

# Consider the Source

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Since the 2016 Presidential election, I've written numerous commentaries about "Fake News," a term that has come into common usage in the vocabulary of popular American discourse. Basically, the term is used by people (all the way from the President down through ordinary citizens) to decry and excoriate any news they dislike, don't believe, or with which they simply disagree. The crude connotation of the epithet is that the rejected news item is wholly false, literally made up out of whole cloth. And that may at times be true, especially in instances of outrageous or questionable online posts and videos appearing in social media or the hysterical ranting of the alt-Right, which apparently feels that damn near everything is a conspiracy designed to deceive a gullible public.

More often, however, the accusation of Fake News really means the opinion (and usually belief) that a particular news item is slanted or biased, based on the agenda of the reporting agency. In other words, Fake News is typically an allegation of intentional distortion rather than outright fiction.

Either way, the upshot is that Fake News is untrustworthy.

Reporting from the mainstream media is frequently a target of denunciation for being Fake. This includes news media on the right, such as Fox News and Sinclair's armada of television and radio stations, and the center-left, such as The New York Times and Washington Post in print journalism and CNN, MSNBC, and PBS in televised journalism (as well as their corresponding online sites).

Is Fake News a recent phenomenon? In its current form, perhaps, but slanted or biased news has a long and inglorious history in America.

Yellow tabloid journalism effectively provoked the invasion of Cuba in 1898 after Hearst newspapers beat the drums of war with a series of purely concocted accounts of Spanish responsibility for the explosion and sinking of the USS Maine, resulting in widespread patriotic outrage among Americans, and giving the U.S. a convenient excuse to wage what then Secretary of State John Hay described as "a splendid little war."

In 1964, an incident involving U.S. and North Vietnamese military ships in the Gulf of Tonkin was inaccurately claimed to be an unprovoked North Vietnamese

attack by American Intelligence Services (who were conducting covert military operations in the Gulf and wanted to keep those activities secret), which was then dutifully reported by the popular news media. That led very quickly to Congressional passage by an almost unanimous vote of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which flung wide open the door to escalation of American military involvement in Vietnam and the tragedy it would become.

In the post 9-11 era, during the run-up to the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, Fake News really took off. Remember yellow cake from Niger? Aluminum tubes? Saddam's hidden stash of weapons of mass destruction? Dick Cheney's endless lies? Colin Powell's infamous presentation at the U.N.? Throughout 2002, the mainstream media in America was complicit in supporting and cheerleading for the invasion. This included The New York Times, CNN, MSNBC, and PBS.

My trust in the mainstream media had been steadily decreasing over my adulthood, but the astonishing and unconscionable performance of the vaunted Fourth Estate in 2002 was a dagger to the heart of whatever naïve faith remained in me. That was the last straw. I felt certain that the invasion of Iraq was an act of incredible hubris, arrogance, and moral blindness, and that it would end up as a disaster and quite possibly the cause of America's downfall. 15 years later, my fears seem to have been vindicated.

Throughout the four decades since Vietnam, I've learned the wisdom of applying one golden rule to help me determine the trustworthiness of all information, in whatever form I get it, whether interpersonal or social, and particularly including news reporting from both the mainstream and alternative media: **Consider the Source.**

The general definition of that phrase is to take seriously only opinions offered by people who are well informed, reliable, and trustworthy. I use it a little differently, however, as an aid in assessing the likely veracity (or lack) of *all* information — opinions, stories, facts, whatever — by trying to understand the perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs held wherever the information originates, whether it comes directly from another person, or indirectly, from an organization or institution.

When humans lived in small, kinship-based groups, determining the difference between a person who was trustworthy (a truth-teller) and one who was full of crap (a fool or liar) was fairly straightforward. Not infallible, of course, since human beings can be both deceptive and easily deceived. Over time, however, the kinship group learned about the character of each individual, and personal reputations were common knowledge, shared by all members of the clan.

Now we live in a mass society. We interact with strangers every day, and people we don't know routinely impact our lives. Who to believe and who not to believe is an important consideration and not always easy to judge. Gaining the trust of

others is now a paramount concern throughout society. Symbols of authority and respectability become critical: diplomas and certifications, comportment, clothing, language, and all the many other ways, both essential and superficial, which affect how humans size up each other.

In reference to the news that's reported and interpreted by the media, "consider the source" means (for me) understanding the inherent cultural lean and political bias of the organization behind the reporting — in short, the overall worldview.

What all the mainstream media outlets share is that they are products of large corporations. With only one exception — PBS — the rest are run by for-profit organizations that participate in the beehive of American business, but even PBS is beholden to wealthy donors (including David Koch of the Koch brothers). That tells me a lot right there. All of them peddle the questionable authority of corporate-approved narratives. To one degree or another, they all espouse the worldview of the American Empire.

Consider MSNBC. It's cultural lean is supposedly progressive, but that's no longer a dependable yardstick for trustworthiness. When I turn on MSNBC on cable TV, I know what I'm going to get: *TrumpTrumpTrump* and *RussiaRussiaRussia*. That's the worldview of MSNBC's corporate parent. Is the news presented by the network fake? No, I trust that most of what's reported has a solid basis in fact and comes from reputable journalists. It's not the news *per se* but the worldview that bothers me, namely, that what's wrong with America could be easily fixed if only we'd get rid of Trump. I don't believe that for a second.

If I want to know how Noam Chomsky or Chris Hedges weighs in on a given news event (and I do), I know going in that I will not see either of them on an MSNBC panel of "experts." Not ever. (In fairness, people such as Chomsky and Hedges are not creatures of the 24-hour daily news cycle; their views are offered from a longer perspective.) What I will see on those MSNBC or CNN panels, besides journalists, is an array of "authorities" from government (mainly former appointees), the national security state (mainly former operatives), and the military (mainly retired generals). Do I think that those people are liars? No, but they all willingly served the Empire and believe in it, so I have to interpret and qualify everything they say in those terms.

In contrast to the predictability of the mainstream news, the "alternative" press is all over the map. Strange bedfellows abound, as if old allegiances had been scrambled in a kind of crazy-quilt 52-card-pickup. Left and right are no longer dependable yardsticks for interpreting information. I'm not so sure that the clearer and more obvious distinctions of liberal-conservative from an earlier era were ever truly reliable, but that simplicity is definitely gone, fractured into a thousand shards by an endless array of conspiracy theories. "False flag" events are now espoused with an almost religious fervor by increasing numbers of people.

I accept that those in power are constantly planning, scheming, and making deals behind the scenes — some of which qualify as plots — but what worries me about too many conspiracy theories is the implied belief on the part of their proponents that the conspirators possess an almost supernatural competence. I don't argue with conspiracy advocates, however, because my experience suggests that such beliefs are not the result of rational deliberation. Reason is fruitless against passion.

Considering the source is not, of course, fail-safe. Often we don't know if a given source is reliable or trustworthy. We can only guess by patterns of association. And even when we conclude that a source has gold-plated bonafides, some possibility exists that the information is nonetheless incorrect. Beyond that, even accurate information from reliable sources is open to our own distortions of interpretation. For human beings, truth is notoriously slippery. How many of my own assumptions and beliefs have led me down a primrose path into illusion or self-deception? Some certainly, and perhaps more than I realize.

Still, "Consider the Source" remains a useful tool, a filter through which the veracity of information may be more reliably assessed. It can help us navigate through the muddy waters of uncertainty, ambivalence, and misinformation.