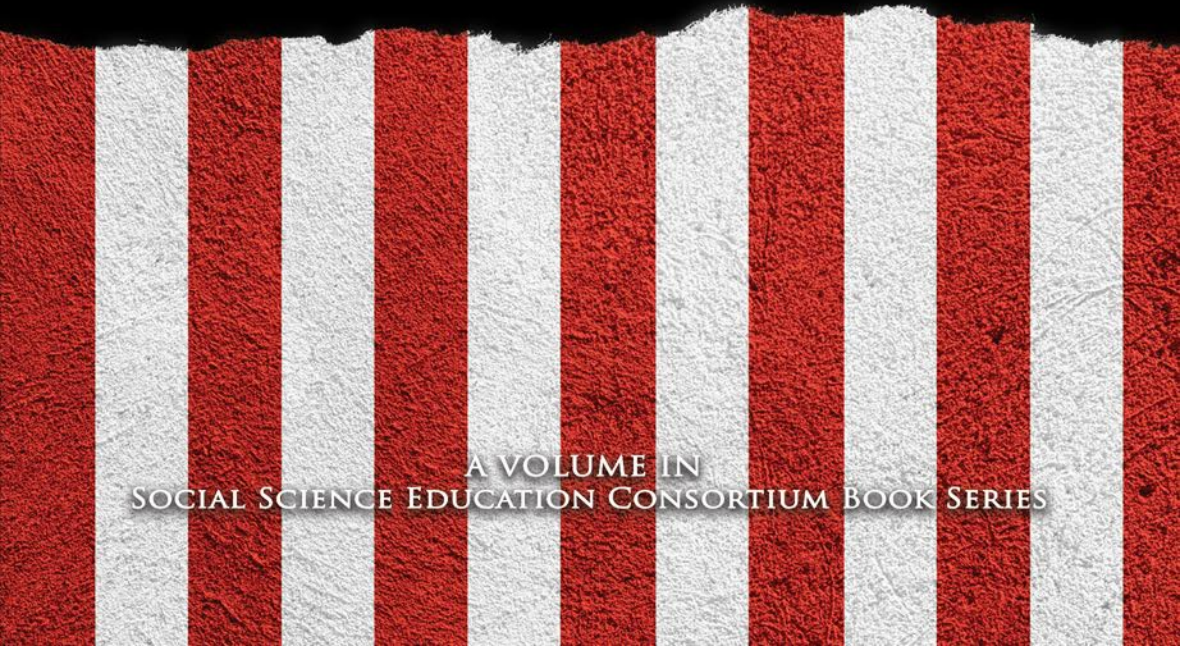




THE DIVIDE WITHIN

**INTERSECTIONS OF REALITIES,
FACTS, THEORIES, AND PRACTICES**

**Tina L. Heafner, Laura K. Handler,
& Tracy C. Rock, Editors**



A VOLUME IN
SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION CONSORTIUM BOOK SERIES

The Divide Within

**Intersections of Realities, Facts,
Theories, and Practices**

A Volume in
Social Science Education Consortium Book Series

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The Divide Within: Intersections of Realities,

Facts, Theories, and Practices (2021),

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Democracy at a Crossroads: Reconceptualizing Socio-Political Issues

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**Tina L. Heafner, Laura K. Handler,
and Tracy C. Rock**
University of North Carolina at Charlotte



Information Age Publishing, Inc.
Charlotte, North Carolina • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP data for this book can be found on the Library of Congress website:
<http://www.loc.gov/index.html>

Paperback: 978-1-64802-300-2

Hardcover: 978-1-64802-301-9

E-Book: 978-1-64802-302-6

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Printed in the United States of America.

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INTRODUCTION

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Nothing is more wonderful than being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

I think the country has to find out what it means by freedom. Freedom is a very dangerous thing. Anything else is disastrous. But freedom is dangerous. You've got to be taught that your life is in your hands.

—James Baldwin

Globalization, modernization, and technologization have brought rapid social and economic change while also increasing diversity of democratic societies. Plurality of democracy, once viewed as a progressive ideology, has been met in more recent years by the movement of identity politics to the margins of society. Although social movements demanding recognition on the part of groups that were once invisible to mainstream society have brought attention to systemic inequities, prejudice, and discriminatory policies, other groups feeling a loss of status and a sense of displacement have pushed back with counterclaims and protests. These conflicting narratives have fractured society and segmented the populace along narrowly defined identities creating a new era of democracy and isolationism.

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Today in the United States and elsewhere we see the troubling effects of increasingly polarized political discourse: amplified gridlock within government, the politicization and fragmentation of economic and social life, and the suppression of the spread of information and mutual learning across ideological lines. The sociopolitical climate in America is characterized by skepticism, hostility, distrust, claims of fake news, and unwavering opposition. Cavernous divisions among Americans are revealed in rhetoric surrounding controversial issues such as inequality, gun control, and immigration. Moreover, divisions about such issues have become increasingly aligned with partisan identities in recent years and exacerbated by social media isolationist practices. The *divide within* our nation has shifted the narrative of democracy from promoting the common good to protecting the interests of like-minded factions and the preservation of power and privilege.

Most recently, COVID-19 forced us to chart new paths of physical distancing and delivering remote education while simultaneously revealing the cavernous socioeconomic and racial divisions in American society. Pandemics not only affect individuals; they change the world. Disease outbreaks have shaped politics, crushed revolutions, and entrenched racial and economic discrimination. Pandemics have altered societies, affecting personal relationships, the work of artists and intellectuals, and the man-made and natural environments. Stretching across centuries and continents, social, political, and economic structures, population settlement patterns, and the use of natural and human resources have also allowed diseases to flourish. Pandemics are not random events that afflict societies capriciously and without warning; on the contrary, every society produces its own vulnerabilities. To study them is to understand a society's structure, its standard of living, its political and economic priorities, its inequities and pretense. While COVID-19 reveals the tenacity, perseverance, selflessness, and kindness of people, it also serves as a mirror to all things that society has not come to terms with. It has made transparent the digital access divide in America, elevated racial tensions, revealed socioeconomic and racial inequalities, and exacerbated political divisions.

Helping people contextualize the significance of the outbreak of COVID-19 is both critical and timely as communities face unprecedented disruptions with far reaching effects. We are in the midst of an economic recession due to the pandemic-related shutdown. Situating government responses to COVID-19 in historic, geographic, global and economic perspectives will deepen students' understanding of their lived experiences and enhance their civic reasoning skills. But it is also necessary for us to examine more deeply structural inequalities pandemics reveal about society. Although the effects of COVID-19 have been felt by all, struggles and

hardships continue to be disproportionately experienced among racial groups.

This current pandemic hits as our country also reaches an unprecedented level of demographic diversity. In 2013, the nation hit a tipping point, where for the first time in history most of the infants born were members of minoritized groups. In 2014 the number of White students fell below 50%, marking this year as the first majority-minority enrollment in U.S. public schools (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). By 2043, the nation is projected to become majority-minority (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). The demographic landscape continues to shift as the racial and ethnic composition is fueled by metropolitan urbanization. More students are living in poverty and in segregated neighborhoods, particularly the country's rapidly growing Latinx school-aged population. For the first time in at least 50 years, a majority of public school students across the country are considered low wealth (Mordechay & Orfield, 2017).

These contexts magnify tensions and challenge the essence of our democracy. The brutal deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor once again laid bare the racist and inequitable treatment of Black people in America. Ensuing protests around the world have sparked a critical reexamination of history and the reverberating, perpetuating effects of systemic racism throughout structures of society. Seemingly overnight, Confederate statues topple in argument of historical atrocities that should not be memorialized, and Juneteenth rises in prominence in recognition of historical events that deserve national celebration of independence and freedom. Despite COVID-19, civic activism persists through mask-wearing protests, arts-inspired murals, and nonstop technology-driven media, hashtags, and webinars.

As social scientists committed to critical inquiry as well as human rights and democratic governance, we must challenge and push against societal structures and curriculum as a wary defense of the status quo. All of this is possible, but none of it is automatic. If we want democracy, we have to demand it, and we have to be able to educate children who will make and remake it. Democracy requires continuous effort to thrive, and a constant willingness to broaden and deepen the application of its principles. The future of democracy depends on our ability to show that it is more than a set of bare-minimum defenses against the worst abuses of authoritarian leaders and divisions within democracies that fracture the structures intended to preserve the promise of liberty. Democracy offers a guarantee of the freedom to choose and live out one's own destiny; it is the promise of unalienable rights for all.

When the voices of democracy are silenced, freedom becomes a hollow concept. No man or woman should be sentenced to the shadows of silence.

— Al Neuharth

* * *

In recent decades, researchers focused attention on studying the social, geographic, political, and technological polarization in the United States. Trends manifest in myriad ways, both in politics and in everyday life, and expose the divergence between urban and rural communities, the opportunities afforded the wealthy and the impoverished, the lived experiences of various racial groups, and countless other divides among us. These inquiries also suggest that causes and effects of identity politics and polarization are too complicated to be construed as simple dichotomies and too complex to be studied within the confines of a single discipline. The exploration of such divides, therefore, requires participation and collaboration from scholars in many different fields, particularly those working in the social sciences.

The Social Science Education Consortium recognizes this integrated nature of the social sciences and the importance of education at this societal impasse. In July 2019, the organization hosted its annual conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, to bring together scholars and educators to grapple with these challenging inquiries and interdisciplinary analyses, both at a broad, national level, and also in a more nuanced, local level. Gathering in the heart of the New South, participants collaboratively engaged in these discussions on a walking tour led by a local historian, while visiting museum exhibits such as “K[no]w Justice, K[no]w Peace”, and during a panel presentation of local social scientists. This book seeks to leverage the research capacity of participants and the broader social science community to engage dialogue concerning *the divide within* and the intersections of realities, facts, theories, and practices in social science education.

Chapters in *The Divide Within: Intersections of Realities, Facts, Theories, and Practices* consider the following questions:

- In a polarized political climate characterized by skepticism, hostility, and claims of fake news, what common ground can be found in the social sciences to help bridge the *divide within* our nation and the broader global society?
- Considering the intersections among realities, facts and theories within the social sciences as well as within urban and rural educa-

tion studies, what are solution-based practices toward mending the effects of a fractured and polarized society?

- How do urban and rural districts compare in terms of equity, sustaining educational issues, teaching staff, social mobility, et cetera? What are the implications for education and for our nation?
- In what ways may social science education promote theory and pedagogy to drive unity?

ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

The book begins with a broad scope in which to view various aspects of sociopolitical fractures within our nation. From the first chapter, author Wayne Journell initiates an analysis of the broader structures and characteristics of our society that serve as mechanisms for deepening divides among public thought. Through the disciplinary perspectives of psychology and sociology, he presents the contemporary contexts that allow fake news to thrive and proposes implications for educators in order to minimize threats to our democracy. Maintaining a big-picture lens yet shifting focus to the sector of public education, in Chapter 2 Laura Handler and Tracy Rock examine educational policy and initiatives that contribute to the inequitable and segregative environment of schools, along with the divisive rhetoric that influences perceptions of students. Danny Yonto likewise focuses on policy and socioeconomic disparities, yet his work in Chapter 3 is set in the rural contexts of North Carolina. He offers the World Café as a collaborative tool for proposing integrative solutions to community challenges related to education, public health, housing, and transportation.

Shifting focus to teachers and teaching, researchers Jessica Norwood, Tina Heafner, and Paul Fitchett then follow in Chapter 4 with a quantitative analysis comparing teacher characteristics in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Looking more closely at a national data set, authors suggest ways that cultural and political differences between urban and rural populations affect teaching and learning experiences. Yvonna Hines, Tina Heafner, and Jeanneine Jones continue the focus on teacher characteristics and influences on students in Chapter 5 by examining the discipline practices in a suburban high school. They find that Black students are disproportionately represented in discipline referrals and are over-represented in in- and out-of-school suspensions, and they pose important implications that the demographic divide between teachers and students carries for ensuring equity in education. To then round out this section, Dean Vesperman and Jill Leet-Otley bring attention to teacher preparation in Chapter 6. Through a mixed-methods study, the authors

detail the transformations of two preservice teachers grappling with concepts of Whiteness, racism, and antiracist teaching, contributing to much-needed understanding of educators' racial identity development.

The five subsequent chapters delve into curriculum and raise important considerations for designing learning experiences for students. In Chapter 7, Wade Morris and Chara Bohan illuminate the interplay of textbooks, statues, and politics in shaping conceptions of history. Through a case study of the Confederate icon John B. Gordon in Georgia, the authors utilize data from a content analysis of Southern history books to demonstrate how combined societal structures perpetuate a legacy of White supremacy. Amy Allen takes a close look at one school's service-learning program in the following chapter, cautioning that without critical reflection, students' experiences could have unintended consequences in promoting a White savior mentality. The authors of Chapter 9, Toni Rochester, Tina Heafner, and Kristen Beach, address learning disparities in history by analyzing pedagogical methods of literacy in middle school. They present the benefits of using discipline-specific reading strategies to support students' development of content knowledge as well as reading comprehension. Finally, the following two chapters encourage international perspectives in curricular approaches. In Chapter 10, Amanda Casto and Greg Wiggan examine the practices and policies of multicultural education established in the Republic of Korea to suggest changes in the ways the United States advances equity and inclusion among its demographically diverse students. In Chapter 11, Portia York, also writing with Greg Wiggan, advocates for arts integration, looking to Canada for an example of the policy and curricular reform that promotes creativity and critical thinking for students of all backgrounds.

As a bookend to this volume, we offer a focus on schools. Jim Davis's chapter uses the social science lens of economics to analyze the perilous state of American democracy. In Chapter 12 the author offers a deep dive into what he argues is one of the most pressing injustices facing the United States: the growing economic inequality manifested through gaps in income and wealth. First providing a solid explanation of economic principles and concepts, he then helps the reader understand how this discipline informs policy and inevitably shapes society. Asserting economic inequality as a looming threat to American democracy, Davis urges citizens to weigh several proposed courses of action in order to once again establish a government and society that meets the needs of its members. In the concluding chapter, Bettie Ray Butler provides recommendations for how to enact restorative justice in schools as a means to bridge the divide between data and solutions. The author provides a theoretical framework for an epistemological change in school discipline practices as a response to the disproportionality of discipline referrals for students of

color. Chapter 13 emphasizes the importance of leveraging research to correct injustice and implicit bias in schools. Restorative justice according to the author bridges racialized divides within our society.

As editors, we wish to thank all contributors for their deep level of engagement with content for this book. Additionally, we are grateful for the support of the Social Science Education Consortium, particularly its leaders of Charlie White, Executive Director, and Michael Berson, President. Moving forward, we hope this book serves to inform social scientists, educators, and global citizens alike of the deep complexities of our world. Perhaps more importantly, we hope this book initiates critical conversations and steers positive directions toward equitable solutions that unify the people who walk this world together.

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CHAPTER 1

EXACERBATING EXISTING DIVIDES

Fake News, Desire, and Partisanship

Wayne Journell

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ABSTRACT

The term “fake news” has become part of the cultural lexicon in recent years, with many arguing that it poses a serious threat to democracy. This chapter complicates that concern a bit by making the argument that fake news is a byproduct of existing political and social divides that is effective only because of aspects of the human condition. The chapter first defines various types of fake news before discussing the psychosocial processes of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias that allow fake news to be believed and shared. The chapter concludes by briefly describing the polarized and partisan environment found in the United States, particularly on social media, that provides a context in which fake news can thrive.

For the past decade, one of the most watched television shows in the United States has been *The Walking Dead*, a science fiction drama about a

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zombie apocalypse. A casual observer of the show might identify the zombies as the catalyst for the destruction of humankind; however, a more sophisticated analysis would recognize that the true monsters are the human survivors. Although the zombies continually make the dire situation the survivors find themselves in worse, the true obstacles to survival are aspects of the human condition that were present well before the start of the apocalypse (Keetly, 2014).

A similar premise can be applied to the phenomenon of fake news. Since President Trump first used those words as a way to disparage media outlets that are critical of him, there has been an obsession about “fake news” negatively impacting U.S. democracy. Certainly, the widespread dissemination of false information, made easier than ever before due to social media, has the potential to affect our political system, perhaps best illustrated by Russian attempts to influence the 2016 presidential election. Yet, much like the zombies in *The Walking Dead*, fake news only exacerbates divides and dispositions that already exist, creating a context in which misinformation can both thrive and be civically disruptive.

This reality creates challenges for civic education. Media literacy has long been a staple of quality social studies instruction, and there has been a renewed interest within the field in light of the 2016 election and the increasing influence of social media on Americans’ daily lives (e.g., McGrew et al., 2018; National Council for the Social Studies, 2016, 2019). While it is undoubtedly important to help students identify aspects of fraudulent information online, media literacy strategies alone will not combat the influence of fake news. Given that fake news is a symptom of existing political divides and not a cause, instructional efforts seeking to reduce the effects of fake news must take a comprehensive view that focuses on the psychosocial reasons why fake news works (Journell, 2019).

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between fake news and the psychosocial practices of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, which are fueled by a desire for reality to fit within one’s preconceived worldview. I begin by defining various types of fake news, including the version that Trump has popularized in recent years. Then, I explain how the current political and social context in the United States has created an environment that allows fake news to thrive. Although this chapter does not offer specific instructional recommendations, it is my hope that readers can apply aspects of this discussion to their specific classroom context.¹

DEFINING FAKE NEWS

On the surface, defining fake news seems like it should be easy: information that can be determined to be verifiably false. However, as Garrett (2019) has noted, the lines between fact and fiction are not always clear,

particularly when politicians and other pundits regularly use the term fake news to discredit factual information. Understanding this ambiguity is essential to understanding the proliferation and effectiveness of fake news; therefore, in the remainder of this section, I will outline the various definitions of “fake news” in the current U.S. political context.

Actual Fake News

At one end of the spectrum are outlets that purposefully peddle factually incorrect information in the spirit of comedy or satire. Outlets such as *The Onion* or *The Babylon Bee* do not consider themselves news outlets; rather, they use information from actual news outlets as fodder for their content. The “nightly news” segment on *Saturday Night Live* would also fall into this category. Typically, these types of outlets are not of concern when discussing the civic ramifications of fake news since most people recognize them for what they are. However, it is worth noting that not all satire/comedy outlets are transparent about their intentions. Nowhere on *The Onion*’s homepage, for example, does it explicitly note that its content is satirical in nature. Readers must be “in the know,” and it is certainly possible that unwitting social media users may incorrectly consume and share *Onion* articles under the premise that they are factual.

Further along the spectrum are outlets that blend factual content with comedy. Television shows like *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and any number of late night talk shows fall into this category. These shows often contain excerpts from news sources, sound bites and other primary source clips, and interviews with politicians or pundits. Moreover, many of these shows engage in extensive research to ensure the factual accuracy of the news content they present (Friedman, 2018). As a result, research has shown such outlets to be sources of accurate, albeit biased, information that often offer more substance than traditional nightly news programs (Baym, 2009), to the point that some scholars have argued that they even have pedagogical potential (Garrett & Schmeichel, 2012; Journell, 2017). However, the stars of these shows uniformly deny being journalists (Steinberg, 2018), and many of the punchlines that emanate from facts either stretch the truth or present outright false information. As with the satirical outlets, these comedic news shows are not typically the targets of fake news accusations because most viewers are in on the joke.

The type of actual fake news that represents a true danger to democracy is misinformation being presented as fact without the subtext of satire or comedy. The most infamous example of this type of fake news is the Russian attempt to influence the 2016 presidential election. The over



Figure 1.1.

3,000 Facebook advertisements, 80,000 Facebook posts on Russian-created pages, and 130,000 tweets (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, n.d.) made by Russian operatives during the 2016 election campaign used a variety of techniques, with much of them relying on factually inaccurate information.² Figure 1.1 offers an example of one of their more simplistic efforts, a Photoshopped picture of actor/comedian Aziz Ansari encouraging Democratic voters to cast their ballot via a Twitter hashtag on election day (Wagner, 2017).³

Of greater concern is fake news that is harder to debunk. Many of the Russian social media efforts contained a mixture of accurate and inaccurate information. Figure 1.2 provides an illustrative example of such a post.

Although the post did not cite any sources for the “69 percent disapproval rate among all veterans” statistic, available data show that veterans disapproved of Clinton and voted for Trump at a rate in the ballpark of what was stated in the post (CNN, 2016; Confessore, 2016). Also, in 2015, Clinton stated on *The Rachel Maddow Show* that delays in treatment times at Veterans Affairs hospitals were not as widespread as commonly thought, which led to calls for her to apologize to veterans by notable Republicans, including John McCain (Richardson, 2015). However, the last sentence of the post calling for the armed forces to be removed from Clinton’s control should she win the presidency in accordance with “amendments to the Constitution” is demonstratively false. There are no

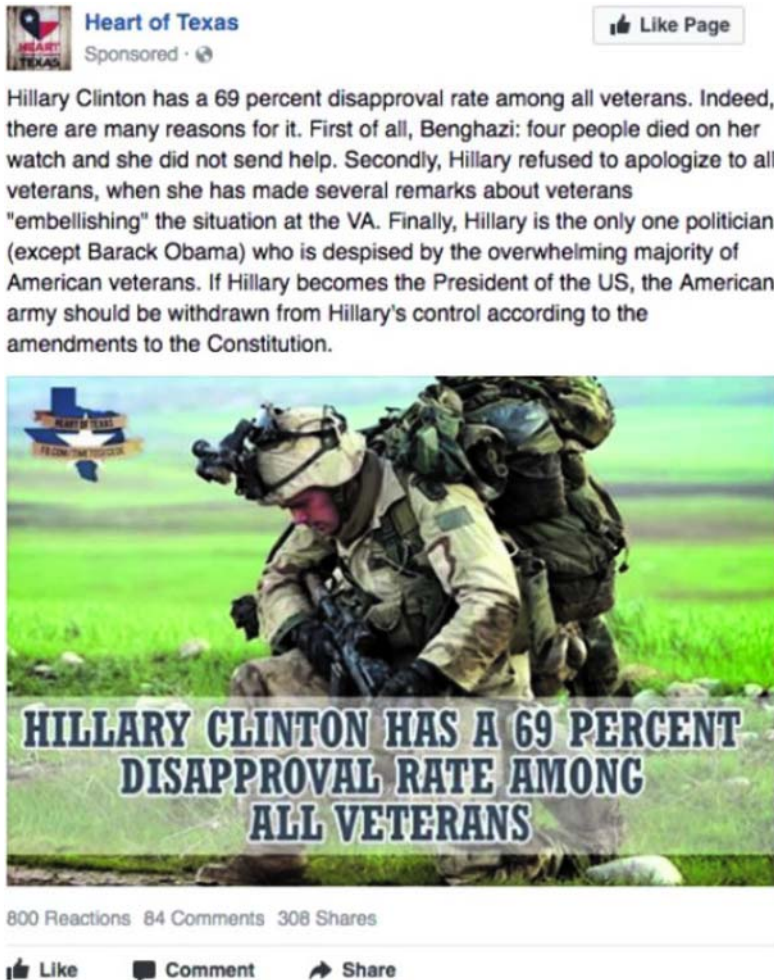


Figure 1.2.

Constitutional amendments that allow for the removal of the president's role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces while in office.

Of course, the Russians are far from the only source of fake news on the Internet. It takes minimal technological skill to create memes, posts, or tweets that have the potential to reach thousands of people, and social media companies offer few safeguards to prevent the proliferation of false information online. Figure 3 shows a post created by a random social media user that went viral in 2018 and was designed to protest the Trump

No this isn't a prison. This is a kids concentration camp in the US.



Figure 1.3.

administration's policy of separating children from their families as they tried to enter the country at the Mexican border. It was spread widely throughout various liberal social media outlets (on one Facebook group, "Millennials for Bernie," it was shared over 9,000 times); however, the photo used in the post was from a 2014 article documenting the conditions of a detention center for unaccompanied minors entering the country illegally during the Obama administration (Kiefer, 2014; Mikkelsen, 2018).

The deregulation of social media has also allowed organizations to disseminate false information under the guise of legitimate news. Extremist "news" outlets have thrived on social media. While these outlets occasionally publish factually accurate stories, they also peddle conspiracy theories and other forms of actual fake news to promote their ideological agendas.

A perfect example is *InfoWars*, an outlet run by far-right conspiracy theorist, Alex Jones. Started in 1999, the popularity of *InfoWars* exploded with the rise of social media, leading to a following that numbers in the millions (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). Over the years, *InfoWars* has championed a number of seemingly asinine theories that have been shared across social media, including (Hanna, 2017; Madsen, 2016; Quigley, 2017):

- The U.S. government orchestrated the 9/11 attacks, the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.
- Former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was murdered.
- Barack Obama is the global head of Al-Qaeda.
- The U.S. government is using juice boxes and city-controlled water to turn people gay.

It is impossible to quantify the impact *InfoWars* has had on the U.S. political landscape; however, it was influential enough for then-candidate Trump to appear on Jones's radio show in 2015 and praise the host's "amazing" reputation (Bradner, 2015, para. 2). Although *InfoWars* has recently been banned by Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Youtube, and Instagram in their collective crackdown on far-right and anti-Semitic accounts (Lorenz, 2019),⁴ the *InfoWars* website and Jones's show are still running strong, and the content they produce can still be used as fodder for user-created fake news.

InfoWars is but one of many pseudo-news organizations that regularly disseminate false, misleading, or heavily biased information on social media. The question becomes, then, why are they believed in lieu of traditional media outlets that have built reputations for delivering accurate information? The answer is that many people seek "news" that affirms what they believe and, conversely, have a predisposition to question or dismiss information that contradicts their worldviews, an aspect of the human condition that Trump has tapped into with his use of the term fake news.

Trump's Version of Fake News

When Trump and his surrogates make claims of fake news, they are conflating accuracy with bias. As Garrett (2019) noted, when a media outlet publishes information that is critical or presents the administration in a negative light, Trump weaponizes the term fake news as a way to dismiss

the premise of the story. Whether the story is factually accurate is immaterial; Trump has used the term to discredit stories that can be corroborated by visual or audio evidence (e.g., Blake, 2018; Davis & Rosenberg, 2017; Smith, 2019).

While we can lament the fact that Trump's weaponizing of the term fake news has hastened our descent into a post-truth society (Journell, 2018), there is no question that it has worked as a political tactic. Numerous surveys have shown that Americans' distrust of the mainstream media is at unprecedented levels, particularly among Republicans (e.g., Fischer, 2018; Gallup, 2018; Mitchell & Barthell, 2017), and this rhetoric is amplified on social media (Al-Rawi, 2019). By making the press the enemy, Trump has helped ensure that his political base remains solidified regardless of what facts get reported. If anything, it seems as though fact-based reporting that is critical of Trump only seems to make his supporters more passionate (Peters, 2018).

The civic ramification of this villainification of the mainstream media is that people are more prone to consume and share actual fake news. When basic facts become questioned, it is easy for consumers of media to take the position that what constitutes factual material lies in the eye of the beholder. As a result, they choose to consume what feels "right" without any sense of urgency to ensure whether the media they consume and share is accurate.

In short, Trump's weaponizing of fake news has given license for people to engage in aspects of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, psychosocial processes to which humans are naturally prone. In the next section, I will discuss these psychosocial processes in greater detail and make the argument that they are the true reasons for the civic crisis we find ourselves in. Trump, social media, and actual fake news have only served to amplify aspects of the human condition in which we all, to varying degrees, find ourselves participating.

MOTIVATED REASONING AND CONFIRMATION BIAS

Imagine if it were being widely shared on social media that actor Tom Hanks, known for iconic roles such as Forest Gump, had been implicated in a child sex ring being operated out of a Washington, DC, pizza restaurant. Most people would likely scoff at the premise of the story and assume it had been conjured up by the editors of *The National Enquirer* so that they would have material to include alongside stories about Elvis Presley sightings and alien abductions.

Yet, when that same story was promulgated about Hillary Clinton and members of her campaign staff during the 2016 election, it went viral

among the alt-right recesses of the Internet. People believed the story to the point that the owner of the pizzeria at the center of the fictitious crime received death threats on a regular basis, and a gunman who had been inspired by *InfoWars* videos opened fire in the restaurant in an attempt to “rescue” the nonexistent children being held captive there (Helm, 2017; Ortiz, 2017). Over 3 years after the election, people still believe and circulate the story, now known colloquially as “pizzagate,” as evidenced by the attempted arson of the infamous pizzeria in early 2019 (Zadrozny, 2019).

The reason why certain groups of people were quick to believe a seemingly ridiculous story about Hillary Clinton, and why they likely would not have believed a similar story about Tom Hanks, can be explained by two closely related psychosocial concepts: *motivated reasoning* and *confirmation bias*. Both concepts involve individuals’ propensity to rationalize new information in ways that reconcile with existing worldviews (Dusso & Kennedy, 2015; Nickerson, 1998; Taber & Lodge, 2016). In short, researchers have found that people actively seek out sources of information that reinforce existing beliefs while avoiding sources that may challenge preconceived worldviews. Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias also make people more likely to uncritically accept false information that fits within their worldview and dismiss factual information that challenges existing understandings (Dusso & Kennedy, 2015). What makes these psychosocial processes particularly insidious and difficult to combat is the fact that most people engage in them unwittingly (Taber & Lodge, 2016).

The idea that Clinton was part of a child sex ring fit within the narrative that Republicans had developed about her and her husband over the previous 25 years. What seems like a preposterous story to most of us makes perfect sense to someone immersed in a culture that has spent the past two decades describing the Clintons as immoral people who have repeatedly broken the law and committed unspeakable acts to create a political dynasty. The individuals who bought into this story did not need to be presented with facts; rather, they were motivated to believe it because it fit within their preconceived notions about who Hillary Clinton was.

Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias are behind much of the fraudulent information that gets shared online. Figure 1.4 offers an illustrative example. The meme is false; Trump never gave that quotation to *People* magazine, nor is there any evidence that he has ever made a similar type of claim (Lacapria, 2017). Yet, that meme was shared widely during the 2016 election and continues to pop up from time to time on various social media outlets. It does not require much Googling to debunk the meme’s claim; however, many liberals uncritically share it because it fits within their beliefs about Republicans and the caricature of Trump as a

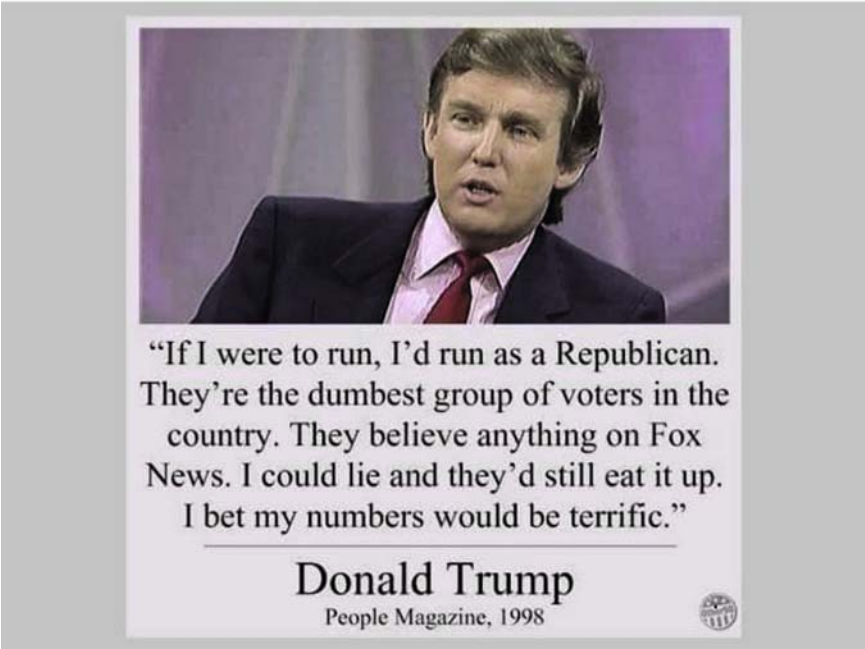


Figure 1.4.

conman. Moreover, they *want* the meme to be true because it offers an explanation for what remains, for many liberals, an unconscionable decision by the American electorate (Clinton, 2017; Holloway, 2018).

The seemingly obvious way to combat motivated reasoning and confirmation bias is to provide individuals with accurate information. However, even if we could pierce the ideological echo chambers that often prevent people from accessing factual information, research suggests that it might not make that much of a difference. Another psychosocial concept called the *backfire effect* has been the subject of much debate among psychologists and political scientists (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wood & Porter, 2019). Although experts disagree about the extent to which the backfire effect occurs, there is evidence to suggest that, for some people, encountering factual evidence that challenges preconceived beliefs actually makes those prior views get stronger.

Although anecdotal, I have witnessed a type of backfire effect on social media among friends who have shared a version of the Trump meme shown in Figure 1.4. After posting, someone inevitably tells the original poster that the meme is inaccurate and often includes a link to a fact-checking website as evidence. While some people apologize and take the

meme down, in my experience, they are in the minority. Most reply with some variation of the following statement: “Well, even if he didn’t say it, you know it’s true!” Although they may acknowledge the factual inaccuracy of the meme, they do not dismiss the broader premise, and perhaps most importantly, they do not remove the content, which only perpetuates the false narrative.

Of course, motivated reasoning and confirmation bias do not apply only to inaccurate information. Rather, these processes are perhaps most evident when dealing with factual information. Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias allow people to pick and choose which facts to accept and which facts to ignore. What often gets overlooked in the Russian interference scandal during the 2016 election is that most of the “fake news” that they disseminated was not necessarily fake. Take, for example, Figure 1.5, which is a meme determined to have been planted by Russian operatives.

There is nothing explicitly false in this meme. Although they did not provide a citation, it is not unfathomable that border agents arrested someone who had committed a crime in Honduras. The claim that “rapists, drug dealers, human traffickers, and others” have come across the border is reminiscent of Trump’s first official speech as a candidate for president when he claimed that “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people who have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (Schwartz, 2015, para. 3). The issue with both statements is that they are technically not incorrect; there are criminals, including those who commit rape and deal drugs, who illegally enter the United States via the Mexican border.

Where motivated reasoning and confirmation bias come into play, however, is in the assessment of the number and impact of these groups entering the United States. Available data show that both legal and undocumented immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans (Bersani, 2014; Light & Miller, 2018; Nowrasteh, 2018) and that the vast majority of immigrants, both legal and undocumented, contribute positively to American society and the economy (Chen, 2016; Varas, 2018). Yet, the statement on the meme that “the percent of innocent poor families searching for a better life is too small to become an argument for amnesty and Texas warm welcome” is not technically incorrect because, for some people, anything less than a hundred percent poses an unreasonable risk for the security of the United States (Journell, *in press*). By framing the argument in this way, the meme speaks to those who are already motivated to view immigrants in a negative light, and



Figure 1.5.

those facts, as incomplete as they may be, serve to confirm individuals' existing biases.

An illustrative example of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias can be found in the response to the video of a confrontation between Trump-supporting students from Covington High School and a tribal elder at a Washington, DC, Indigenous Peoples March in early 2019. An

initial video showed the Covington students, who were in town for a March for Life rally and wearing Make America Great Again hats, appearing to mock the tribal elder, Nathan Phillips, in a way that was culturally disrespectful. In particular, one Covington student, Nick Sandmann, was seen smirking just inches from Phillips face.

This initial video went viral, with liberals quick to condemn the Covington students and, by extension, Trump supporters more broadly. In the spirit of full disclosure, I was one of those liberals. I include my own bout with motivated reasoning and confirmation bias to illustrate how easy it is to fall victim to these processes. Even though I pride myself as someone who is inclined to be accuracy motivated (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2019) and well versed in media literacy strategies, I am also a human with strong beliefs, which means I am not immune to these psychosocial processes. Figure 1.6 shows my Facebook post upon the release of the initial video. I linked to a *HuffPost* article containing the video and explicitly denounced the students, but if I am being honest, my intent was to make a larger point about what I perceived to be racism and bigotry among Trump supporters and the policies of the Trump administration.

My post was initially met with a flurry of comments from likeminded friends who expressed disgust over the students' actions, with one of my friends even going so far as to say that she would "love to punch that kid [Sandmann] in his smug face". Within 24 hours, though, a longer video surfaced, showing that the confrontation was instigated by members of the Black Hebrew Israelites, a far-left group, and that Phillips was the one who approached the Covington students. This second video also went viral, leading many conservatives to condemn liberals like myself for making false accusations of racism.

My own Facebook wall, which I am not displaying here out of respect for my friends' privacy, became a back and forth between those who still believed that the Covington students were bigots and those who believed that they were being victimized simply for wearing pro-Trump apparel. The discourse only intensified when additional videos emerged that showed the Covington students catcalling and cursing at women as they participated in the March for Life Rally. On my wall and across social media, aspects of motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, and the backfire effect were on full display. Despite everyone having seen the same videos, we all came to different conclusions based on our existing beliefs and the strength of our convictions.⁵ Writing in the days following the incident, Beauchamp (2019) described these psychosocial processes when he noted that