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SchwartzReport

Consciousness, and the weaponization of lies

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Lies – misinformation or disinformation in its polite academic and media dress – fills the news today. Endless stories of lying Congress members, dark money PACs spreading conspiracy theories, media's deliberate use of misinformation. Not a day goes by without some headline in this realm. The use of such information, however, is not new, although it has never been as prevalent as it is today. Promoting fake news is an ancient tool of power. The weaponization of misinformation for such purposes dates back to Babylon at least 3000 years ago according to research done by Martin Worthington, a fellow at St. John's College at Cambridge University. Worthington is an Assyriologist who specializes in Babylonian grammar, literature, and medicine, and he describes the first example he found in Babylonian literature, "Ea (a Babylonian god) tricks humanity by spreading fake news. He tells the Babylonian Noah, known as Uta-napishti, to promise his people that food will rain from the sky if they help him build the ark. What the people do not realize is that Ea's nine-line message is a trick: it is a sequence of sounds that can be understood in radically different ways, like English 'ice cream' and 'I scream'." ¹

Martin says that while the "message seems to promise a rain of food, its hidden meaning warns of the Flood. It may be the earliest ever example of fake news."²

So, if fake news is not new and is and has been prevalent all over the world, what is different today? The answer, I think, is the internet in all its various forms and the weaponization of lies in a manner and to a degree never seen before in human history. Almost without real consideration of its impact we have undergone a fundamental and existential transformation of our culture through the digitization of information. Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Align, and all the rest of the digital information spigots operate with very little oversight as to the accuracy of material found on their sites, and in many cases, with the deliberate intent to create a political result through misinformation. I want to take two aspects of this trend to give a sense of the effect it can have.

The role of misinformation, and its power, have been very clear in the Covid crisis, and it has been going on long enough to draw some fact based conclusions about this culture shaping trend. A trend that is literally a matter of life or death. National Public Radio (npr), working with the Kaiser Family Foundation, pulled the relevant data together: the number of deaths per 100,000 across the U.S. by calculating the deaths per 100,000 in roughly 300 counties. They reported, "Since May 2021, people living in counties that voted heavily for Donald Trump during the last presidential election have been nearly three times as likely to die from COVID-19 as those who live in areas that went for now-President Biden."³ (See Fig. 1)

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It would be hard to get to a better example of misinformation then influencing and shaping people to create an objectively verifiable death cult. I have previously discussed in *Explore* in much greater detail how this death cult arose and what it tells us about American, and in some ways, all the cultures of the world.⁴ Here it is the conclusion that matters. People were indoctrinated, seduced, whatever word you like, to ignore readily available information because misinformation displaced it. These people literally programed their consciousness to willful ignorance.

And part of the power of this misinformation is based on the conscious and explicit collaboration between the evangelical Christian movement and the Republican Party with the intent to degrade the quality of public education because the more educated a person becomes the more likely they are to vote Democratic and be less adherent to the peculiarities of evangelicalism. To give you a sense of where elementary school public education is today compared with the past, consider this 1895 graduation exam given to 8th grade students who had been taught in an all-grades one room rural Kansas schoolhouse. Here's just a sample.⁵ Try it yourself:

GRAMMAR

(Time, one hour)

1. Give nine rules for the use of Capital Letters.
2. Name the Parts of Speech and define those that have no modifications.
3. Define Verse, Stanza and Paragraph.
4. What are the Principal Parts of a verb? Give Principal Parts of do, lie, lay and run.
5. Define Case. Illustrate each case.
6. What is Punctuation? Give rules for principal marks of Punctuation.

7-10 Write a composition of about 150 words and show therein that you understand the practical use of the rules of grammar.

ARITHMETIC

(Time, 1 ¼ h)

1. Name and define the Fundamental Rules of Arithmetic.
2. A wagon box is 2 ft. deep, 10 feet long, and 3 ft. wide. How many bushels of wheat will it hold?
3. If a load of wheat weights 3942 lbs., what is it worth at 50 cts. Per bu., deducting 1050 lbs for tare?
4. District No. 33 has a valuation of \$35,000. What is the necessary levy to carry on a school seven months at \$50 per month, and have \$104 for incidentals?
5. Find cost of 6720 lbs. coal at \$6.00 per ton.

6. Find the interest of \$512.60 for 8 months and 18 days at 7 per cent.
7. What is the cost of 40 boards 12 inches wide and 16 ft. long at \$20 per m?
8. Find bank discount on \$300 for 90 days (no grace) at 10 per cent.
9. What is the cost of a square farm at \$15 per acre, the distance around which is 640 rods?
10. Write a Bank Check, a Promissory Note, and a Receipt.

I go into this issue about education because it plays such a significant role in the success of the weaponization of lies. Here is an example of what I mean. Last summer on the 25th of July, Jeremy McAnulty, the director of health protection in Australia's state of New South Wales misspoke. A simple mistake any of us could have made. McAnulty said 141 people were currently hospitalized with Covid, and 43 of those were in intensive care. He added, "All but one are vaccinated."⁶ To anyone familiar with the widely disseminated data on Covid McAnulty's statement was absurd; it could not possibly be true since the math of the pandemic showed clearly that unvaccinated people all over the world make up the majority of hospital patients. He must have misspoken, and in fact that is exactly what he had done. Almost immediately upon realizing this he issued a correction. "I think I misspoke before. Of the 43 people in intensive care units, 42 have not been vaccinated."⁷

But his first statement had been recorded, and although obviously a mistake it was picked by anti-vaxxers around the world and posted on social media like Facebook and Twitter, claiming that McAnulty's statement showed that vaccines were "literally useless."⁸ As a result untold thousands too innumerate to comprehend McAnulty's mistatement felt they were justified in their opposition to vaccines.

Why would someone train themselves to be willfully ignorant? The answer I think is fear. If one looks at the experimental data one quickly discerns something widely known in the relevant science circles, but almost never discussed in the general media or taught in schools: the role of the amygdala in human fear. A search of the National Library of Medicine of the National Center for Biotechnology Information on the

term "the emotional brain fear and the amygdala" produces an astonishing 4,709 results, and they all support a single hypothesis: the amygdala is a prime factor in the processing of human fear.⁹ And although we rarely discuss it in these terms, fear is now one of the central cultural features of American society. It is present in other societies worldwide as well, but few have such a virulent racial fear as in the United States. It is baked into the country's founding documents, and I want to use this fear trend as a second illustration of the power of lies. There is no time in American history when racial fear has not been present.

The Second Amendment exists in large part because of race and fear. The Southern states were culturally structured on race. White people owned Black people, imported them from Africa, and bred them like dogs to get more. The flesh of Black humans was the principal wealth of many Southern Whites. It created obvious fear in Blacks and fear in Whites because of occasional rebellions and frequent runaways. Duke professor William Sandy Darity compiled the actual data and reported: "In 1860, 1% of white southern families owned 200 or more human beings, but in states of the Confederacy, at least 20% owned at least one and in Mississippi and South Carolina (this) ran as high as fifty percent."¹⁰

U.S. civil war expert Al Mackey backs up the Darity research. "... according to the Census of 1860, 30.8% of the free families in the confederacy owned slaves. That means that every third white person in those states had a direct commitment to slavery."¹¹ More than enough to shape the culture. And they wanted slave hunters to be able to cross over into non-slave owning states retaining their right to bear arms, under protection of federal law recapture runaways, whatever the local state law said.

The Frontier states had a separate racial issue. They wanted the right to bear arms to defend themselves against Native Americans who resisted the takeover of their land. And the strategy agreed to by all states, slave or non-slave owning, was that rather than maintain an army

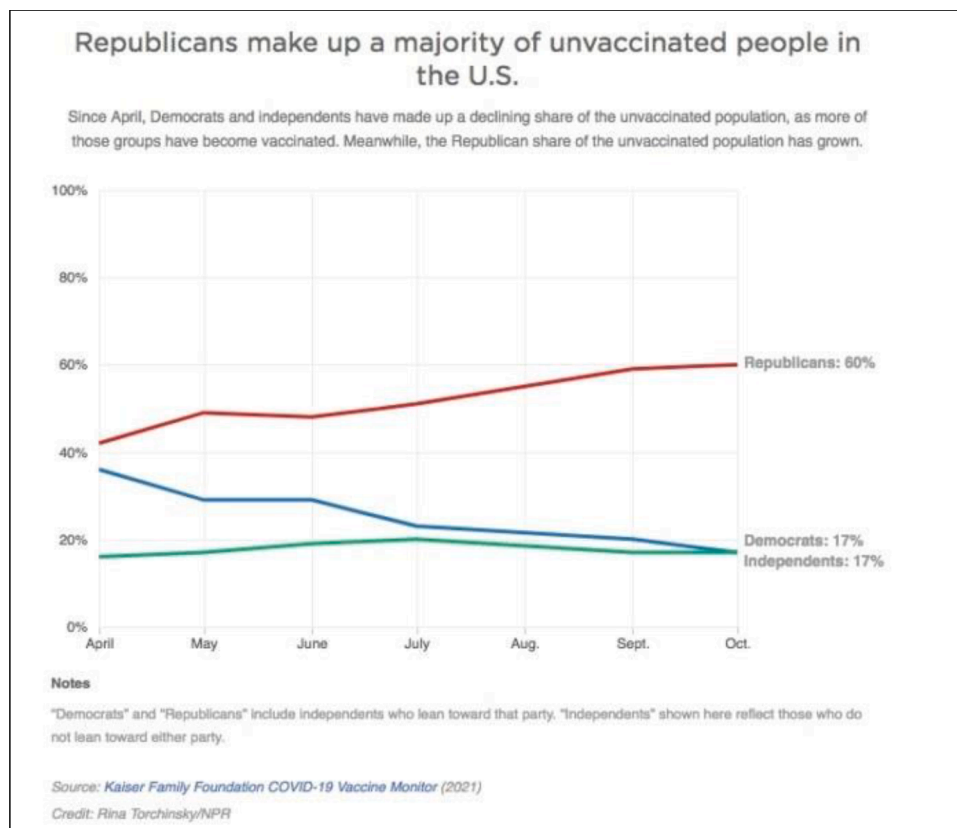


Fig. 1.

each state would have militias. Few Americans seem to realize that the Constitution establishes a navy but not an army. Why? Because on 24th March 1765, in order to control their colonies in North America the British parliament passed the Quartering Act, requiring Americans to house and feed British troops, which placed the Americans under constant surveillance.¹² Driven by the consciousness of fear, brought on by their experience with Quartering, the Founders made their decision not to create a standing army.

Although not much discussed, today we are living through a third incarnation of racially driven amygdala fear because we are becoming a majority minority nation, and somewhere between 2040 and 2045 we will cross that line. That is provoking existential fear in a segment of the White population and that is the cause of an endless stream of misinformation. And that has become linked with another fear, the christofascist fear and loathing of the LGBTQ communities. There is an obsession with heterosexuality in the christofascist world because the LGBTQ community is growing. A Gallup survey in February 2022 found that 7.1% of adult American men and women, that is 24 million individuals identify as LGBTQ, and the data shows the number is growing year-by-year.¹³ To give you a sense of scale, people identifying as LGBTQ constitute more than a million more people than the total of all the Methodists (6,268,310), Presbyterians (1,245,354), Jews (7,600,000), Muslims (3,450,000), Buddhists (4,170,000), and Quakers (75,000) in the United States. And, of course, many in the LGBTQ community also belong to one of those faiths.

All of this, the anti-vaxxer misinformation, the anti-masker lies, the White supremacy lies, the critical race theory lies, the teachers promoting pedophilia nonsense, and the anti-LGBTQ lies, are the work of individuals who either are not smart enough, literate enough, or numerate enough to understand what they are repeating or, if they are, are spreading these lies consciously and deliberately to weaponize them for political purposes. And this weaponization is being made possible because of the historically novel development of electronic media which gives a bullhorn to potentially millions. This is distorting American society in ways great and small.

The challenge, for which no one seems to have a practical solution, is how does a democracy that values free speech deal with the deliberate weaponization of lies in a world where one anonymous person can set in motion something that influences the thinking, the actions, the voting, of millions?

The reference often made is to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes' now famous decision in the case of *Schenck v United States* on 3 March 1919 clarifying the meaning of "free speech."¹⁴ It was a classic case of the weaponization of misinformation. Socialists Charles Schenck and Elizabeth Baer distributed leaflets stating that the military conscription of World War I was a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment's prohibition against involuntary servitude. Schenck and Baer were arrested and charged with conspiracy to violate the Espionage Act of 1917 by attempting to obstruct the draft and advocate insubordination in the military. They were convicted and appealed to the Supreme Court on the ground that the statute violated their first amendment rights to "freedom of speech." The court's decision was unanimous, and Holmes wrote the opinion comparing the leaflets with their false information to falsely shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater, which was not permitted under the First Amendment.

The problem we face today, of course, is that posting something on

Facebook that is picked up and reposted on Twitter, then picked up again and posted on TikTok, where over a few days it can be seen by thousands or even millions across the country, or even the world, is not the same as handing out a few hundred leaflets on street corners in one city.

Unfortunately, neither the President, the Congress, nor the Supreme Court has really taken up the issue of the electronic digital distribution of weaponized lies and misrepresentation. And so, like a paranoid schizophrenic drug addict who refuses treatment and whose acts are driven by false information, the American culture is being devoured from within by the weaponization of lies and the consciousness it produces that in turn shapes our society.

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