

ful of a Clinton presidency. (Common denominator: fear.) Fox's highest-rated shows reinforced this point of view night after night. "The conservative entertainment news complex has constructed an alternative reality so all-encompassing that the chance of conservatives happening on any sort of good news is virtually nil," Jason Sattler wrote in *USA Today*. This foreboding view of the world benefitted Trump.

A Suffolk poll in October showed that people who trusted Fox over other networks were way gloomier about the health of the economy than, say, people who trusted CNN or CBS the most. Only 11 percent of Fox devotees said America was in an economic recovery, when the recovery had been going on for years. Fox loyalists were also more likely than other news consumers to say they were concerned about political corruption, media bias, and the bogeyman of voter fraud that Trump kept talking about. Many of these viewers were primed to lose, which made Trump's victory all the more shocking. Now they felt like they were gaining power for the first time in years, in the most surprising of ways, with the most surprising of leaders. Fox felt like the home team, with one of the network's super-fans ascending to the presidency. Like many of Fox's super-fans, he was resentful of news outlets that didn't reflect his view of the world. Now he had the unique power to do something about it. Trump was determined to delegitimize anyone who stood in his way.

While he was still president-elect in January 2017, Trump seized on the term "fake news"—which was coined by reporters and researchers to describe made-up stories on social media—and co-opted it as a bludgeon, a diversion, and a punchline. "Fake news" meant Russian propaganda and clickbait, but for his base Trump defined

it as "news you shouldn't believe." The most important thing he did during the pre-election campaign was to turn "fake news" into a slur fit for a campaign of disbelief, as best conveyed by the contrast between what you are seeing and what you are hearing. He suggested with disturbing clarity that the entire election was a hoax. It was straight out of George Orwell. "The Party told you to reject the facts of life, to reject reality, to reject what was their final, most essential condition."

Disbelief of, and disdain for, the reality of Fox's business model in 1996 was one thing. But the arrival of Trump's presidency. But the arrival of something even bigger: The utter triumph of the Republican Party. The anti-intellectual resistance to settled scientific agencies—"it's all one thing," say, all part of the same rejection of anyone who claims to know better. It came from liberals like Rosen. It came from tankers Norm Ornstein and Tom Clapper. "Ideologically extreme" and "misunderstanding of facts, evidence, and the historic polarization" afflicted the country. It moved more radically to the right. It accused Fox of being partly responsible. It faulted the GOP establishment, like Fox's own Bartlett, were equally outspoken. It faulted the Fox echo chamber.

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Bartlett, were equally outspoken about this radicalization and also the GOP establishment, like former Reagan and Bush aide Bruce accused Fox of being partly responsible. Some veteran members of moved more radically to the right than liberals had to the left, and ric polarization” afflicted the country, meaning conservatives had derstanding of facts, evidence, and science.” They said “asymmet-
“ideologically extreme” and “unpersuaded by conventional un- tankers Norm Ornstein and Thomas Mann described the GOP as come from liberals like Rosen. In 2012 the straight-edge DC think anyone who claims to know better. These observations didn’t just say, all part of the same rejection of expertise and resentment of agencies—“it’s all one thing,” as media scholar Jay Rosen liked to resistance to settled scientific fact, the contempt for intelligence publican Party. The anti-intellectual positioning of the party, the thing even bigger: The utter transformation of the Fox-fueled Re- Trump’s presidency. But the anti-media posture was part of some- of Fox’s business model in 1996, and it became the cornerstone of Disbelief of, and disdain for, the news media was the cornerstone was their final, most essential command.”

“The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It hoax. It was straight out of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: He suggested with disturbing regularity that everything could be a you are seeing and what you are reading is not what’s happening.”
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news source for millions of Americans. This has had profound political implications that are only starting to be appreciated. Indeed, it can almost be called self-brainwashing—many conservatives now refuse to even listen to any news or opinion not vetted through Fox, and to believe whatever appears on it as the gospel truth.”

This had dangerous consequences during the coronavirus outbreak in 2020. At that time, Bartlett argued that “Murdoch and the Fox brainwashing operation are risks to public health.”

By then, the president had been telling people to suspend belief for three full years.

The first time he did it, he was in a rage against the U.S. intelligence community’s conclusion that Russia intervened to help him win the election. As Obama ordered a full review of the Russian plot, Trump was in denial about it, telling Fox’s Chris Wallace in December that “I think it’s just another excuse. I don’t believe it.” Under pressure from the press corps, Trump eventually said he accepted the intel agencies’ consensus view that Russia that was behind the cyberattack. Then came CNN’s exclusive about the Steele dossier on January 10: “Intel chiefs presented Trump with claims of Russian efforts to compromise him.” The story was airtight—the meeting happened as described—and it shook Trump to his core. “FAKE NEWS—A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!” he tweeted a few hours later. He brought the term “fake news” with him to a previously scheduled press conference the next day.

The dossier, thirty-five pages full of allegations of Trump’s links to Russia, was all anyone could talk about. CNN did not publish the dossier’s contents, since the info was unvetted and some of it was virtually impossible to confirm, but *BuzzFeed* did publish it—even the part about Trump supposedly paying Russian prostitutes for a “golden showers” show at the Ritz-Carlton in Moscow in 2013. *BuzzFeed*’s rationale was that the dossier’s claims had already “cir-

culated at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Trump should be able to read it and “make sense of it.” But at CNN criticized *BuzzFeed*’s decision to publish the dossier—Trump—he attacked both news organizations. He printed the salacious claims. He used the same claims on other outlets, claiming to distinguish between the media like a regulator saying this or that is banned.

Some people at Fox saw through the president’s reporting on the Russian matter was a lie. The document dump executed by the president’s team, Shep Smith said at the end of his show, “I cannot confirm CNN’s report, it is a lie. Correspondents followed journalistic standards. Any other journalists should be subject to the same scrutiny by the president-elect of the United States.”

Shep claimed to be speaking for the “majority of Americans.” News”—but he couldn’t truly speak for the majority. Hannity felt a proverbial thrill up the spine. The press conference today was the single most important event of the week. Left, abusively biased mainstream media,” Hannity declared. He one-upped the other viewers to “be prepared” because of the president.” By “they,” he meant the media.

Hannity and Trump worked hard to make the entire American news media as “fake news.” The message was that Fox was the only legitimate news source. Hannity reinforced the message of his show. Every night, he served up the same ingredients—mashed-up news, conspiracy theories, things he didn’t like, graphics of c-

culated at the highest levels of the US government," and Americans should be able to read it and "make up their own minds." Anchors at CNN criticized *BuzzFeed's* decision, but that didn't matter to Trump—he attacked both news outlets and acted like CNN had printed the salacious claims. He used his press conference to praise other outlets, claiming to distinguish between "good" and "bad" media like a regulator saying this product is approved and that one is banned.

Some people at Fox saw through the act. "CNN's exclusive reporting on the Russian matter was separate and distinctly different from the document dump executed by an online news property," Shep Smith said at the end of his show. "Though we at Fox News cannot confirm CNN's report, it is our observation that its correspondents followed journalistic standards and that neither they nor any other journalists should be subjected to belittling and delegitimizing by the president-elect of the United States."

Shep claimed to be speaking for the network—"we at Fox News"—but he couldn't truly speak for the network because Hannity felt a proverbial thrill up the leg as Trump spoke. "Trump's press conference today was the single greatest beat-down of the alt-left, abusively biased mainstream media in the history of the country," Hannity declared. He one-upped Trump's attacks and told his viewers to "be prepared" because "they're going to try to destroy the president." By "they," he meant the media.

Hannity and Trump worked hand in hand to tar practically the entire American news media as "fake." Both men's hypnotic message was that Fox was the only legit network while everyone else was fraudulent. Hannity reinforced this position on every episode of his show. Every night, he served the exact same meal, made from the same ingredients—mashed-up videos of commentators saying things he didn't like, graphics of cherry-picked information from

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Clinton campaign chair John Podesta's stolen emails, slogans like "media mob." Hannity took examples of individual journalists acting friendly with the Clinton campaign, ignored the fact that the same coziness happened on the Trump side too, and alleged "all these major news organizations" were "colluding with Hillary." This rubbish, repeated every night, was pure propaganda in service of Trump's campaign of disbelief. Hannity's effect was to say to viewers, You can't trust anyone or anything but me. There was nothing equivalent to this on the left. Nothing even close.

Jay Rosen described it as an "information loop" where all the information about Trump came from Trump or his approved surrogates. "It's as if one-third of the public has been broken off from the rest of the electorate and isolated in an information system of its own," he told me. "It's not only that they are inclined to trust the president more than the news system, it's that the White House and Trump himself are trying to eviscerate the whole idea of a public record or of an independent source of facts on which the country can disagree and argue about. And I think that goes way beyond the notion of bias in the media or 'look skeptically at what you are told.' It's actually an authoritarian news system that is up and running in the country that is known for having the freest press in the world."

The system delivered un-news while trying to destroy traditional sources of news. And the president-elect preferred the authoritarian approach.

"The crowds were much, much smaller"

From the day of his inauguration, Trump was the say-anything president. He valued feelings over facts. And he needed his two Seans, Hannity and Spicer, to do the same.

The president's early morning very first day waking up in the White House. We know this, but the inauguration crowd on the left. Trump was watching CNN's *Early Morning News* inauguration. At 5:19 a.m. anchor Josh Rogin and said, "One thing people are saying is that the crowd size is smaller than I think it's just worth showing the crowd size."

"I mean, Donald Trump leading the parade, people to come here and said they were smaller than the crowds. It doesn't look like they were smaller at the difference—"

On screen, a CNN.com graphic showed the crowd on the left and Trump's supporters on the right. Along the Mall, there were even more people than Berman's co-anchor Christine Romo.

Yes, Rogin said, "the crowds were much smaller than I think it's just worth showing the crowd size. Yes, he was right, but he was also sympathetic to the fact that many of Trump's supporters couldn't take off work to travel to Washington, D.C. no doubt that the crowds were much smaller."

Trump heard this accurate comparison and blew a gasket. He called and screamed at CNN DC. He called and screamed at CNN DC. At 9 a.m. Feist found video of the segment. It was fair. But Trump remained enraged.

"We need to figure something out about the crowds. Sanders and other aides."

Spicer, at this point, was still the reliable Republican comms guy with a big mouth but not lying. He was trying to fix the problem.

The president's early morning TV watching hurt him on his very first day waking up in the White House. Most people don't know this, but the inauguration crowd size debacle started because Trump was watching CNN's *Early Start* the morning after the inauguration. At 5:19 a.m. anchor John Berman turned to journalist Josh Rogin and said, "One thing people are discussing today, Josh, and I think it's just worth showing the picture, is the difference in crowd size."

"I mean, Donald Trump leading up to this had been calling on people to come here and said they were going to break records with the crowds. It doesn't look like they did," Berman said. "If you look at the difference—"

On screen, a CNN.com graphic showed Obama's historic 2009 crowd on the left and Trump's sparse crowd on the right. "You can see, along the Mall, there were empty spaces this time around," Berman's co-anchor Christine Romans said.

Yes, Rogin said, "the crowds were objectively smaller." Rogin was right, but he was also sympathetic to Trump. He pointed out that many of Trump's supporters hailed from faraway states and couldn't take off work to travel to DC. But, he concluded, "there's no doubt that the crowds were much, much smaller."

Trump heard this accurate comment about his crowd size and blew a gasket. He called and screamed at Sean Spicer, who in turn called and screamed at CNN DC bureau chief Sam Feist around 9 a.m. Feist found video of the segment in question, and saw that it was fair. But Trump remained enraged.

"We need to figure something out," Spicer told Sarah Huckabee Sanders and other aides.

Spicer, at this point, was still tethered to reality. He was a reasonable Republican comms guy with a twenty-year record of spinning but not lying. He was trying to fall in line and serve the presi-

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dent his party had elected—but it was excruciating. A 5:19 a.m. segment seen by half a million viewers had lit a presidential fuse. CNN had mentioned it again an hour later with the banner: “TRUMP DRAWS SMALLER CROWD THAN OBAMA FOR INAUGURATION.” And *The New York Times* posted its own compare-and-contrast widget. For the news outlets, this was just one small item out of dozens of stories and segments, but for Trump, it was all that mattered. Nothing of his could be smaller than Obama’s. “He wants me to say it was the largest crowd to ever witness an inauguration,” Spicer told his aides.

In my view, this absurd Saturday set the tone for Trump’s entire presidency, including his relationship with Fox and other television networks. Because after he watched *Early Start*, Trump flipped to Fox and soaked up *Fox & Friends* praise for his “American carnage” speech. He tweeted a thank-you to @FoxNews. It was already clear that Fox was going to be his safe space, a humiliation-free zone, while the other channels were going to burst his bubble.

Since Trump demanded that his press secretary retaliate, the White House announced that Spicer would address the press corps in the briefing room at 4:30. I was on an Amtrak train to DC, so I turned on a CNN livestream on my phone, curious to see what was about to happen. But CNN didn’t carry Spicer’s tirade live. Why? Because Feist had been dealing with this issue all day, so he knew Spicer was going to come out and lie to the press corps. Why amplify that lie without any context? Instead, CNN producers showed the press conference on a tape delay and the anchors refuted Spicer’s comments with facts.

Was that the right way to handle a livestream of wrongness? Discussions about journalism in the age of alternative facts lit up newsrooms in the early days of the Trump presidency. What were

the best ways to fact-check the W times when Trump aides came on public? Should those aides continue irresponsible to show Trump’s presumed journalism conferences for at Fox barely had these debates. For stunt live. It was a metaphor for what the other networks did and contrarian . . . or call it being part

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Feist was in the briefing room whidium. Afterward, Spicer brought office and lectured him. Then Spicer asked the White House operator to proceed to yell at the CNN executives. Trump cared so much about this thing that he was still venting about rage and Spicer’s presser turned crest of the weekend. So Trump’s on the job.

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the best ways to fact-check the White House's lies? What about the times when Trump aides came on network shows and deceived the public? Should those aides continue to be booked? Was it just plain irresponsible to show Trump's rallies live? These questions consumed journalism conferences for months. But the decision-makers at Fox barely had these debates. Fox carried every second of Spicer's stunt live. It was a metaphor for the next few years: Fox watched what the other networks did and did the opposite. Call it being contrarian . . . or call it being part of the cover-up.

For the Murdochos, it was a business calculation. Fox filled a void in the marketplace and fomented a cult following. For the producers, similarly, it was a ratings maneuver. And for some of the hosts it was a political strategy, advancing a GOP agenda. The result: Inexcusable stupidity, duplicity, and treachery got excused. Inauguration weekend illustrated it perfectly.

Feist was in the briefing room when Spicer went out to the podium. Afterward, Spicer brought Feist back to his West Wing office and lectured him. Then Spicer told his aides to leave and asked the White House operator to patch in the president. Trump proceeded to yell at the CNN executive for close to half an hour. Trump cared so much about this coverage from five in the morning that he was still venting about it at six in the evening. Trump's rage and Spicer's presser turned crowd size into a top story for the rest of the weekend. So Trump's narcissism ruined his first days on the job.

In my estimation, the say-anything president lost the benefit of the doubt somewhere between January 21, when he said that the skies became "really sunny" right after his inaugural address, when

it was excruciating. A 5:19 a.m. viewers had lit a presidential fuse. an hour later with the banner: ER CROWD THAN OBAMA and *The New York Times* posted its lighter. For the news outlets, this was ens of stories and segments, but for d. Nothing of his could be smaller say it was the largest crowd to ever told his aides.

Friday set the tone for Trump's entire relationship with Fox and other television *atched Early Start*, Trump flipped to its praise for his "American carnage" to @FoxNews. It was already clear ate space, a humiliation-free zone, going to burst his bubble.

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in fact it remained cloudy with occasional sprinkles, and January 24, when he claimed that 3 to 5 million people voted illegally in the election that he won. He proved that his words were worthless, yet they were taken so seriously by his converts, and thus they remained newsworthy.

This was true in 2017 and it remained true in 2020. So much of what came out of Trump's mouth was inaccurate, illogical, or incoherent. But Fox's shows still generally took his words seriously. Segments were centered around his point of view, even when his point of view made no sense. On Fox, his failures were treated gently. His lies were ignored almost completely.

For Hannity and his acolytes, it was pretty easy to perform this way, because they believed the No. 1 story Fox sold: That no matter what, the Democrats were worse. But other hosts had to swallow hard and come up with different justifications for their jobs. "We speak the conservative language," one anchor said, in an attempt to explain the bullshit. With all the anti-Trump conservatives seeking refuge on CNN and MSNBC, Fox defaulted to the pro-Trump language. "We're a business," another anchor said. "It's as simple as that." There was no big behind-the-scenes meeting, no single moment when new marching orders were delivered. There was just a capitulation. "The Republican party was co-opted by the Trump movement, and that's what happened to Fox too, in the absence of anyone at the top setting any other direction," a producer who was on the inside for decades said.

When Ailes was the ruler, everyone knew who they were trying to impress. The channel was produced for an audience of one. Without him, "there was a power vacuum, and everyone was afraid to fill it," a former host said. So the channel was still produced for an audience of one—but now it was for Trump, not Ailes.

How did it come to this? Ask *Fox & Friends*.

"You're getting much better"

The first time I found myself at a *tan*, one of my editors at *The New York Times* used the "fake it till you make it" aphorism. "That's what we all did, faked it till it became real," he said. It was like it was an actual secret. It was a secret that commentators too, like Heather Nauert, knew.

An Illinois native, Nauert was on TV. She broke through in 1990 on a long-forgotten talk show on a channel that was a perfectly fine starting point for her. It was about repetition. You've gotta do it over and over, just like an athlete. That's what she did. When the Lewinsky scandal broke, there was a demand for analysts on the news. As *The Washington Post* conservative "pundettes" satisfied the demand, so did women who were predictably and

During the Clinton impeachment, she took a job at Fox, in large part thanks to her previous work. She was then the top producer for the show. Fox conferred an impressive reputation on her. The only drawback was that she was not the party or for any campaign. "The show was told Farhi.

And if you think of segments on the show, well then, she was a GOP

Farhi was so intrigued by Nauert's work that she hired her in 2000, when she was thirty. The show's head was still new and strange back then, and it offered an astonishing variety of political and