

Alternative Facts: The Shifting Realities of Community, Media and Public Opinion
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It's my great honor to talk to you this afternoon, and to join my colleagues in welcoming the International Academic Forum to Hofstra University. We are very proud of Dr Rodney Hill's participation in your organization, and I am truly delighted to see you all here on our beautiful campus.

I am speaking to you just a few hours after we learned the results of a truly momentous election, an election in which early voting took place at record levels, and the overall voter turnout appears to have also set records for a midterm election. In my own school, the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication, 200 students of radio, television, journalism and other disciplines came together to produce four hours of live television, radio and internet coverage of the election, ending just after midnight this morning – reflecting their generation's deep interest in their own futures.

Increased participation and voter enthusiasm, in and of itself, would be considered by most committed lovers of democracy as a “good” – as a positive development, reflective of positive trends in our society. But we cannot celebrate increased participation in our democracy in isolation. We must also consider other trends in this election – including the rapid spread of demonstrably false information, the adoption of previously extremist views and so-called “conspiracy theories” by mainstream participants in the process, and the frightening increase in nationalist, misogynistic, racist, and even overtly violent rhetoric.

It is in that context that I want to speak to you about media and communication, and the delivery of facts, opinion, and “alternative facts,” into the bloodstream of American and global politics. And I would like to encourage you to think of these questions within the context of your broader theme – “Heritage and the City.”

It is a truism that “the city” – metaphorical and physical – is intrinsically tied to democracy. It was Athens, after all, arguably the most notable city of ancient times, that gave birth to the concepts and ideas that we most associate with democracy. And “city” and “community” have always been part of the same idea; the notion of shared physical and social space, the elevation of the common good through shared values and resources.

For a long time, various forms of communication and media have also grown to become an indispensable part of the social fabric of cities and communities. But now, it could be argued that media and communication have become a net negative to community and democracy – that the very freedom of communication that underpinned the emergence of so many societies into democracy, may now prove the undoing of democratic societies around the world. The key change, in my view, the monumental shift that we are only just beginning to understand and confront, is the wholesale movement of “community” from the brick and mortar world, to the digital world.

I am sure all of you have heard of “Craigslist.” This game-changing website burst into

existence in 1996 as an online marketplace for goods and services. A decade ago, founder Craig Newmark described it as “an online community of shared information, services, activities and ideas.” Even in 2006 it had more than five billion – that’s billion with a “B” – page-views each month. Mr. Newmark said the community had developed a culture of trust. Notably, one of the most dramatic innovations of Craigslist was a robust “personals” section – the first massively adopted online dating and matchmaking forum.

Ask almost any print journalist working in the early 2000’s about Craigslist, and they will undoubtedly point to the role Craigslist had in decimating a prime revenue source for most newspapers: classified advertisements. It’s fair to point out that if Craigslist had not been first to this task, some other web entrepreneur would undoubtedly have filled the gap. Classified ads were doomed one way or the other. But Craig Newmark’s invention undoubtedly hastened the trend – and dozens of newspapers shuttered their newsrooms as a result.

But even in those early days of Craigslist, Craig Newmark became something of a canary in the coal mine, as he began speaking and writing about how fragile the “culture of trust at Craigslist” could be in the online community he had created.

This was Craig, writing in Nieman Reports. “Beginning in early 2004, we noticed a surge of web-based efforts in our online forums to smear political candidates ... what was most disturbing is that the folks doing this would ‘spamvertise’ political talking points, even ones known to be fraudulent. Those who posted these notices would occasionally pretend to be different people, and post the erroneous information again. In this way, this decentralized network of posters would keep information in circulation ... What’s troubled me is that disinformation campaigns and information warfare appear to be amplified by the Internet. When the scent of bad information can taint a relationship built on trust, this poses problems for the Web.”

And the disintegration of trust – in our leaders, in our institutions, in the press and media – is a key feature of what is happening today. What Craig Newmark observed as a disturbing aspect of the Internet, has become perhaps its defining characteristic. Remember, his words of caution and concern were spoken the same year Twitter was just launched – and a year before the introduction of the iPhone.

Today, Craig Newmark is an active supporter of independent journalism. The CUNY Graduate School of Journalism is named after Craig and he has been generous, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars, in his support of that school and many other efforts to bolster journalism in this troubled time. Craig is right in pointing out how critical shared “trust” is to successful communities and cities. And as I mentioned a few moments ago, the disintegration of trust, in many directions, is probably the most disturbing trend we are witnessing today.

As an almost 40-year veteran of mass media, I’ve had the privilege of working with many talented journalists, and I have had the awesome responsibility of guiding programming – sometimes for hours or days at a stretch – that reached tens of millions of viewers worldwide. For most of my career, the major media organizations in the United States shared a common set of values and broadly similar codes of ethics. By and large, we all did our best to abide by the maxim of the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who famously said “You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.” This shared base of commonly held beliefs and knowledge had, I believe, a profound effect on American society, and injected a positive cohesive force at many times when society could easily have been fractured.

Some might argue that this era was defined by monolithic corporate control of media and journalism, and a certain “group think” that ignored issues and concerns that existed outside the Washington beltway and New York society. But think about it: when the major American networks, as a group, began to cover the Vietnam War in an aggressive, and independent way, America paid attention, and Americans began to demand an end to that conflict.

When American journalists brought their cameras to Alabama and Georgia and Mississippi, to bear witness to the peaceful protests of African Americans – and the violent reactions in those states – they provided the shared basis of facts that allowed John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to move forcefully to begin righting a century of wrongs. When President Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas, the entire American community mourned together – on television. Another set of shared experiences, shared realities, enabled by shared media.

Let me dig deeper into that time: were there extremists who celebrated the death of Kennedy, or the murder of civil rights workers in the south? Of course there were. But without the modern tools of social media, these fringe players in our cities and societies had to rely on risky strategies to connect with each other. They could not be anonymous – they had to meet in person or speak one-on-one in telephone conversations to share their extremism and build their hate.

In immunology, there is a concept called “herd immunity.” In a nutshell, the theory is that when an animal herd – or in my metaphor, a city or society – when that “herd” is immunized to the degree of 70 or 80 percent, the prevalence of the herd’s immunity causes the potential for infection even among the non-immunized 20 or 30 per cent to decrease. The shared immunity of the many protects and affects the non-immunized few. When it comes to extremism, I would argue that the shared reality and shared facts of mass media in the latter half of the 20th century provided us with a significant degree of that “herd immunity” in opinion and information. As that shared experience grew stronger – with the growth of television as a dominant medium – the Ku Klux Klan crumbled; social equality improved; popular concern for the environment turned into political action; an unpopular war was brought to an end; and in a variety of ways our cities and communities made progress on issues and challenges that had bedeviled them for generations.

But in the past decade, the explosion of interaction on the Internet, and particularly social media, has turned the tables on that construct. Those “non-immunized” 20 or 30 percenters are now able to connect electronically. Entirely new communities have formed, nationally and globally, aligned to shared beliefs and ideologies that could never have gained a foothold in prior times.

A young journalist named Ryan Broderick graduated from our Communication School seven years ago; today, he is deputy global news director of BuzzFeed, based in London. For the past month, he covered the final weeks of the presidential campaign in Brazil, where as you know, another long-ruling party has fallen to an extremist, nationalist candidate. Ryan has spent much of his brief career exploring the rapidly changing nature of the Internet and the interactions that increasingly characterize it. In the wake of Brazil’s election, he wrote this: “I’ve been to 22 countries, six continents, and been on the ground for close to a dozen referendums and elections. I was in London for the UK’s nervous breakdown over Brexit, in Barcelona for Catalonia’s failed attempts at a secession from Spain, in Sweden as neo-Nazis tried to march on the country’s largest book fair. And now, I’m in Brazil. But this era of being surprised at what the Internet can and will do to us is ending. The damage is done. I’m

trying to come to terms with the fact that I'll probably spend the rest of my career covering the consequences.”

Ryan Broderick is as attuned as anyone to the extremists experiencing rebirth in the dark corners of the web, on Reddit or 4Chan or Twitter. But increasingly he is focusing his attention not on them – but on the companies that enable them. Quoting Ryan again: “This new darkness lives almost exclusively on our smartphones and almost always involves exploiting an American company’s platform. Roughly 70% of smartphone users have an Android phone; the remaining 30% are on Apple. There are 2 billion monthly active Facebook users, 2 billion monthly active YouTube users, and 1.5 billion monthly active WhatsApp users. The way the world is using their phones is almost completely dominated by a few Silicon Valley companies. The abuse that is happening is due to their inability to manage that responsibility.”

I do not mean to suggest that I am here to argue that we should aim to “make mass media great again,” or to cast ourselves back into a pre-internet age. But I agree with Ryan Broderick that the damage being done to our societies by this new dynamic is undeniable. The manifest inability – some would say unwillingness – of the major players in social media to confront these issues is a real problem. The insistence of Mark Zuckerberg and his peers that they are merely technologists, offering a platform to the world for its use, belies their enormous responsibility they bear for where we are today.

Our physical communities made progress in the 20th century in controlling extremism, promoting civility and enforcing civil rights. Now much of that progress is at risk of being undone by a wild west of social media platforms, where extremism is celebrated and rewarded, “going viral” is the highest achievement, and facts – well, facts just don’t matter. What good does it do for each of us to shun and isolate extremists in our midst, if those same people can find each other – support each other, and egg each other on – by connecting online?

I was one of the millions of Americans who were shocked and terrified by the images of fascist, white nationalist marchers parading through a university campus in Charlottesville, Virginia last year. They gathered by their hundreds. Ask yourselves: is there any way this gathering of racists from across the country could EVER have been organized without social media?

Just a few days ago, a middle-aged white man burst into a yoga studio in Florida, shooting two women dead and wounding five more. His motivation? He was a rabid misogynist and a self-identified “in-cel” – or “involuntary celibate.” This is an entirely new community of frustrated, angry, woman-hating men who have connected online, built each other up, and moved each other to violence. The Florida shooter, it turns out, posted multiple violent, sexist and threatening messages and videos on Twitter and YouTube. Helpfully, those platforms closed his accounts only after he had committed murder.

Recently, another wild and thoroughly debunked story has rocketed through social media. Namely, the unfounded accusation that billionaire Jewish philanthropist and activist George Soros had funded and initiated the immigrant caravan making its way to the US border. USA TODAY painstakingly traced that particular lie, from its origins with an anti-semitic writer in North Carolina with 6,000 followers on Twitter just a few days after the caravan first left Honduras, when she posted about the caravan and simply added the word “Soros.” On the

same day, identical posts spread to six pro-Trump Facebook groups within 20 minutes. Within three days, the combined following of accounts mentioning both Soros and the caravan had expanded to 2 million people. Within four days, the Soros non-connection broke into the mainstream; a member of Congress posted a video to Twitter raising the question of a Soros connection to the caravan. Another day passed, and another influential voice joined the bandwagon: Donald Trump Jr. And within a few day yes, the President himself was tweeting about Soros funding the caravan. And Ann Coulter. And numerous other so-called conservative “influencers.” In short order, reports USA Today, the single posting from an anti-Semitic account had metastasized into a disinformational cancer, posted by 43-thousand accounts with a combined 125-million followers. Within just two weeks, the combined reach of this wholly manufactured lie was 98-million on Facebook and 274-million on Twitter. It was not much longer before police intercepted the first of many pipe bombs sent to George Soros and other prominent critics of Donald Trump.

There is another way in which the shared experience of community has been undermined in the last decade, and that is the radicalization and tribalism of news media. The major broadcast networks in the United States continue to hue, for the most part, to the ethics and ideals of the latter 20th century. Watch ABC News, NBC News or CBS News and you will generally see similar coverage, similar story choices, and a broad consensus on the facts. The same can be said of our shrinking collection of major newspapers. But the broadcast networks are no longer where the action is in digital and video journalism. The cable news networks are the new “influencers” and in that realm the reality has radically changed. Viewers of Fox News experience an entirely different world than viewers of MSNBC. There is either (A) a dangerous caravan infiltrated by terrorists and convicted murderers and drug dealers about to attack the southern border or (B) there is a shrinking and bedraggled group of oppressed asylum seekers, mainly women and children, struggling to move north but still hundreds of miles from the US border. There is either (A) a dramatic improvement in the lives of working Americans thanks to the Trump administration’s tax cut or (B) a dramatic improvement in the lives of the wealthiest Americans, at the expense of working men and women.

Just a few days ago, two of the most prominent anchors of one of those networks saw nothing inappropriate in appearing on stage at a rally staged by President Trump and speaking enthusiastically on his behalf. One of them even pointed at his colleagues on the press riser, journalists from his own newsroom, and called them FAKE NEWS as the crowd jeered.

This world of two realities is becoming a defining characteristic of our politics, and sadly, our civic life ... and last night’s election results bore that out, as democrats grew their strength in suburban and urban areas, while republicans grew in rural areas. Each of our political tribes circled its wagons. Were we to transplant Rome to modern times, there would be not one Roman forum, but two competing forums.

As you all undoubtedly heard, the reality of this new media order was confirmed by Kelly Ann Conway, one of Donald Trump’s closest advisors, in an infamous television interview early in the Trump Administration. Confronted with facts by my former colleague Chuck Todd, she declared “You have your facts, and we have ... alternative facts.” What has made all of these trends, and all of these phenomena, so disturbing, is that they are now beginning to visibly and rapidly erode the norms that have underpinned our civic life for decades. My former colleagues in the news media are still trying to figure out how to respond to what is happening, and how to stem the rapid decline in trust they are experiencing from the public.

But there is no question that the traditional tools simply do not work.

Confronted with a President, and his acolytes, who lie frequently, strategically, and shamelessly, journalists have been aggressive in their fact-checking and declarative exposure of falsehoods and exaggerations. But Brad Heath, an investigative journalist who has had a hand in fact-checking and debunking lies told by President Trump, has identified the problem with his own work: “One of the ways lies ... spread – a way fantasy mutates into fact – or at least a subject of debate – is when the Press reports that they’re false.” If a student burst through our door right now and declared that the world was flat, we would all – rightly – ignore him. But if Donald Trump declares the world to be flat – it is dutifully reported and debunked. But it’s becoming clear that debunking from a thoroughly discredited press is not effective. It is even counter-effective – spreading a lie rather than suppressing it.

Ezra Klein, a veteran political journalist and editor-at-large at VOX, puts it bluntly and alarmingly. “I’m a political journalist,” he says. “I believe in my profession. But right now, I’m worried we’re failing. I’m worried we’re making American politics worse, not better. We’re getting played by outrage merchants and con artists and trolls and polarizers who understand this world better. We’re being used to fracture American democracy, and I don’t think we know how to stop it.”

Ezra’s assessment is not only sobering – it’s chilling.

I do not come before you with answers to these challenges. But as you contemplate Heritage and the City, I hope you will reflect on the profound role of cities as harbors of freedom and justice, of creativity and progress. I hope we will – with time and perhaps with the help of some of the students we are teaching today – find ways to address these disturbing trends and reconnect with the civic virtues and democratic ideals that have been our strength for many generations.

Thank you.

ⁱ Mark Lukasiewicz is Dean of the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University. He is a veteran producer, journalist, and media executive who has spent his professional career telling important stories to worldwide audiences and helping media organizations deal with transformational change.

Most recently, he was senior vice president of specials at NBC News, planning and supervising coverage of major breaking news events such as the death of Osama bin Laden, the visit of Pope Francis to the United States, and presidential elections and debates from 2004 to 2016. Also at NBC, he served as NBC News’ first vice president of digital media, and later as executive-in-charge of the NBC News Group Transformation Project, a multiyear redesign and reimagining of technology, workspace, and workflow across NBC Universal’s news platforms.

Before NBC, Lukasiewicz spent 11 years at ABC News where he was executive producer of Good Morning America, senior producer of World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, and senior producer of Primetime Live with Diane Sawyer and Sam Donaldson. In his decades-long career, he has produced numerous live and long-form programs, winning 10 Emmys, two Peabody Awards, and the Grand Prize of the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards, among other journalism and international film festival awards. He has also taught video storytelling at the Columbia Journalism School, and has been a featured speaker at professional conferences in the United States and abroad.

A native of Canada, Lukasiewicz began his career as a reporter and columnist with The Globe and Mail and later as a senior producer with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). He earned a BA in economics (with honors) from the University of Toronto.

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