

You Are Here

A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape

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5 Cultivating Ecological Literacy

(Milner)

It was a sunny morning on Aunt Lynda's porch in Kennesaw, Georgia, as the birds serenaded me and the breeze dropped September's yellowing leaves. Lynda's rosy-cheeked ceramic frog flowerpot stared into the middle distance, serene behind a placid painted smile. A quiet companion as my kids ran through the yard, counting the fluorescent butterflies landing on the grass.

The reports from back home in Charleston, South Carolina, on the other hand, were less idyllic. A few hundred miles away from Aunt Lynda's porch, Hurricane Dorian roared along the coast. It sent a tree through some kid's bedroom up by the airport, dropped a sparking power line into the flooded City Market downtown, and ripped the roof clean off a church about a mile from my house. And those were just the last three tweets. There were countless other disasters to take in and hours to go before the storm drifted north to darken the doorsteps of Myrtle Beach, Wilmington, and the Outer Banks. All the while, my commander in chief was vigorously altering five-day-old forecasts with sharpies instead of admitting that he misspoke when he said the storm was headed toward Alabama—a real encouraging fixation when more than a million of my fellow coastal Carolinians had been told to vacate their homes and brace for the destruction. I put down my phone and sighed, the gentle wind rustling as I looked at Aunt Lynda's ceramic frog mirroring my glass-eyed stare.

I don't know if the frog knew what I knew. That it was all too much. After all, this was the fourth time in as many years that I had to drag my family up a lane-reversed highway to the North Georgia hills (thanks, climate change). Each time meant new worries. Matthew flooded my study. Irma wrecked up the yard. Florence just sat in the ocean for an extra week before turning north (Charleston got a half inch of rain but lost a lot of tourism dollars). With each, I couldn't do anything but watch and wait and wonder as sky and sea and ground

interacted in all their mysterious ways. High winds plus wet soil might unmoor roots that might topple trees and the power grid with them; a strong surge at high tide might flood out a neighborhood, especially one built on marshland never meant to hold condos; a heavy flow of evacuees returning to Florida might make the drive home a gnarled nightmare.

No matter what, the cleanup wouldn't be simple; it never was. I'd do my part on my own little lot, hoping that just meant moving mulch, instead of an amateur attempt at sawing up a downed live oak or killing mold inside my walls. The city, county, and state would have bigger pollutants to contend with. The streets don't flood with spring water; they flood with raw sewage that splashes disease over any surface or person it comes in contact with. And eroded beaches aren't rebuilt without consequence; rebuilding means more coastal development, and more coastal development means even more to rebuild the next time a storm rolls through. Year after year, the cleanup was becoming more and more daunting, and all the answers kept feeling too small.

Or at least all the answers I could come up with. From the heavens themselves to the president on down, I had little power to fix any of it. So there I sat, yet another September day on Aunt Lynda's porch, contemplating a crisis that was always bigger than me, was only getting worse, and felt like it was on the verge of swallowing us whole.

The frog just stared.

Ecological Literacy

The media hurricanes that cloud our horizons are just as unpredictable, just as disruptive, and just as difficult to clean up as their meteorological counterparts. Like real hurricanes, they put bodies and livelihoods at risk. They're complicated by wide-scale human activities. And they have a long history of interventions hurled their way, with a long history of mixed results.

Media literacy education scholars Renee Hobbs and Sandra McGee explain that efforts to track, warn about, and respond to information

storms coalesced after World War I.¹ The chief concern for researchers and educators was political propaganda, which became all the more pressing with Adolph Hitler's rise to power. Following World War II, the focus on propaganda broadened to include the study of mass persuasion in advertising and other media. The goal of these efforts—which were often framed as ways to resist the tricks played by manipulators—included calls to closely analyze media messages, identify rhetorical techniques, and assess creators' underlying motives.² Modern media literacy education emerges from this lineage.

As with any field of study, media literacy is large and contains multitudes. Most basically, educators often disagree about what exactly they mean by the term, immediately complicating efforts to assess the effectiveness of media literacy curriculum.³ The field has also generated a wide range of sometimes-conflicting strategies. For example, a number of postwar educators resisted framing propaganda as a trick, since that had the tendency to make students cynical and mistrustful of everything, including teachers—a perspective ultimately drowned out by a louder and larger chorus insisting that propaganda is absolutely a trick, one for which close rhetorical analysis is the only solution.⁴ The emergence of digital media has inspired even more changes to how media literacy is taught and understood.⁵

Despite these shifts and disagreements, contemporary media literacy efforts remain broadly consistent with the goals of postwar propaganda analysis: to equip citizens with the necessary skills to make sense of the messages they read, see, and hear. For the National Association for Media Literacy Education, this means learning to effectively “access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act” on information.⁶ *Media Essentials*, the textbook Milner assigns in his introductory media studies class, similarly identifies “description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement” as the five steps necessary for a “media-literate critical perspective.”⁷

A fact-checking guide published in 2019 by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, collated from several other guides published around the world, exemplifies how this approach tends to be framed for everyday citizens.⁸ The guide's basic argument is baked into its title, which references a mass shooting in El Paso, Texas, in August 2019: "Don't be the one spreading false news about mass shootings." Its tips include checking to make sure that the information you're sharing comes from a trusted source, with preference given to official sources, and even more preference given to sources whose reporting is corroborated by other sources. The guide also explains how to spot and avoid sharing fake images. These strategies reflect the kinds of good-sense skills offered up—by journalists, by third-party fact checkers, by public media literacy programs—as a cure for what ails us. And why not? Who would argue against verifying sources and analyzing texts for accuracy? Isn't that how we should be cultivating the land, with facts?

Although these strategies seem well suited to the task, verifying sources, checking claims, and even critical thinking aren't clear-cut remedies for the problem of polluted information. For one thing, they aren't consistently effective. Particularly online, these strategies often outright backfire, sending more and worse pollution zooming across overlapping networks. This happens, in part, because of the affordances of social media, which influence how quickly, and to what effects, information spreads. It also happens because these strategies draw their energy from the old-growth grove of Enlightenment liberalism, the very same one that, as we've seen throughout the book, so easily pumps polluted information into the soil, into the rivers, and into the atmosphere.

Liberalism is a deep memetic frame. It aggrandizes autonomy and self-sufficiency, recasts communities as markets, and privileges individual *freedoms from* outside restriction over communitarian *freedoms for* the collective to enjoy equally.⁹ Liberalism trains us to be alone and think alone. But we exist ecologically, not atomistically. Our fundamental interconnection is only deepened by network climate change, by the twists and tangles linking one grove to

another to the entire globe. When liberalistic literacy strategies sidestep these connections and focus instead on individual autonomy, they have exactly zero chance of enacting meaningful change—because autonomy over connection is part of the overall problem.

Our proposed alternate to liberalistic literacy is *ecological literacy*. In advocating for this shift, our goal isn't to reject facts or throw critical thinking into the river. It's not even to challenge the value of media literacy. It's to argue that liberalistic literacy is an ecological liability. It obscures the full contours of the landscape, fails to consider how deep memetic frames affect the information ecosystem, and allows pollution to rush in without detection. Chapter 6 presents recommendations for cultivating ecological literacy in everyday life. For now, in this chapter, we must think big. We must set aside the systems that have, at best, failed to protect our shores, and at worst, have invited more widespread destruction. What we've tried isn't working. It's time to start doing something else.

Informational Bootstraps

The liberal ideals at the heart of modern media literacy can be traced back to political philosophers like John Milton, writing in the seventeenth century, and John Stuart Mill, writing in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Channeling the spirit of the Enlightenment, each argues that the overall health of a society is determined by how free its citizens are to express a diversity of opinions—even when those opinions are unpopular or harmful. We might not like the speech, the well-worn argument goes. We might hate it. But we must not censor it. We might learn something, for one thing. For another, if we start censoring bad speech, it's only a matter of time before good speech is also silenced—our own very much included.

These ideas are woven into the political fabric of the United States. They underscore US Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis's assertion in 1927, now enshrined in contemporary free speech debates, that “fallacies and falsehoods” are best remedied by “more speech, not

enforced silence.”¹¹ The complicating factor is that a public square blessed with the freest possible speech is also cursed by a deluge of conflicting, misleading, and ugly information threatening to drown out what’s helpful and true. People therefore need to learn to parse fact from fiction, and good arguments from bad arguments—something Milton argued hundreds of years ago.¹² Media literacy is the only way to cut through that noise.

Within this tradition—particularly in the US, where commitment to free speech echoes religious fundamentalism¹³—the goal of media literacy isn’t just to counter harmful perspectives. The goal is also to bolster helpful ones. The presumption is that as people weigh their options, separate the good arguments from the bad, and passionately defend their positions, the most truthful ideas will win out. This rhetorical survival of the fittest is the “marketplace of ideas” at work. Liberalistic literacy is itself a winner within the marketplace; it’s been embraced by so many across so many generations that it’s often treated as a self-evident truth.

In addition to its replication of free speech fundamentalism, liberalistic literacy reflects a ruggedly individualistic, ripped-from-the-Enlightenment ethos of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Within this frame, Clifford C. Christians, John Ferré, and P. Mark Fackler explain, society is no more than “an aggregate of the self-seeking automatons that compose it.”¹⁴ Its sole purpose is to protect the negative freedoms of all those automatons, so that they are free *from* undue restriction. Media literacy, here, is mission critical. If people can’t figure out for themselves how to properly navigate the marketplace of ideas—if they can’t do their own homework, follow their own evidence, and arrive at their own conclusions—the government or some other oppressive authority would need to step in to help. Media literacy is what saves us from an informational nanny state.

Most public media literacy programs in the United States, media scholars Monica Bulger and Patrick Davison note, foreground this individualistic focus, including its baked-in assumptions about the dangers of censorship. These programs, in turn, pay much more attention to the person interpreting specific media than to the

broader social and technological networks the media emerge from, or the regulatory reasons those networks look the way they do.¹⁵ Danah boyd likewise explains that online literacy efforts tend to be framed through the liberal lens of individual agency and choice.¹⁶ The implication is that media *illiteracy* represents a failure to pull yourself up by your informational bootstraps—rather than a failure of the broader policies that allowed so much bad information to flood the marketplace to begin with. Platforms replicate these logics, particularly social media companies that, as Siva Vaidhyanathan argues, underfilter polluted information in the name of maximizing free speech.¹⁷ Happily for these platforms, maximized free speech leads to maximized profits, so they have twice the incentive to leave moderation to the marketplace of ideas.

The Limits of Liberalistic Literacy

The most conspicuous sources of pollution online are the coordinated hoaxes, bullshit claims, and manipulated media that cascade across social media. These are the things we need the most help cleaning up.

At least that's the assumption. But as example after example in this book has shown, falsehood is not the only source of pollution. Entirely true, well-sourced, well-vetted accounts of coordinated hoaxes, bullshit claims, and manipulated media can do just as much damage. So can empirically verifiable facts about the world. The problem isn't necessarily the facts themselves or the stories themselves, but the environmental consequences they trigger—consequences that are obscured when the focus is on whether a story is true, whether it's been confirmed by multiple outlets, and whether it's been analyzed thoughtfully. These strategies make good sense. The problem is, giving people permission—even encouraging them—to share things that are safe from a liberal perspective discourages broader self-reflection about the unpredictable ecological impacts of that sharing.

Donald Trump's 2019 summer of racist tweets illustrates the limitations of liberalistic literacy, particularly through gold-star strategies like fact checking, critical thinking, and holding falsehood up to the light of reason. Whether you're a reporter trying to determine what about a story to cover or a citizen trying to determine what about a story to share, doing everything right by liberalism doesn't guarantee that you won't spread pollution. Our best intentions might make the problem worse, as efforts to flush out pollution *now* can open the floodgates for more pollution *later*.

Everyday Presidential Racism

On July 14, 2019, Donald Trump fired off a round of tweets before heading out to play golf. These microblog blusterings followed a week of public infighting between congressional House leadership and its progressive caucus. At the center of the controversy were four high-profile congresswomen of color: Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, and Ilhan Omar of Minnesota. The president, apparently, wanted to add his two cents.

In his first tweet on the topic, Trump sneered that the progressive representatives came from "countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe,"¹⁸ echoing his reported assertion from 2016 that African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American nations are "shitholes." Because their home countries were such messes, Trump asserted, the congresswomen had no right to criticize how the US was run. In his second tweet, Trump added that those representatives should go back to where they came from, so they could fix their own broken countries first. He rounded out the trilogy by quipping that he was sure Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi would be happy to make travel arrangements.

Trump's tweets resulted, of course, in an uproar. Pelosi quickly responded, pointing to the tweets as proof that when Trump talks about Making America Great Again, he actually means Making America White Again. The four congresswomen responded just as

quickly, taking the occasion to denounce Trump's racist policies and his general disdain for women like them. Trump responded by calling them racist.

A cascade of Democratic politicians, and a pallid smattering of Republicans, also expressed disgust; some even called Trump a racist outright, despite a long-standing reluctance among elected officials to say such a thing about the president in public. Other candidates described the tweets, but not Trump himself, as racist. Likewise, the mainstream press was almost uniform in its condemnation, though many center-left outlets struggled with how to employ "racist" as a presidential descriptor. Some publications used the term immediately (typically referring to the tweets, not the man), but others took their time. Still others chose to perform a well-worn euphemistic dance, claiming that the tweets "replicated well-known racist tropes" or that they were "racially charged," an oft-used phrase that, taken literally, doesn't mean anything.

The factual accuracy of Trump's tweets, on the other hand, and Trump's claim that the four congresswomen were the ones who were racist, were much easier nuts to crack. Reporters wasted no time. Katie Rogers and Nicholas Fandos of the *New York Times*, for instance, noted in an article titled "Trump Tells Congresswomen to 'Go Back' to the Countries They Came From" that Pressley, Tlaib, and Ocasio-Cortez were all born in the United States, and Omar was a naturalized citizen.¹⁹ This was their country.

Unsurprisingly, Trump didn't back off; over the next few days, he doubled down, then tripled down, on his attacks. When asked by a reporter if it bothered him that white supremacists were rallying around his rhetoric, Trump shrugged. "It doesn't concern me because many people agree with me," he said.²⁰ In subsequent follow-ups on the controversy, he singled out Representatives Tlaib and Omar in particular, denouncing both women, who have been critical of the Israeli government, as anti-Semites. At a July 17 rally in North Carolina, Trump continued his attacks on Omar, prompting his elated crowd to chant "Send her back! Send her back!" For thirteen seconds, Trump just stood there, basking in the vitriol.

Clips of the chant went thermonuclear as soon as they hit social media. Cable networks looped it on repeat; news outlets embedded it in articles; reporters, along with countless everyday citizens, tweeted and retweeted the video. Journalists at publications small and large, in print and on television, again assailed Trump's comments, with more journalists and more politicians (especially Democrats running for president) willing to actually use the word "racist," at least regarding the content of the tweets. Just as they had in response to the initial "go back" tweets, reporters also highlighted the fundamental flaw in the crowd's logic: Omar *is* a US citizen. She's *already* home—a fact check embodied by a viral video recorded on July 19 of Omar arriving in her home district. Shared as a much-needed salve to Trump's racism, the video shows a gathered crowd cheering and chanting "Welcome! Home! Ilhan!" as the congresswoman exits the airport.

Meanwhile, White House aides told the *New York Times* that Trump was pleased by the dustup; it was all part of his 2020 reelection strategy.²¹ Another wave of stories, in turn, pondered the broader question: just how smart was Trump being? Reporters and pundits clamored to answer, with particular focus on how the story might play in the Rust Belt. A representative CNN segment interviewed two white Wisconsinites who had voted for Trump in 2016. One declared that he would not vote for Trump in 2020 because of the "embarrassment going on" ever since Trump's "go back" proclamation. The voter said he didn't think the tweet was racist, but still, it was hateful. The other voter didn't see a problem with any of it. "How is that racist?" she asked. "If you don't like this country, get out!" The title of the segment, posted to CNN's website, read "Trump Voter: How Is That Racist?"²²

And then Trump decided to comment on the majority-Black city of Baltimore, Maryland. This attack, which came a week after the "send her back" chants, followed a racist Mad Libs template similar to what Trump had said about the presumed "home countries" of Pressley, Tlaib, Ocasio-Cortez, and Omar: that Baltimore is dirty, worse than the US-Mexico border, filled with rats, and that no human being

would want to live there. Trump directed these tweets at another congressperson of color, Representative Elijah Cummings of Maryland. Cummings, who represented most of the Black folks in Baltimore before his death in October 2019, was chair of the House Oversight and Reform Committee. Perhaps not coincidentally, the committee had recently ratcheted up its investigations of Trump on a host of potentially impeachable offenses.

The lingering energies of Trump's "go back" tweets and his crowd's "send her back!" chants collided with the Baltimore story. Many journalists were again confronted with the choice of whether and how to call the president's racist tweets racist. After all, the hand-wringing went, Trump didn't come right out and *say* that the residents of Baltimore are subhuman. He just implied it, giving many reporters, or at least their editors, pause—ambiguity further stoked by Trump's many apologists, who insisted that Trump wasn't even *talking* about race, Baltimore really does have rats. The result was a roaring superstorm of news coverage, social media commentary, and anonymous White House sources whispering to reporters about how this was all part of Trump's plan, he's playing four-dimensional chess, trust us.

Trump's racist tweets, reflecting a long public life of racist action, were not a story that could have been ignored. The tweets were not a story that *should* have been ignored. And yet much of the resulting news coverage, particularly coverage that insisted on fact-checking the president, completely missed the point. Adam Serwer of the *Atlantic* was especially pointed in his critique of people who responded to Trump's "go back" tweet by rattling off its targets' true national origins.²³ Trump wasn't making a fact-based claim to begin with, Serwer observed; he was asserting a moral conviction about the conditional citizenship of people of color. They will never be real Americans, Trump was implicitly arguing, because they aren't white.

Put another way, the factual *truth* of their citizenship mattered less than what was *real* to Trump and his chanting supporters: the fundamental belief that black and brown skin equals foreignness, and more fundamentally, that America is a country for white people.

People of color are here, this logic goes, solely because *we* allow them to be. Reporters' efforts to jump in and fact-check citizenship status overlooked this deeper, and much uglier, part of the story. These efforts also inadvertently replicated the racist frame they were trying to counter: that people of color need justifying and, when challenged, need to show receipts. Even the most heartwarming "Welcome! Home! Ilhan!" chants implicitly affirmed the charge that "home" is an open question if your skin isn't the right color; white congresspeople, even those who are the children of immigrants, even those who have naturalized from another country, don't need a cheering airport crowd to remind everyone that they're American.

All the Media Literacy That's Fit to Print

The liberalistic literacy strategies employed by people responding to 2019's summer of presidential racism were great ideas on paper. Sometimes these strategies—in this case and others—are great ideas in practice as well, at least for certain audiences. The benefits for those audiences, however, are often counterbalanced by the harm caused to others. Fact checking, critical thinking, and shining a righteous light on our problems might clean up a beach here and there—but that's not the same thing as having a pristine coastline, especially when one beach's gain is another's loss.

Online Affordances and the Tools of Liberalism

Many will resist the assertion that liberalistic literacy efforts are unreliable at best and counterproductive at worst; it's a big assertion to make. In the context of networked media, however, it's actually a second-order conversation. Digital affordances—the tools digital media provide to users—complicate liberalistic literacy efforts before those efforts can even be deployed.

The opaque curation of algorithms is an especially powerful affordance complicating liberalistic literacy efforts. Algorithms direct our eyes to *this* at the expense of *that*, without telling us what we're not seeing as a result. They are instrumental in reinforcing partisan echo-systems, encouraging asymmetric polarization, and delivering

increasingly radicalized content to audiences increasingly eager to consume it. They also feed into and are fed by social behavior; whether or not anyone realizes it, journalists, audiences, and algorithms work together symbiotically to drive the attention economy, often to very disturbing places.

That attention economy is propped up by an even more pervasive digital affordance: the quick and easy spread of information. Trump's Twitter feed epitomizes this spread. It also epitomizes how algorithms amplify messages far and wide. Within minutes of declaring something, Trump can generate a global hashtag that captures the attention of hundreds of millions. The message might begin on Twitter, a relatively niche platform in terms of actual active users, but through extensive news coverage and social sharing on other platforms—again amplified by trending-topic algorithms—it's able to filter into the networks of countless additional audiences. Some audiences spread the message as a cheering MAGA endorsement; others do the same as a disgusted psychic scream; still others exhibit every shade of affect in between. No matter the motive, the outcome remains the same: the message pings across more and more networks, prompting more and more responses from more and more participants along the way.

This ceaseless, cascading network spread has two effects. First is context collapse, the unpredictable commingling of audiences online, and the related unpredictability of the people you might be talking to at any given moment.²⁴ Trump's Twitter feed epitomizes context collapse, particularly when he retweets a random conspiracy theorist, white supremacist, or chaos agent, whose audience suddenly spans the entire globe. The second effect of out-of-control-spread is Poe's Law. Poe's Law is an axiom emphasizing how difficult it is to parse sincerity from satire online. By highlighting this difficulty, Poe's Law speaks to a much deeper problem inherent to the internet ecosystem: knowing what something is supposed to mean, simply by observing.²⁵

Trump's presidency is a Poe's Law presidency; it's often dizzyingly unclear whether any given Trump statement is an actual policy proposal, a strategic provocation meant to rile up his base, a

deflection from the latest disaster of his own making, or merely rambled words about a cable news show he just watched.²⁶ Poe's Law also complicates efforts to assess the motives of the conspiracy theorists, white nationalists, and chaos agents breaststroking in Trump's wake. Whether these hangers-on are spreading coordinated propaganda, sincere hate, entrepreneurial clickbait, or some mix of god knows what else, is often unclear.

The question of intent—and related question of how someone can or should respond to content—becomes proportionally more vexing the less is known about the content-sharers. In many cases, the only thing knowable is the impact a message has—a particularly critical point when considering messages that, trolling or not, cynical brand-building or not, are dehumanizing and violent. But even then, the impacts of a message can be uneven, depending on who intercepts the message, the deep memetic frames they're standing behind, and what they end up doing as a result. Under such conditions, merely identifying what something *is* can be enormously challenging.

Critiquing the Critical

Online, streamlined spread and all its Poe's Law complications is no accident. Designing platforms to maximize speech is a liberal impulse. Assuming that the best and brightest content will win out is a liberal impulse. Looking around and feeling pretty good about the systems rich white men have built is a liberal impulse. When profound informational dysfunction emerges from these impulses, liberal responses are highly unlikely to do much to solve the problem—because they emerge from the same taproot as the problem that needs solving.

The seemingly unassailable pursuit of critical thinking exemplifies how insufficient liberal solutions can be when applied to problems caused by liberalism. Of course, within education scholarship, critical thinking, like media literacy more broadly, is large and contains multitudes; how exactly educators can or should implement critical thinking in the classroom remains hotly debated.²⁷ In more common

usage, particularly in the context of news literacy and other public media literacy efforts, critical thinking tends to refer, broadly, to an analytic way of being in the world. A critical thinker doesn't just accept claims without question. A critical thinker does their homework. A critical thinker is an active, informed liberal citizen.

Francesca Tripodi illustrates the limitations of informational bootstraps-style critical thinking in her research on how conservative Christian Republicans search for truth in the contemporary media landscape.²⁸ Tripodi's work upends the common argument that Trump won in 2016 because so many Republicans were the unwitting victims of "fake news" criticizing Clinton and celebrating Trump. Rather than being duped by anybody, Tripodi maintains, these Republicans arrived at their conclusions by doing everything that liberalistic literacy advocates ask for. They methodically read multiple news outlets across the political spectrum. They meticulously analyzed the specific word-for-word transcriptions of Trump's speeches and compared those words to subsequent mainstream news narratives. They carefully pored over exact phrases in documents like the Constitution. They did everything right.²⁹

The issue is what they ended up believing as a result. In many cases, these were not objective truths, as the Christian Republicans assumed and their research seemed to corroborate. Rather, they were realities filtered through a series of deep memetic frames. For the Christian Republicans Tripodi interviewed, the most relevant of these frames was the secular media subversion myth that animates so much far-right conspiratorial thinking, from the Satanic Panics to the Deep State superstorm. In each of these cases, critical thinking efforts launch from the premise that left-leaning media are morally bankrupt, biased against conservatives (particularly Christians), and a threat to "real" American values. You couldn't trust CNN or the *New York Times* to tell you the truth. You had to find out for yourself.

Subsequent efforts to "Google for truth" sent these Christian Republicans down increasingly biased, reactionary, and asymmetrically polarized rabbit holes—rabbit holes that Democrats weren't ushered down nearly as frequently, because they weren't

standing behind those same frames and therefore didn't feel as compelled to look outside the mainstream for answers. The result wasn't just to reinforce far-right messaging within Christian Republican circles. It was to further entrench the epistemic gulf between the Right and the Left, since the information circulating through the right-wing echo-system was shockingly discordant from what outlets like CNN and the *Times* were saying. To these Christian Republicans, it must have seemed like the center-left media was living on a totally different planet; just look at all the trash in their networks! The only reasonable response from their frame was to continue searching for the *real* truth through alternative channels.

Citing Tripodi's study and other examples of people doing their homework but arriving at problematic, false, or otherwise harmful conclusions, danah boyd similarly challenges the idea that critical thinking is a universal fail-safe—particularly when algorithms push searchers toward gamed information sources.³⁰ Boyd bases her argument on two primary concerns. The first is the deeply ambivalent paradox that emerges when people are encouraged to be critical. Questioning authority, challenging our long-held assumptions, and remaining skeptical of capitalist motives all make for good, informed citizenship. Up to a point. Taken to the extreme, however, the warning “trust no one” easily snakes back to those who are worth trusting—a paradox that educators teaching propaganda analysis realized almost a century ago. For example, yes, we have very good reasons to question and critique journalists, boyd maintains. But too much of that cynicism, and establishment journalism becomes the enemy of the people.

Boyd's second concern with critical thinking is its tendency to, ironically, prevent critical self-reflection. People who have arrived at conclusions based on facts—at least what look and feel like facts to them—would only ever describe their efforts in terms of critical thinking. They *earned* those conclusions, all too easily collapsing critical thinking into assertions of personal authority. And personal authority isn't something you can easily argue a person out of—just ask someone convinced that Trump's “go back” tweets weren't racist,

on the grounds that they don't think they were. In these cases, algorithmically supercharged critical thinking does not bring people to the truth. It entrenches existing deep memetic frames, foreclosing the possibility that other frames, and other realities, might be worth consideration.

The Light of Liberalism

Critical thinking isn't the only facet of liberalistic literacy that can backfire. Another is the knee-jerk instinct to find, chronicle, and rebuke as many malignant falsehoods as possible. Once again, this impulse is rooted in the marketplace of ideas. You have to keep feeding the marketplace good information to counter all the bad, the argument goes; once you expose a lie or dehumanizing attack, individual citizens will weigh the evidence and arrive at the correct conclusion.

The summation of this long-standing ideal is often credited to Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, of "more speech, not enforced silence" fame, who in 1913 declared that "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants."³¹ This was not a modern insight. Brandeis was instead channeling the Enlightenment's centuries-old call to shine the light of reason on human ignorance and superstition. That was the whole point of the Enlightenment: to enlighten people. The Enlightenment's focus—even obsession—with the curative powers of light reflected an even older religious history, particularly the extreme dualism of Catholicism, which framed the light of God in apocalyptic opposition to the forces of darkness.³² The assumption that shining a light on falsehood will usher in facts is so pervasive in the West that it serves as a kind of creation myth. In the beginning, there was Light; and the Light was Truth.

While this underlying theme is ever present, Phillips argues that there are in fact two parallel tracks of the light disinfects model: the light of liberalism and the light of social justice.³³ The light of liberalism tends to shine its spotlight on those doing the harming, with the assumption that if people can see the bad actors for what

they are, they'll reject them. It also tends to align with center-left journalism, which is a product of liberalism through and through. Negative freedoms, fierce autonomy, and the imperative to report as many truths as possible from the most impartial "view from nowhere" possible³⁴—all are woven into what it means to be a mainstream journalist.³⁵

The light of social justice, in contrast, tends to shine its spotlight on those who have been harmed, with the assumption that if citizens can see the embodied effects of bigotry and injustice, those citizens will embrace the structural changes necessary to fight back. The light of social justice isn't totally absent from center-left journalism (the *New York Times*' 1619 project, helmed by Nikole Hannah-Jones, is one example), but is comparatively rare within establishment, legacy, majority white newsrooms more geared towards liberalistic *freedoms from* than communitarian *freedoms for*.³⁶

Journalism isn't an anomaly; the light of liberalism suffuses capitalist institutions—certainly in the United States, a nation born of liberalism. The result isn't, as we might expect or hope, steady beams with predictably just outcomes. Instead, the light of liberalism can be ineffective at best and outright destructive at worst. This happens, most basically, because the marketplace of ideas—that great clearing house for all that's been illuminated—isn't itself all that steady or just. As free speech lawyer Nabiha Syed argues, certain kinds of speech, speakers, and experiences have always been elevated within the liberal marketplace, while others have been silenced or pathologized.³⁷ Rather than reliably defaulting to the truest, most rational ideas, the marketplace reliably defaults to what resonates most with the people whose voices carry loudest. It's a power-replication machine, in other words, not a truth-telling one.

Those power differentials can send the light of liberalism scattering to all kinds of strange places, ensuring that even the most well-intentioned illuminations can backfire. A historical case in point is Northern news coverage of the Klan discussed in chapter 3. As both Elaine Parsons and Felix Harcourt show, Northern papers may have intended to stymie the Klan's influence by spotlighting its dangers

and self-aware absurdities.³⁸ What that coverage managed to do, instead, was amplify the Klan's propaganda and bolster its recruitment efforts. The light of liberalism didn't solve the problem of the Klan. The light of liberalism helped the Klan. This was a known risk to the Klan's targets. That's why so many Black newspapers in the 1920s defiantly refused to run stories about the Klan. That's also why Jewish groups in the 1960s implored journalists not to publicize the rise of the American Nazi party, even in order to condemn it. The light of liberalism has a funny way of empowering perpetrators from dominant groups while disempowering their marginalized victims.

Online, the light of liberalism is an even less reliable ally—evidenced by what a boon it was to the nationalist publicity blitz known as the alt-right. Because of Poe's Law, because of context collapse, because of rampant information spread, it's extremely difficult to know where even the most righteous light might travel online, how its beams might refract, and what the consequences might be for the people spotlighted. This is true of the light of social justice as well; even when the lights shine on victims, they can still bend unpredictably. But, as the light of liberalism actively ushers the ugliest, most misleading, and most harmful speech into the funhouse mirror that is the marketplace of ideas, it's the most likely to do the most damage.³⁹ The consequences can be dire. However sincere a person's intentions, however illuminating the light might be for some audiences, that light can have the opposite effect on others. It can grow something just as toxic as the thing it disinfects.

“Go Back”

In the case of Trump's racist tweets about Pressley, Tlaib, Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, and Cummings, weeks' worth of wall-to-wall coverage of the who, what, where, and when of the tweets only made those messages multiply. More than that, the coverage generated whole new waves of pollution.

Most basically, light-of-liberalism coverage kept whiteness central to the “Go back!” narrative—not just because most of the establishment journalists reporting the story were white. Throughout

the controversy, the cameras, both metaphorical and literal, lingered on Trump's face, repeating and repeating every hateful word he spoke. They lingered on the overwhelmingly white faces at his North Carolina rally. They lingered on white Trump voters in the Rust Belt, giving them sympathetic chyrons that framed white nationalist musings about who gets to be American as an abstract thought exercise with two morally equivalent sides.

It's true that people of color were part of the story, most obviously the representatives Trump singled out, who received almost universally sympathetic coverage after Trump's outbursts. It's also true that center-left coverage had improved since 2016. As Joan Donovan quipped in an interview with *Wired*, had the case unfolded two years earlier, she would have been on the phone begging reporters not to ask white nationalist influencers for comment.⁴⁰ Still, a great deal of even the most anti-Trump coverage privileged white people's experiences, reactions, and frames over the experiences, reactions, and frames of people targeted by bigotry.

These experiences, reactions, and frames included the ability to have, as *Washington Post* reporter Wes Lowery explained in an interview with *Politico*, "high minded" conversations about the traumas people of color confront every day.⁴¹ White journalists and pundits got to play "fruitless, if earnest, pedantic games" with questions like whether or not a racist statement was *technically* racist.⁴² A similar game was made out of assessing the alleged brilliance of Trump's reelection strategy. The very existence of these stories implied that there was a world in which Trump's statements could be considered good politics, divorced from the impact those politics have on millions. Such stories pushed journalistic impartiality to its most grotesque extremes, as the fundamentally unequal statements "the president is being racist" and "the president is being smart" were both-sideded into just another political discussion between talking TV heads.

Some mainstream journalists whose light arced toward social justice avoided the worst of these traps. In the wake of Trump's "go back" tweets, for example, many reporters and influencers of color

described how frequently they're told to "go back" to some other country, and what a toll that psychological violence takes on them. Similarly, after Trump's Baltimore comments, a number of prominent Black folks—including writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and CNN anchor Victor Blackwell, both of whom are from Baltimore—foregrounded their own bodies and affirmed the value of the other Black bodies who populate their city.⁴³ The El Paso mass shooting that followed Trump's tweets also generated some light of social justice coverage. Rather than focusing exclusively on the shooter or other white supremacists, these stories explored how violent white supremacy impacts Latinx communities. "It feels like being hunted," one *New York Times* headline read.⁴⁴

That said, even in stories that explicitly and unflinchingly addressed how Trump's rhetoric puts people of color in the literal crosshairs of racist violence, center-left coverage broadly omitted a critical point: that the amplification of Trump's words was, fundamentally, part of the problem. Trump's racist statements persist as national earworms because they're repeated—and, of course, retweeted—hundreds of thousands, even millions, of times. All those amplifications ensure that the citizens lucky enough to have missed his comments the first time will have to hear them again and again and again.

Repeating Trump's racism doesn't just amplify that racism. Amplifying racism normalizes racist ideology. Normalizing racist ideology, in turn, emboldens and validates bigots. When bigots are emboldened and validated, they feel freer to lash out. The result is a public square that is less hospitable and less safe for people of color, particularly for those who are immigrants. Lights may have been beamed on Trump's ugliness in the name of both liberalism and social justice. For some, those lights disinfected. For others, the lights incubated, illuminated, and nurtured their very worst impulses.

Those impulses don't stop at racist rally chants. Research teams at the University of North Texas and California State University, San Bernardino, both found a correlation between Trump's racist rhetoric and white supremacist violence.⁴⁵ The El Paso shooting, which took

place two weeks after Trump's racist tweetstorms, evidences this correlation. In his manifesto, the shooter offered the same justification for murdering twenty-two people, many of whom were Mexican citizens, that Fox News gives its viewers for fearing "white replacement," and Trump gives his followers for fearing the immigrant "invasion."

El Paso native and Democratic presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke had little patience for the reporters dancing around the underlying cause of all this violence and naively asking why any of it was happening. "Members of the press, what the fuck?" he snapped during one interview, having just been asked what possible cause there could be. "It's these questions that you know the answers to. . . . He's inciting racism and violence in this country. I just—I don't know what kind of question that is."⁴⁶

This question, and the problem of amplification it reflects, certainly didn't begin with any individual presidential tweetstorm. The pattern was established on the very first day Trump announced his candidacy in 2015, when he described Mexicans as criminals and rapists and the American press corps responded by laughing. By summer 2019 there was no way to ignore Trump's public statements, tweeted or otherwise, certainly not under the current rubric of newsworthiness; when the president does anything, it's by definition news. When the president does something racist, it's doubly so. To turn away from the individuals and communities that Trump dehumanized would have signaled complicity in that dehumanization. And yet turning toward Trump with yet another camera, to chronicle yet another attack against people of color—regardless of what kind of light a person might have been shining—only incentivized Trump to do the same thing again, with increasingly grim stakes for the people threatened by his statements.⁴⁷

The Fact Check Fallacy

As the "Go Back" case illustrates, the insistence that light disinfects is often accompanied by efforts to check facts and debunk falsehoods.

These efforts are enshrined within the profession of journalism, and have long been regarded as foundational to liberalistic literacy. So much so, Alice Marwick explains, that fact checks are often considered a “magic bullet” in the fight against falsehood online—understandable, when the diagnosis is a terminal case of not having all the facts.⁴⁸

But online, fact checking efforts face immediate, logistic challenges. In an environment governed by Poe’s Law and context collapse, it’s difficult to know what even needs to be fact checked—and even more difficult to know what the consequences will be. A fact check might, for example, direct sympathy and support to a targeted person or group. Or it might subject the targeted person or group to additional attention and therefore additional attacks. It might do both things at once. The difficulty, in essence, is that information traveling across collapsed audiences does so unevenly and unpredictably. Liberalistic fact checking, which treats falsehoods as static objects to pin content warnings on, simply isn’t calibrated for all the zooming and chaos that, ironically, is engendered by liberalism itself.

There are, however, deeper problems with fact checking than the logistics of where to pin the content warnings. First, people don’t always post things because of facts to begin with. In a 2016 Pew Research Center study, for example, 14 percent of Americans reported sharing a story they knew to be false when they shared it.⁴⁹ Similarly, danah boyd notes that “If you talk with someone who has posted clear, unquestionable misinformation, more often than not, they know it’s bullshit. Or they don’t care whether or not it’s true. Why do they post it then? Because they’re making a statement.”⁵⁰ That was the entire problem with fact checking Trump’s claim about the nationalities of Pressley, Tlaib, Ocasio-Cortez, and Omar. Fact checks are definitionally useless when directed at people whose reaction is a snorted “lol we know.”

These kinds of bad-faith arguments are vexing. But the principle is straightforward enough: if the truth doesn’t matter to the person speaking, then facts won’t work as counterarguments. The

effectiveness of fact-checking good-faith misperceptions, on the other hand, is even more vexing and even less straightforward. When people truly believe what they're saying, do fact checks even work?

The existing research on the subject is, to put it lightly, mixed. Some studies show that efforts to correct false information actually reinforce that information, a process known as the *backlash effect*.⁵¹ Some studies show that support for the backlash effect is tenuous, and that facts do indeed correct misperceptions.⁵² Some studies show how little consensus there is across multiple studies.⁵³ Others show how little consensus there can be within the same study.⁵⁴

There may not be any clear, incontrovertible evidence proving once and for all that fact checks backfire. But neither is there any clear, incontrovertible evidence proving once and for all that they *don't*. On the contrary; outside the confines of research studies, backlash abounds. Nonstop fact-checking of QAnon, for example, didn't decrease its size, influence, or follower count. QAnon only got bigger as time wore on, particularly as it collided with the COVID-19 crisis in January 2020.⁵⁵ QAnon's take on COVID-19, that Bill Gates created the virus in a lab, itself then collided with what passed in 2020 as a mainstream Republican talking point: that COVID-19 was a plot by the "fake news" media and the Democrats to destroy Donald Trump. Eventually, the tragic reality of the pandemic tamped down many (but certainly not all) of the conspiratorial claims about the virus. Weeks and weeks of relentless mainstream corrections, on the other hand, did nothing—other than convince even more conservatives that they didn't need to take COVID-19 seriously, precisely because center-left journalists said that they should.⁵⁶

The rejoinder here might be that, okay sure, fact checking clearly wasn't effective in these cases. But that's because of ideological siloing between the Right and the Left; thanks to asymmetric polarization, facts proffered by the center-left simply don't *count* as facts to the far-right. To which we say, yes, that disconnect is precisely the problem. If facts truly were corrective, then they would be equally so for everyone. They aren't. So, the question remains: if fact

checking works so well, then why is there so much evidence to the contrary?

Social psychology offers some possible explanations. None uniformly explain why certain debunks fail so abysmally with certain audiences. Instead, these explanations help contextualize the failures when they do occur.

One possibility is the *illusory truth effect*. This effect was first identified by Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein, and Thomas Toppino in 1977.⁵⁷ It reveals a strange contour of human cognition: that repeated claims seem more true than new claims. In the context of media manipulation, the implication is stark. Say a lie enough times, and even the most airtight fact check will seem false in comparison. The illusory truth effect can occur even when a person already knows that the repeated claim is false.⁵⁸ It can also occur after corrective information is issued, believed by research subjects, but then misremembered over time.⁵⁹

A second reason some fact checks might fail is the *continued influence effect*, which states that belief in misinformation can persist even when countered with clear corrections. According to Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, the strength of this effect derives from the causal inferences people make between events.⁶⁰ Once someone establishes a coherent causal explanation for a particular outcome—*this* happened, therefore *that* happened—it's extremely difficult to dislodge the misinformed conclusion; people who hear the fact check have an odd tendency to integrate the new information, yet continue to believe that *this* caused *that*.

A third, related reason that fact checks might fail is how tightly people cling to consistency in the stories they tell themselves about the world. As multiple fields of study have long emphasized, the human brain seeks out narrative coherence.⁶¹ When the integration of a new fact would dismantle a person's psychic curio cabinet of coherent narratives, those efforts face cognitive resistance—because people don't like dissonance. Applying facts to false (if coherent) narratives might, Stephan Lewandowsky and his research team

suggest, even trigger new misinformation to take hold when the fact check transforms a previously coherent narrative into nonsense. Irritated by the sudden gap in the story, a person's brain casts about for something, anything, to fill that spot in its curio cabinet.⁶²

Which loops back to deep memetic frames. Our frames exert enormous reciprocal influence over the stories we tell ourselves and others. It therefore stands to reason that they would also exert enormous influence over when and why certain fact checks succeed and others implode. Research conducted by Lewandowsky and his team supports this connection.⁶³ As they show, when people are presented with a claim, they tend to evaluate it based on “knowledge consistency,” that is to say, how well the claim lines up with their accepted frames. Knowledge-consistent information *feels* right, feels *real*, and therefore is easily believed. Knowledge-inconsistent information feels wrong and, beyond that, would make too much of a mental mess to investigate further. So that information is sent to the cutting-room floor.

For people who already know the information being fact-checked, or who don't know the information exactly but whose deep memetic frames give them no reason to resist it, the fact check isn't *unhelpful*. It's probably interesting. But it's the cognitive equivalent of golf claps. On the other hand, when a fact check misaligns with a person's frames, that fact check can have a very different effect.

One of the most vexing is a type of backlash known as the *boomerang effect*. This effect occurs, danah boyd explains, when a person mistrusts the source of a fact check, and as a result, comes away from the correction more convinced of the falsehood than before.⁶⁴ This effect is essentially an inverse of source credibility bias, in which people are more likely to believe falsehoods from a trusted source than the truth from an untrusted source.⁶⁵ Secular professors dismissing the satanic threat, Democratic officials defending representative Omar, the “liberal media” sounding the alarm about COVID-19—all can cause audiences that mistrust professors, Democrats, and center-left journalists to dig in their heels. Of course these groups would try to mislead, the boomerang logic goes; they're

known liars and are always up to something. Whatever they say, the opposite must be true.

D.J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler help contextualize the boomerang effect.⁶⁶ In the process, they also help contextualize why it's so difficult to fact-check information positioned behind a deep memetic frame. As they argue, when people search for and evaluate information, they demonstrate either *accuracy* or *directional* motivations. Accuracy motivations are straightforward; they occur when someone is looking for correct information without an existing investment in the outcome. They just want to know, for example, how cold it is outside. Directional motivations, on the other hand, reflect the pursuit of a conscious or unconscious goal, like confirming an existing belief or communicating partisan identity. Backlash effects correlate most strongly with directional motivations, particularly when the issue in question is contentious.⁶⁷ As they help cohere a person's basic sense of self, deep memetic frames are the ultimate directional motivation. Therefore, deep memetic frames are a likely source of backlash when it occurs.

Of course, just by observing, it's difficult to know exactly why a particular fact check fails, or exactly why it results in even stauncher false belief. What *is* observable is how often these things happen. If the answer was as simple as fact-checking believers out of their satanic panics or white racial terrorism or far-right conspiracy theories, then those problems would have been solved as soon as they were held up to the light of reason. That is, most decidedly, not what has happened.

It hasn't because of a basic liberalistic miscalculation: the belief that people are rational subjects who arrive at conclusions after dispassionately weighing all the evidence. Much more often than we might like to admit, that's simply not how we think. That doesn't mean we're unintelligent or unsophisticated; it means that we're guided by frames as much as facts. And yet the inherent power of facts, and more broadly, the inherent effectiveness of liberalistic literacy, persists as a deeply resonant frame—one that, appropriately enough, just isn't supported by the facts.

The answer isn't merely to adopt better media literacy tools; we need to adopt a better media literacy frame. And we need to do it fast. Disaster is already upon us, and will only intensify, because our most prominent tactics don't work very well. They can't handle the hyper-networked spread of information; they can't handle the compounding complications of Poe's Law and context collapse; they can't handle the symbiotic relationship between audiences and algorithms. All of that is bad enough. What's worse is that liberalism tricks people into thinking that liberalistic literacy is enough. Just throw facts at falsehoods, just trust the marketplace of ideas, just pull yourself up by the informational bootstraps, and everything will be fine. We've been doing that for centuries, and things are not fine. We don't have the luxury of continuing to get the same things wrong, over and over.

From Facts to Ecology

The problems we face are structural. To cultivate enduring solutions, we need legislative action, economic restructuring, and educational reform. We're not going to get any of that overnight. We can, however, begin cultivating a different, more robust, and yes, more rational way of situating ourselves within the networked world.

Enter ecological literacy. Unlike liberalistic literacy, ecological literacy doesn't fight against the affordances of the information ecosystem. It doesn't assume that falsehoods are easily decontaminated by the application of facts, or indeed, that falsehoods are the only pollutants to worry about. It doesn't cast people as atomistic islands unto themselves. Instead, ecological literacy emerges from network complications. It foregrounds the downstream, communitarian consequences of falsehoods and facts alike. And it takes people's frames seriously. These frames might not be true, but they are real; they shape how people navigate the world. Understanding these frames—indeed, approaching them as basic features of the information ecosystem—is key to protecting our public

lands. To get us there, ecological literacy zooms out, way out, to survey the entire landscape.

Interdependence in the Biomass Pyramid

Just as they are in the natural environment, all our problems, and all our pollutants, are fundamentally connected online. No clear division exists between the biggest, most harmful pollutants and the smaller, seemingly less harmful pollutants; efforts to mitigate one must also consider the other. The same holds true for the polluters themselves. Those who spread pollution deliberately and those who spread it unwittingly feed into each other, always. Biomass pyramids provide an ecological framework for understanding the energetic exchange between the worst, most abusive, most toxic actors and the rest of the ecosystem. Approaching harms from such a frame helps illustrate the interdependence of people, their tools, and the broader media environment.

In biology, biomass pyramids visualize the relative weight and number of one class of organism compared to other organisms within the same ecosystem. The top level represents the apex predators: the lions and tigers and bears. Each descending level grows larger, reflecting that there are more foxes in the ecosystem, and beneath them more rabbits, and beneath them more insects, and beneath them more fungi. Each level is distinct and, at the same time, intertwined with all the others. Apex predators succeed because their prey succeeds, and their prey's prey succeeds. Moreover, the fate of each creature depends on its surroundings: how much it rains, the health of the soil, the strength of the trees. Robin Wall Kimmerer emphasizes just how dependent everything is on everything else. "All flourishing," she explains, "is mutual."⁶⁸

The biomass pyramid of online harm exhibits similar interdependence. At the top of the pyramid are the propagandists, violent bigots, and chaos agents—the most obvious sources of abuse and pollution. These actors make a choice to harm; it's in their emotional, social, and financial interests to harm. Just below the apex

predators are the secondary predators who don't quite reach the top tier and likely harm with less intention, but whose behaviors still wound; fetishized laughter and arm's-length irony fit within this category. Beneath them are the lowest and widest rungs of the pyramid, which represent the everyday actions of everyday people: folks posting news stories, commenting on what others post, and chatting idly with friends. These everyday behaviors tend to be neutral or even positive in intent.

When considering their varying impacts on the digital environment, it makes good sense to separate levels. What the apex predators do is, simply, worse and more damaging than what the secondary predators do, which is simply worse and more damaging than what broadly well-intentioned everyday people do. As distinct as these harms might be, however, each level can't—and shouldn't—be approached as a closed system. Our fates are connected, both to one another and to the environment: how much is tweeted, the health of the platforms, the strength of our networks. We can talk about specific predators on their own, like we would talk about specific species and specific animals. But we can't understand any group or any individual without placing them in their full ecological context.

For example, the people at the base of the biomass pyramid—which includes, we suspect, the majority of our readers—might, individually, be massively overshadowed by the apex predators. Collectively, however, well-intentioned everyday people have massive power within the ecosystem, so much so that the apex predators' very lives depend on them. Predators rely on the rest of the pyramid for their signal boosting. They rely on the rest of the pyramid to determine that, yup, this is safe to share because it's true and unbiased and corroborated by multiple trusted sources. They rely on the rest of the pyramid to carry out all the deeds they cannot do themselves.

The biomass pyramid thus illustrates how everyday actions like posting articles and telling the truth can still do what is ultimately very dirty work. The end goal might be to denounce racism. The means to that end might meet a whole host of liberalistic literacy

criteria. But spreading bigoted messages, even to denounce them, exposes others to coordinated manipulation, risks poisoning the very bodies it seeks to protect, and directly enriches the worst actors. These actors might be big. They might be dangerous. But they're also the ecosystem's most needy inhabitants.

On Feeding the President

Donald Trump is an apex predator. When approaching the harmful things he says and does, it makes sense that people want to focus on the factual truth of his statements, to critically analyze his words, and to consider the motives behind his messages. It makes less ecological sense to start with those points. Not because those things don't matter, but because those questions divert attention from the unintended consequences of responding to a person like Trump: who might be standing downstream from the fact check, what other networks could be activated by amplifying his latest lie, and the broader environmental impact of clogging the landscape, yet again, with his antidemocratic poison.

Focusing solely on Trump himself—or any other predator of his caliber—has another unintended consequence. It perpetuates the myth of the lone wolf. From this view, predators are atomistic; they're the beginning and the end of the conversation. But apex predators, presidential or otherwise, have *always* been raised by other apex predators, either directly, within an existing community, or indirectly, within the echo-system of a given ideology.

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate Miltner make a similar point in their analysis of the social, technological, and legal structures that cultivate misogynist expression online.⁶⁹ Sociologist Jessie Daniels likewise foregrounds the interconnections between white supremacists and mainstream culture. Racism emerges *from* these structures, Daniels argues, not outside of them.⁷⁰ These scholars avoid the pitfall—common in analyses of apex predators—of treating harmful action as singular, or worse, anomalous. The truth is much more complex. All misogyny is networked misogyny. All bigotry is networked bigotry. All

pollution is networked pollution. It might be tempting, even intuitive, to paint someone—from the president to a mass shooter—as the sole perpetrator of an attack. Especially if, technically, the perpetrator acted alone. But focusing on the individual tells a much smaller, much less revealing story. What needs telling, instead, is a story about how these predators are created and continually reinforced. Not just by other predators, but by expansive cultural systems that, on their face, might not seem related—or even remotely harmful.

Applied to Trump, sensitivity to these interconnections inspires whole new lines of questioning. Rather than asking, “what fresh hell did Trump stir up today?” an ecologically literate approach to the president would begin by asking, “what conditions have made this fresh hell possible?”—with an eye, always, toward the intended and unintended consequences of what Trump said, what the people reacting to him said, and what you’re about to say. The resulting stories would, obviously, have to do with Trump. But they wouldn’t be *about* him—certainly not separated from everything else.

An Ethics of Reciprocity

The question is, how do we translate ecological literacy into everyday action, particularly for those of us just sitting there, yet again, in our metaphorical aunt’s metaphorical backyard following the latest informational shitstorm, not sure what to do next?

Our proposal is network ethics, which foregrounds reciprocity, interdependence, and a shared responsibility for the whole digital ecosystem. Network ethics is fundamentally oriented toward justice and demands full-throated, strategic pushback against people who harm and dehumanize. That word “strategic” is key; network ethics is keenly attuned to how everyday actions impact others, particularly those already under siege—whether those effects are caused deliberately or inadvertently.

Needless to say, network ethics is not the norm online, where liberalism reigns. Negative freedoms animate everything from

platform design to moderation policies to user contributions. The liberalistic frame is epitomized by what danah boyd labels the “right to be amplified”: the assumption that I deserve to be heard, not just to speak, regardless of the impact that speech might have on others.⁷¹ Network ethics trades these negative freedoms for the positive freedoms of communitarian thinking: action designed to secure freedoms *for* everyone in the collective.⁷² Freedom that is equally distributed and enjoyed by all. Freedom that emerges from an acute understanding that all our freedoms are connected.

Feminist scholars long ago diagnosed the need for such an inversion. Writing in 1982, psychologist Carol Gilligan underscored the behavioral gulf between a “morality of rights,” predicated on independence, and a “morality of responsibility,” predicated on *interdependence*.⁷³ We’re in the mess we’re in because the individual has, in so many ways, from so many different directions, been privileged over the collective. Because a morality of rights is more interested in *me* than in *we*.

A morality of responsibility draws from a different taproot. It can, as a consequence, bear different fruit. Writing about ecological climate change, Robin Wall Kimmerer considers this possibility.⁷⁴ What would happen, she asks, if we shifted our culture of rights, whose narratives center on what’s *mine*, to a culture of responsibilities, whose narratives center on what’s *ours*? We could nurture relationships of gratitude and reciprocity. We could nurture appreciation for shared abundance. The gentleness of Kimmerer’s question and the poetry of her answer aren’t some floaty, idyllic, tree-hugging daydream. They speak bluntly to the existential threat that all living beings face. What is ultimately at issue, Kimmerer explains, is “the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal.”⁷⁵ Not to redirect our perspective from one frame to the other—or at least to try to move the needle away from individual rights and toward communitarian responsibility—is to court catastrophe. It is to keep doing what will, quite literally, destroy the world.

This is the steel at the core of the softness—or what might seem like softness to those who have internalized the misconception that softness is opposed to strength. Feminist philosopher Virginia Held presents a similar steeliness in her exploration of feminist ethics of care. “There is nothing soft-headed about care,” she writes, emphasizing that caring for others doesn’t mean retreating into a receptive, permissive, or weak place.⁷⁶ To care for others is to fight like hell so we all can survive. Otherwise the storms will keep coming, the marshes will keep flooding, and the most dangerous actors will keep roaring forward.

Bigger storms loom on the horizon. And yet our living rooms are still grimy from the ones we’re weathering right now. The final chapter ends our journey—and begins our journey—with a network ethics guide designed to help with the immediate cleanup. By thinking ecologically about the problem, we can begin acting ecologically. And by acting ecologically, we can begin shifting the paradigm, bit by bit, whether we’re average citizens or high-profile journalists or anything in between. These everyday cleanups might seem small and disconnected from systemic solutions. But in our networked ecosystem, there is no small or disconnected anything. More effectively, and of course more ethically, responding to today’s pollution is the first and most critical step in cultivating what we need more than anything: foundational, systematic, top-to-bottom change.

Chapter 5

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