidly and even instantaneously all over the whole of America.”

But where marketing sells a product, propaganda sells a story—specifically one that encompasses an entire value system. As Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, author of [Selling Hitler](#):

[Propaganda and the Nazi Brand](#), told me, “Propaganda is ideological. It’s sell not tell. It’s didactic. We want to actually drive people to a perspective which is pretty much set in stone.”

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Less than a decade after Bernays published his seminal book, propaganda shaped American politics to disturbing effect. In the 1930s, right-wing demagogues like Father Charles Coughlin railed against Jews and communists in newspapers, books, and popular radio broadcasts. Coughlin also singled out Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal; as Harold Meyerson noted [for The American Prospect in 2004](#), Coughlin had supported Roosevelt until the president pushed for U.S. membership on the World Court. Partly as a result of Coughlin’s efforts, fascism took root in the United States. Trump’s infamous slogan, America First, found its original iteration in Charles Lindbergh’s fascist-sympathizing America First Committee.

Roughly 30 million households listened to Coughlin [defend Kristallnacht](#). Meanwhile, the German American Bund staged a pro-Nazi rally in Madison Square Garden that [drew 22,000 attendees](#). Nazis even collaborated with Hollywood tycoons, which resulted in the cancellation of films deemed critical of the Reich; studios agreed to heavily censor other films to guarantee their German distribution. “No doubt the studio bosses accommodated the Nazis because they hoped for a more amenable regime in the future; they were businessmen, and acted as businessmen,” [David Denby wrote](#) in *The New Yorker* in 2013. Swap out Old Hollywood for media executives, replace films with cable news networks and news sites, and the parallel between Lindbergh’s America and ours becomes starker.

Though it is typically produced by governments, propaganda can also be created by non-state actors, including political parties. Roger Ailes understood this a long time ago. Ailes unabashedly embraced propagandistic techniques as a means to secure power for Richard Nixon and the broader Republican Party. As John Cook [reported for Gawker](#) in 2011, a 1970 memo by an anonymous GOP staffer—called “A Plan for Putting the GOP on TV News”—detailed plans for a pro-Republican news channel, with the enthusiastic support of Ailes.

Ailes’s subsequent efforts didn’t pan out, but he didn’t give up on the idea of a semi-official GOP outlet, and later founded Fox News in 1996. We reap the results of his work. “The Republicans have had a highly effective propaganda machine, a propaganda culture which is operated on many levels, and has consolidated their base and consolidated loyalty to them,” O’Shaughnessy said. This phenomenon can now be seen in everything from the Fox News viewer’s belief that [Hillary did Benghazi](#) to the conservative consensus that [Obamacare is collapsing](#).”

But these stories at least take kernels of truth—the Obama administration’s mishandling of its intervention in Libya, the troubles in the individual health care market—and blow them up to conspiratorial proportions. The new propaganda we are seeing is closer to outright fantasy.

Speaking for the NRA, [Dana Loesch insists](#) that Barack Obama and his band of wicked elites tell liberal protesters “to smash windows, burn cars, shut down interstates and airports, bully and

terrorize the law-abiding until the only option left is for the police to do their jobs and stop the madness.” She doesn’t add *with their guns*, but she doesn’t need to. Trump himself sounded a similar theme when discussing the recent violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, claiming, contrary to all available evidence and common sense, that [“many sides”](#) were responsible for a deadly attack by a white supremacist that took the life of a woman protesting his ideology. Trump’s position played into a deeply embedded conservative narrative that left-wing, often minority activists fighting for their rights are just as dangerous as racists seeking to suppress those rights—that the broader struggle for civil rights is violent and illegitimate and hateful.

In this, Trump and Loesch aren’t just trying to deceive their followers. They are reinforcing and expanding on what their supporters *already believe*, which [Jacques Ellul](#), a Christian anarchist who lost a university position for refusing to collaborate with France’s Vichy regime, identified as a staple of propaganda. “All propaganda must respond to a need,” Ellul [wrote](#) in 1965’s [Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes](#). “Whether it be a concrete need (bread, peace, security, work) or a psychological need.”

And, like their historical predecessors, our propagandists rely on highly charged appeals to emotion, not reason, tapping into resentment and anger and fear. All of this plays into the larger phenomenon of [negative partisanship](#), the theory that voters in America are largely motivated by their antipathy toward the other party. The relationship between negative partisanship and propaganda is a bit chicken-and-egg, but they clearly strengthen each other. [According to a CBS poll](#), nearly 70 percent of Republicans agree that “both sides” are to blame for what happened in Charlottesville. Meanwhile, [a full 61 percent](#) of Trump’s supporters say there is nothing he can do that would make them ever disapprove of him.

Nowhere has the appeal to blind belief been more apparent than in the never-ending stream of falsifiable claims and outright lies that pour from the White House, whether it’s from the press secretary’s podium or Trump’s Twitter feed. These statements seek to elevate Trump to glorious, cult-like heights, while painting America as a lawless hell. Former Press Secretary Sean Spicer started his short-lived tenure by claiming the crowd at Trump’s inauguration was the largest in history, when it was obviously not. That was only the beginning: In no particular order, Trump has falsely claimed that three million to five million illegal ballots cost him the popular vote; that the murder rate in this country is the highest it has been in nearly 50 years; that he won the biggest Electoral College victory since Ronald Reagan; and that Barack Obama had tapped his phones during the campaign.

The list goes [on and on](#). These lies are bolstered by a galaxy of conspiracy theorists and conservative media outlets that in turn affect the coverage on more [centralized outlets like Fox News](#), particularly Trump’s chief propagandist Sean Hannity, who is so in the tank that he has [clashed](#) with other Fox News anchors. The conservative Sinclair Broadcast Group, the largest local television station owner in the United States, is only [expected to grow](#) under the lax oversight of Trump’s Federal Communications Commission, which means more households will be treated to familiar storylines that could have come [straight from the White House](#), including that economic growth has become white-hot under Trump and that voter fraud may have cost Trump the popular vote. (Sinclair’s chief political analyst [Boris Epshteyn](#) used to be a White

House staffer.) This is an era in which an entirely false story can result in a [gunman shooting up a pizzeria](#), in the belief that it was the site of a child sex ring run by the Democratic Party.

For this campaign to flourish, its architects must delegitimize actual news outlets with the ability and the reach to expose their lies. This is why “fake news”—originally a description of untrue stories concocted by conservatives that went viral on the internet—was appropriated by conservatives to defend Trump and undermine his critics. Breitbart is particularly fond of the term, labelling Trump’s sparring partners in the press as malicious purveyors of fake news. One recent headline screamed: “[CNN Historian Compares Jim Acosta to Fake News Godfather Dan Rather](#).”

On other sites, like The Daily Caller, the smear is implied rather than explicitly invoked. “[We Film What Really Happened At That Boston Antifa Rally](#),” one headline winks, portraying a recent Boston protest as a seething mess of violent radical leftism.

And of course, the fake news rhetoric is constantly deployed by Trump himself, who shrieks the phrase at all critical coverage:

Trump has repeatedly claimed, falsely, that *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have apologized to their readers for running erroneous stories about Trump. At a rally in Phoenix last week, Trump laid into his preferred whipping boy, leading supporters in a chant of “CNN sucks!” It has become an article of faith on the right that non-right media is malicious propaganda, even as the right itself has been almost entirely overtaken by actual propaganda. But does the mainstream press understand this?

“I think it’s really important to have voices on CNN who are supportive of the Republican nominee,” network CEO Jeff Zucker told *Variety* in 2016 [after hiring Corey Lewandowski, Trump’s former campaign manager](#). “It’s hard to find a lot of those. Our competitors tried to hire him too.” Lewandowski appeared on the network for months as a regular commentator—a conservative foil for liberal guests—despite having worked for a chronic liar and remaining in close contact with the campaign. On November 11 of that year, shortly after Trump’s election, Lewandowski resigned from CNN, the [suspicion being](#) that he wanted to join the administration.

But contra Zucker, there has hardly been a scarcity of pro-Trump pundits on CNN. The network regularly booked McEnany, Trump campaign adviser A.J. Delgado, and Trump’s longtime hatchet man Roger Stone. It hired Jeffrey Lord until he crossed a line by tweeting “[Sieg Heil!](#)” at the head of Media Matters for America.

CNN’s own media reporter, Brian Stelter, recently wrote that the network has around [a dozen pro-Trump commentators](#) on its roster—a decision the network justifies as proof of its objectivity and its respect for conservative viewpoints. And yet what CNN’s audience is treated to is propagandized dreck. Lord once [claimed](#) that Trump’s Muslim ban would have prevented 9/11, even though Saudi Arabia, the home nation of the hijackers, was not included in the ban.

He also made patently absurd statements that only make sense in the fevered context of propaganda, such as, “Think of President Trump as the Martin Luther King of health care.”

CNN is an egregious example, but standard conservative propaganda is published in even the most prestigious news organizations. Despite the fact that the United States boasts [the only major political party](#) in the developed world that denies the existence of climate change, *The New York Times* just hired [a climate denier](#) for its op-ed page. A day after that white supremacist killed a woman in Charlottesville, the *Times* ran an op-ed that perpetuated some of conservative propaganda’s worst tropes, even as it condemned Trump. “As a conservative, I see both the social justice warrior alt-left and the white supremacist alt-right as two sides of the same coin,” [Erick-Woods Erickson wrote](#).

The line between a conservative opinion and straight propaganda has become exceedingly thin, to the point that it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. For media outlets that choose to air or publish these views, there is a danger of normalizing and disseminating that propaganda, as well as giving it the imprimatur of authority. They can become collaborators, unwitting or otherwise, just as Hollywood tycoons once were.

Conservative propaganda succeeds because it taps into real fear and a real sense of alienation. It doesn’t have to explain that fear and alienation with facts, as Trump’s campaign proved. It merely has to mirror and amplify them, creating an alternate universe where hordes of ultra-violent Mexicans are pouring over the border, America’s cities are burning from black-on-black crime, the free press is public enemy number one, and whites everywhere are under siege. People believe these claims because they want to, and because they believe Trump has the answers. [“I alone can fix it,”](#) Trump promised at the Republican National Convention, offering himself as the savior his base was clamoring for.

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But though emotional appeals are powerful, they have limits. It took the calamity of utter defeat to dispel the hold that propaganda had exercised over the citizens of Nazi Germany. America’s conservative propagandists at some point will have a similar encounter with reality. Its efficacy will inevitably erode when the gap between it and the lived experiences of its targets becomes too wide. And there is emerging evidence that this is already happening. Some [Republican voters](#) are starting to desert their hero. [An August 2017 poll](#) produced by Firehouse Strategies showed that only 29 percent of Americans now report a “strongly favorable” opinion of the president. A Gallup poll released the same month showed a significant drop in support in crucial Rust Belt states.

Still, it would be foolish to presume that the Trump supporters of this world will one day wake up, see the light, and start voting for Democrats. In terms of reaching conservatives where they live, Democrats could learn a thing or two from Republicans—without pandering to the prejudices that the party promotes. As Ellul argued, “The mechanism used [in propaganda] is to slip from the facts, which would demand factual judgement, to moral terrain and ethical judgement.” In a sense, the best way to fight propaganda is to compete with it on its own territory. Voters need a message that speaks to their fears without deploying Trump’s racism and

sexism. A counter-propaganda campaign must pair facts and reason with a competing version of reality: an ideology, defined by bold moral claims.

“The liberal left have got to learn to mobilize emotion, to actually eschew rationality,” O’Shaughnessy asserted. “You have to offer people a vision.” The point isn’t to fight lies with lies, but to admit that truth is political. The Democratic Party needs a compelling vision of its own, something that goes beyond technocratic competence and incremental progress and means-tested welfare. It needs a cogent explanation and remedy for the inequalities of the world. It needs to speak in terms of power and justice.

The alternative is to allow conservative propaganda to fester. An impenetrable bloc of voters will continue to blame Latinos for their woes, to ignore basic facts that are staring them in the face, to trumpet American exceptionalism while neo-Nazis roam the streets, and to look to a strongman in their image to save them. We will have an unfree country, ruled by fear, and if we do not act we will bear some of the blame.