

Red, White & Blind

*The Truth About Disinformation
and the Path to Media Consciousness*

Tony Brasunas

TORCHPOST

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JOIN THE AWAKENING, OPEN YOUR MIND

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Those who tell the stories rule society.

- Plato

FOREWORD

IT'S A TRUISM IN THE WORLD OF ADDICTION THERAPY, OR THERAPY OF any kind, that the treatment process begins with an acknowledgement of the problem. Well, we have a problem. A big problem. The American media, the free press enshrined not just in our Constitution but in the very fabric of our democracy, is in a state of crisis. What makes matters worse is that the people seemingly in the best position to address this problem refuse to recognize its existence. In fact, they openly champion the “health” of the system in which they are entrenched.

Unfortunately for them—but fortunately for the rest of us—the intended end user of the American press (you know, the customer that matters so much to other industries), knows better. Trust in media has never been lower. In fact it's all but evaporated, leaving the media hanging onto its former special status by a thread of credibility. And yet, media has never been more ubiquitous, or more instrumental, in shaping our perception of reality.

As a result, we're today experiencing a form of society-wide cognitive dissonance. We know in our gut that the narratives being advanced do not reflect our experience of the world. Yet we are told to obey the dictates of the media delivering them. Worse still, we are accused of a kind of dis-allegiance—to state? to society? to an unarticulated religion?—for questioning these dictates at all.

But as Tony Brasunas elegantly and systematically shows in the pages to come, there is a significant opportunity in this moment. It's charged with the energy required to refashion an essential institution like the press to meet the needs of a new era. First, however, we need to understand the problem in all its ugliness, messiness, and even in what you might call its glory.

What you'll learn from this book is just how subtly and expertly distortion has been woven into the current incarnation of our news media. You'll see that although we've only begun to have a mainstream conversation about this in recent years, the trend is one that has played out over the course of decades.

In the years following the Second World War, the American state, flush with power and loaded with resources but also burdened with the self-appointed role of maintaining global stability, deduced from these political premises that it had to do everything it could to fulfill this crucial imperative. Of course, it would turn to one of the most vibrant, sophisticated and exhilarating engines of influence in history, the American media. The media, perhaps sharing a belief in this imperative, didn't simply comply but became a full-fledged partner in the enterprise of American power.

That was then. We are governed by a very different set of circumstances today. We need the kind of change that by definition does not flow from power but is imposed upon it, to limit it, to invert the dynamic that, to an alarming extent, has resulted in the sense that we are being ruled rather than governed.

This is an important book. It's a book whose lessons you will not soon forget, least of all because Tony has experienced firsthand, as a journalist working for one of the brightest names in media, just how swiftly the hands of censorship can move. You'll learn how the CIA infiltrates a possibly all-too-willing press, how the clock face of journalism is turned by gears of the corporate machine, how facts get invented, truth gets annihilated, and stories get plucked out of thin air.

All this is to say that the time to develop what Tony calls a new "media consciousness" is now. There is not a moment to waste. For the first time in a long, long time, power is in our hands. It's up to us to use it.

Ashley Rindsberg
September 2022

INTRODUCTION

“We will know our disinformation campaign has been successful when everything the American people believe is false.”

William Casey, Director of the CIA, 1981-87

VIRGINIA ROBERTS FOLDED EIGHT WHITE TOWELS INTO STACKS, ENSURING the seams lined up and the spa’s floral logo appeared in the corner. She placed the stacked towels on a polished granite countertop. There were no customers, so she tied her blond hair into a ponytail and resumed reading where she had left off in an illustrated guide to massage therapy. She found the book fascinating.

I’m only fifteen, she reminded herself.

But she had a goal now: to ascend from mere attendant at the luxurious Mar-a-Lago resort to real, professional massage therapist.

A woman with pointy, black locks of hair appeared. Virginia offered the woman tea, as she always did, and asked politely whether she had an appointment. The woman didn’t have an appointment, but she accepted the tea. With a friendly smile, and with a proper English accent, the woman asked Virginia several questions about the spa before she asked about her copious notes in the massage book.

With a bashful smile, Virginia shared her goal.

The woman told Virginia that her boss was a wealthy man, and as it turned

out, he was looking for a massage therapist for his frequent jet trips around the world. He would pay for her training if Virginia showed the right enthusiasm for the job. The woman handed Virginia her card and introduced herself. Her name was Ghislaine Maxwell.

It was June 2000, and a three-year nightmare was about to unfold for Virginia as she followed in the path of dozens—perhaps hundreds or even thousands—of young girls who were abused by Jeffrey Epstein. Later that warm summer night, Virginia visited Epstein’s Palm Beach mansion as many of the unfortunate girls did before they accompanied him to Paris, New York, London, and Little St. James, Epstein’s private island in the Virgin Islands. The girls were offered as sexual property, escorts, and “massage therapists” to some of the world’s most powerful and wealthy men (usually men). Millionaires and billionaires, former presidents and foreign royalty, senators and judges, hedge fund tycoons and Hollywood producers, powerful attorneys and famous actors, chairmen of boards, and CEOs of giant conglomerates. They all flew on Epstein’s plush private plane. The plane was nicknamed the “Lolita Express.” Ascending from a resort attendant to a professional massage therapist was not in the cards for Virginia.

Shortly after that night, as she tells the story, she was forced to have sex with Prince Andrew of England, famed attorney Alan Dershowitz,¹ and many others.² Those known to have flown on Epstein’s jet many times include Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, Donald Trump,³ and countless others.⁴

Non-Reporting on a Non-Prosecution

No legal action was brought against Epstein for years. The first case brought against him occurred in 2005 when a different girl’s mother brought charges of sexual assault on behalf of her daughter. Many other victims came forward immediately thereafter, revealing Epstein had been running a pedophilia rape ring since at least 1993. Local law enforcement amassed a litany of evidence and multiple witnesses. It looked like a slam dunk case. Epstein faced life in prison for sex trafficking.

What ensued was one of the saddest chapters in American legal and media history. The FBI stepped in and took over the case from local Florida law enforcement. The federal attorneys heard hours of damaging testimony from

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the victims themselves and their families but chose to use a grand jury, which protected Epstein from the most threatening charges. Epstein's powerful attorneys, including Alan Dershowitz, who himself was a frequent traveler on the "Lolita Express," secured a highly unusual "non-prosecution" from US Attorney Alexander Acosta. It was a sweetheart deal that required him to plead guilty to *one* charge at the state level. In exchange, Acosta granted Epstein immunity and canceled an FBI probe into his activities. How was this possible?

Acosta claimed orders had "come from above" that were "above his pay grade."

National media coverage was nowhere to be found.⁵ A *New York* magazine piece, "Billionaires Are Free," was one of few national pieces on Epstein at the time, and it vindicated him with a shockingly permissive "boys will be boys" attitude.⁶

And that was that. The national media uncharacteristically dropped a story about sex and famous people. Indeed, the media ran away from the matter of a major sex trafficking ring as if from an infectious virus.

Epstein had to register as a sex offender following the "non-prosecution," but eight years later, he was still somehow flying on his personal jet with "very young girls" to his private Caribbean island on a weekly basis.⁷ It was as if he had never been convicted at all. The media stayed silent.

Quashing the Story Again

Years later, after Virginia finally escaped Epstein's clutches, she married an Australian and took her new husband's name, Giuffre. The birth of her daughter prompted her to overcome her shame and speak out. Virginia contacted national news organizations and penned a 139-page exposé about her experience, which was eventually submitted as evidence against Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell.⁸ In 2016, she spoke directly with ABC News host Amy Robach.

Robach was intrigued, and she took up the story. She arranged a flight to New York for Virginia, and Virginia felt confident enough to tell Robach the whole horrifying story in person and on the record. Robach recorded it all and spent hours preparing a report on the bombshell revelations. The story

would finally expose Epstein for what he had done.

ABC News never ran the story. No corporate media channel picked it up despite Virginia's dogged efforts. If the main priority of American news organizations is to generate clicks and views, as many Americans believe, this story was surely a godsend. But they all ignored it. Why?

We will answer this question in this book.

Robach recalled in 2019:

I had this interview with Virginia Roberts. We would not put it on the air. First of all, I was told, 'Who is Jeffrey Epstein? No one knows who that is. This is a stupid story.'

Then the [British] Palace found out that we had her allegations about Prince Andrew and threatened us a million different ways. We were so afraid we wouldn't be able to interview Kate and Will that we... quashed the story. And then Alan Dershowitz was also implicated...

She told me everything. She had pictures, she had everything. She was in hiding for 12 years. We convinced her to come out. We convinced her to talk to us. It was unbelievable what we had: Clinton, we had everything.⁹

ABC News "quashed the story" indeed. Despite Virginia's repeated efforts to tell the world, her story was never heard.

Two years—and countless young girls—later, the story finally broke in the corporate media. A low-level reporter at *The Miami Herald* named Julie K. Brown convinced her editors at long last to run a story she had spent years researching. Entitled "Perversion of Justice," the investigative piece identified over eighty girls who had been pulled into the pedophilia rape ring.¹⁰ Brown's *tour de force* informed the nation of Epstein's and Maxwell's crimes, and the story exploded into mainstream awareness.¹¹ It took yet another year, but in 2019 Epstein was finally arrested. He had operated a pedophilia ring for the world's rich and famous for over a quarter century.

A Culture of Corruption

Only pervasive fraud and deceit could allow this magnitude of criminal behavior to go on this long. It wasn't one bad apple at one news organization

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or one attorney at one complicit prosecutor's office. Widespread corruption prevented justice from being served in 2005 and for fourteen years thereafter. Widespread corruption enabled Epstein to perpetrate his heinous crimes with impunity.

Robach's story was quashed at ABC News, but surely it wasn't the only one. We know about it because of a leaked accidental recording,¹² not because Robach came forward.¹³ No major print reporters were put on the story. Julie K. Brown pursued the story out of personal interest and passion, and when her editors finally ran the story, it was the exception proving the rule.

Brown herself acknowledged this in her 2021 book, also entitled *Perversion of Justice*:

I didn't at the time believe that any media network would have succumbed to pressure to ignore or drop such an important story. I was, however, naïve and wrong... there are news organizations that protect powerful people.¹⁴

How does this "pressure" affect the mainstream media's coverage of other issues? We will examine this question in this book.

As for Epstein, the media circus revealed aspects of the corruption he exploited. Before his trial, Epstein loudly told a reporter that he had dirt on hundreds of powerful men all over the world, hinting at explicit videos. The allegations flew, and the suspicions grew.¹⁵ *Who had visited this serial pedophile rapist's island? Who had been a part of this depraved sex trafficking ring?* But few answers appeared in corporate media. Nearly as rapidly as it had exploded on the media scene, the bombshell story was gone.¹⁶ Epstein was killed, or died, or committed suicide in prison, or secretly escaped, and the media moved on quickly from the story, running away as if from a ghost. It remains unclear to this day what exactly happened to this bizarrely omnipotent pedophile, and so contradictory are the stories of his death, it's not clear that he is dead.

What is clear is that men at the apex of the entire power pyramid of the Western World engaged in repeated sexual assault, sex trafficking, abduction, and statutory rape. It's also clear that this country's most powerful media organizations looked the other way for years. Ghislaine Maxwell finally faced a court conviction in 2022, but none of the men who participated in the despicable acts faced an iota of punishment.

For the sake of comparison, ten years earlier, in 2008, when investigations revealed that New York Governor Eliot Spitzer had interacted with prostitutes in an Albany hotel, it became an international news scandal that ran him out of office immediately. It ended his career. What he had done was unbecoming and probably illegal, but it was consensual sex between adults. The Epstein scandal was orders of magnitude larger than the Spitzer story, yet it was on the front pages for a *shorter* amount of time.

Why was this story quashed for so many years? Why wasn't it investigated extensively in the corporate media? When it did come out, how could the entire corporate media—dozens of newspapers and cable channels and magazines—drop this bombshell story so quickly?

We will answer these questions in this book.

THE NEW ENLIGHTENMENT

WELCOME TO THE ERA OF DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA, AND CENSORSHIP. The horrible censorship and biased coverage of the Epstein crimes reflect but one of countless episodes of news distortion in our modern American media world. We will examine many of them in this book. Becoming accurately informed about current events today might seem impossible, but we will learn in these pages that it is actually easier than ever—if we are willing to read broadly.

We live in a time when curtains are parting, truths are being revealed, and collective knowledge is broadening and deepening. Two decades of internet expansion have unleashed an explosion of news media and delivered us into a new epoch in human communication, a brand new information age: what I call the New Enlightenment.

As we will see in this book, we were fed propaganda about the polluted water coming out of faucets in Flint, Michigan in 2014. We were misinformed by distorted news on Russia in 2018 and facemasks in 2020. We suffered from censorship when Twitter and Facebook decided what could be shared in the lead-up to the 2020 election.

Misinformation, propaganda, and censorship are formidable evils to de-

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tangle when navigating the news. We will find reasons for optimism too. Just as Hope appeared at the bottom of Pandora's Box, beneath the evils of deception and distortion lie the things they are designed to obscure: this New Enlightenment and the truths it has in store for us.

The world we know is a world in which myriad voices purporting to be news present the same event on the same day in divergent ways. Some voices shout at a deafening volume about things that matter little to us. Other voices obscure events altogether, such as the disgusting crimes of pedophiles and the powerful men whose depravity they stoked and satiated.

Whenever each voice labels the others as “deceptive,” “misinformation,” or “fake news,” this creates a dilemma. We can choose to accept one news source as our arbiter of truth and let it distinguish the true news from the false for us. Or we can choose to read broadly and trust our own intelligence to determine the reliability of each news source and the veracity of each news report. The choice we make impacts how we consume information and how we act.

Choosing the first path—which many do—has created “reality bubbles,” rigid echo chambers where a small and dwindling range of perspectives is available.

This book is for those choosing the second path.

If you're ready to acknowledge that no single news source is always right about its take on events or about which of its competitors' coverage is “fake,” then you're ready to acknowledge that it's important and worthwhile to be both conscious and skeptical when consuming news. Furthermore, if you're interested in learning the history of journalism, propaganda, censorship, and media manipulation in this country, you'll discover that the slant of news events isn't exclusively chosen to deliver fair reporting nor to maximize news organizations' profits. Each news source selects its angle based primarily on a series of *filters* that steer the bounds of acceptable debate. You'll come to see that the most heavily produced news is often the most dangerously fake.

Not that fake news is new. From this country's founding, when the Freedom of the Press was enshrined in our Constitution, readers who have wanted to know the truth have had to sort through various accounts and opinions.

If you consume a narrow media diet only from one sector of the media landscape, reading this book might be uncomfortable. The stories we will investigate will likely challenge your assumption that your one source or segment of the media is always correct. We will dive deeply enough to question

whether *any* source is primarily interested in accuracy or impartiality. While we can enter this New Enlightenment broad-minded, part of our social challenge is stepping outside our comfortable echo chambers.

On the other hand, if you have long had the impression that deep biases distort mainstream corporate media coverage of the news—if you already see that important perspectives are routinely dismissed, deleted, or manipulated—you will learn how, why, and by whom this manipulation is taking place.

In either event, I thank you for taking this journey toward greater awareness. The path may not always be smooth, but you will find it fascinating, worthwhile, and even transformative in how you view the world we share.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

THIS BOOK IS NOT A SIMPLE COLLECTION OF NARRATIVES, SUCH AS THE Epstein scandal, nor an expository analysis of corporate media filters, nor an investigative report. This book intends to be four things for you: a history, an exposé, a guide, and a pep talk.

- **History.** In my journey to media awareness, learning the *history* of media manipulation in this country has been essential to truly understanding the predicament we're in. We start with the origins of the Free Press in our Constitution, review the invention of journalism, and examine the onset of propaganda during World War I. We explore a handful of key events in the 1800s and 1900s before focusing our attention on the 2000s. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on more recent history, and then in Chapter 11 we take a deep dive into the origins of the newspaper as well as the illusory notion of "objective journalism."
- **Exposé.** A large part of this book is devoted to a thorough *exposé* of misreported events and manipulated news, such as that of Jeffrey Epstein, to demonstrate how distorted our media has become in this young decade. The manipulation is worsening too. Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 focus on this investigation. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 delve into the new

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world of social media, “fact checkers,” and “astroturf” independent media. You’ll likely find the rise of censorship and propaganda serious concerns whether you’re a Democrat, Republican, or Independent.

- **Guide.** Thereafter, I propose a solution—a *guide*—in Chapter 13 on how to navigate the modern media world. This Balanced Media Diet encompasses both tips on how to read and think critically as well as a concrete set of sources to read. In the old adage about teaching a man to fish, the goal of the guide is to provide you with both sources of news to consume right away and the know-how to construct your own media diet (whether or not it’s pescatarian).
- **Pep Talk.** Finally, a *pep talk*. In Chapter 14, we step back to look at our position in the history of human knowledge. The truth is, we are not so badly off. Lies and deception by powerful people have been the rule, not the exception, for recorded human history. Today, with the growth of decentralized human communication through the internet, we are in a New Enlightenment. We have an unparalleled opportunity to experience another flowering of human wisdom and innovation.

The book is carefully organized so that you’ll learn the most by reading it from front to back. Start at the start, end at the end. Every chapter is essential.

But if you’d like to read the most timely material first, read Chapters 8 and 9 first, which cover social media censorship in 2022, “fact checking,” and “astroturf” independent news, as I rewrote them as the book was going to press.

If you’d like to read the book in chronological order, with the events occurring in historical order, read Chapter 11 first, then Chapters 2 and 3, and then the rest of the book.

If you’re pressed for time, you might skip Chapters 2 and 3, start with Chapter 4, and read as many of the exposés as you need to understand the predicament we’re in. Then, flip straight to Chapter 13 to explore the Balanced Media Diet and plan your weekly news exploration. Finally, jump to my conclusion in Chapter 14 to understand my take on where this is all going and my tips on participating in a better media world.

THE TERMS

THIS BOOK COVERS A CENTURY OF MEDIA MANIPULATION IN THE UNITED States. Many instances of *bias*, *propaganda*, and *censorship* will be easy to spot; others will prove sophisticated and difficult to detect. We'll look at the buildup to wars, the campaigns of national elections, the handling of the pandemic, and the covert activities of powerful organizations like the CIA. We'll confront the possibility that our media might be as distorted and "fake" as that of any country, including China, a place where propaganda dominates. Certainly the propaganda in American media sources is more sophisticated than China's—but is it less common or less deceptive?

Several key terms will be used repeatedly, and we define them here for convenience and clarity.

- ◆ **Bias.** All news reporting has *bias*. This is what slants, skews, filters, or manipulates news coverage depending on who's writing the report and who's publishing it. The questions we'll be investigating are, what kind of *bias* does each news source and contributor have, and what causes this *bias*? We'll distinguish three types of bias:
 - *innocent bias* - tendencies that come from the fact that journalists and editors, like all human beings, have natural blind spots based on their heritage, identity, background, and worldview.
 - *systemic bias* - distortion that originates from a news organization's ownership by a gigantic corporate conglomerate. All large corporations have interests beyond simple, candid reporting of the events of the day.
 - *nefarious bias* - covert manipulation of news reporting by intelligence agencies and other external organizations via infiltration or control.
- ◆ **Filter.** Each of the three *biases* above is composed of *filters*. A *filter* is a specific rule or tendency that causes *bias*. The *filters* of *innocent bias*, for instance, are the writer's race, class, political beliefs, national origin, education level, and so on. The *filters* of *systemic bias* are fascinating and often obvious in their effects, and we'll devote a full chapter to

understanding these organizational screens through which news coverage is processed by professional journalists and editors. The *filters* of *nefarious bias* are rarely admitted but aren't difficult to guess: the specific, hidden agenda of the institutions controlling the news, such as launching a war, concealing racism, pushing a drug, or justifying fraud.

- ◆ **Propaganda.** This is the heavily produced news mentioned above. *Propaganda* is produced deliberately by governments and corporations to deceive through a mixture of dishonest statements and omissions of facts and perspectives. In a stereotypical depiction of China or the Soviet Union, *propaganda* was a one-way stream of news and views from the government to the people. In our country, *propaganda* generally comes from public relations firms, large corporate media organizations, or intelligence agencies and carries *nefarious bias* or *systemic bias*, or both. If news coverage carries only *innocent bias*, it is not *propaganda*.
- ◆ **Censorship.** This is the deletion of news events, perspectives, or data, or the silencing of journalists or entire news sources on account of *systemic* or *nefarious bias*—whether done by government actors or large corporations. Some people believe that only governments can perform censorship, but that narrow definition is outdated with the fusion of government and corporate power in our modern world.
- ◆ **The Narrative.** This is the pearl, the treasure. This is what it's all about. The *narrative* is the story we believe we are living in. The *narrative* is what *bias*, *propaganda*, and *censorship* aim to control. It is the background against which the media reports the news. It's *what* is happening in the world and *why*. It's the collection of facts our parents, colleagues, and friends believe about the world, or at least what we think they believe. If an athletic team is about to overcome immense adversity and win a championship against long odds, that is the *narrative* with which we turn on the television or step into the stadium. Throughout history, to those in power, control of the *narrative* has always been more valuable than money.

Speaking of money, we won't analyze wealth or power much in this book, although they are the goals of many who manipulate the news. We'll delve even less into the ultimate marriage of wealth and power sought by the most nefarious actors: social control. Wealth, power, and

control are important things to research, but this book's topic is this more fundamental, priceless jewel: the *narrative*. If you can tell the people of a society what to fear and what to covet, whom to admire and whom to loathe, wealth and power will be yours.

- ◆ **“Fake News.”** This term and its synonyms **disinformation** and **misinformation** technically refer to dishonest news and opinion published in the media. But these powerful words are most often used as slurs to discredit news reports and analysis with which one disagrees. Politicians and commentators on both sides of the political aisle employ them to reject reporting by news sources aligned with the other side. People who employ these terms rarely attempt to ascertain the actual *bias* or *filters* at play, so I call them “intellectually lazy” slurs, and they're related to another popular slur, *conspiracy theorist*, which we'll examine in depth in Chapter 2. The government and corporate media generate nearly all of the truly insidious fake news that plagues our media. There is *bias* in independent media and deliberate deception in “astroturf” independent sites, too, and we'll investigate those.
- ◆ **New Enlightenment.** This refers to today, our era, these last ten years and the next twenty or so years. This is an exciting, challenging epoch of unprecedented access to information. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the movable-type press in the fifteenth century rapidly broadened popular access to knowledge and unleashed a flowering of philosophy, art, and science that led to the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. Similarly, we live in a new era of rapidly broadening access to information. Virtually anyone can share his or her experiences with the world instantaneously. This is precipitating a flowering of free thought.
- ◆ **Progressive, Conservative, and Reactionary.** These terms are applied in their traditional sense in this book to describe the three core political impulses that drive the ebb and flow of wealth and power.
 - *Progressive* groups and organizations seek to spread wealth and power more broadly.
 - *Reactionaries* seek to concentrate wealth and power into fewer hands.

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→ *Conservatives* seek to keep the distribution of wealth and power as it is.

These impulses have been at play in all eras of human civilization. The previous millennium was primarily a progressive millennium in Western culture as feudalism and colonialism gave way to democracies and republics. In this book, we will predict what this third millennium holds in store.

Please note that the terms “progressive” and “conservative” are associated with factions of today’s political parties, but that is not how I use them in this book.

One final note, on geography. This book focuses on how Americans distort the news for Americans. Foreign actors also distort some of our news—and our intelligence agencies certainly attempt to distort the news in other countries as well as in our own—but *domestic* propaganda and censorship are always most effective. Distorting a nation’s news by having citizens with familiar faces tell lies to other citizens with familiar faces is easy to carry out, hard to notice, and highly effective when successful. We will touch on foreign news and foreign manipulation of our media, too, but it is not as effective nor as common and thus is not our primary focus.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

IF THE NEWS IN THIS COUNTRY IS HEAVILY BIASED AND MANIPULATED, why not simply turn it off and go about life as if it didn’t exist? Why not treat the *bias* and *propaganda* like toxic fumes and simply not inhale? Why even try to make sense of obnoxious headlines, distorted reporting, and dishonest opinions?

The reason is simple. The news media controls the *narrative*, the background of our lives. We human beings are storytelling creatures and have been since before we could write. As American poet Muriel Rukeyser put it, “the universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” The narrative is our ongo-

ing, shared story that shapes our shared culture. The narrative tells us and our family what kind of world we are living in, what is important, what is scary, and what is wonderful. The narrative tells us and our friends which ideas to treat as benign and understandable and which ideas to treat as false and unconscionable. Going through life acknowledging that the news *does* exist binds us to the world around us.

And not inhaling is not an option. The headlines shout the day's stories, and we absorb them whether we want to or not. The narrative penetrates our hearts and minds even when we do not realize it. The narrative inserts itself into our *internal* voices—the ego and superego that guide and critique our thoughts from within, telling us we are good or bad, smart or stupid, successes or failures. Those voices are the subject of psychological analysis, but they are also affected by external voices that tell us what to value. The voices of CNN and NPR, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, Fox News and MSNBC, Facebook and Twitter come at us nonstop whether we'd like to quiet them or not. We cannot shut off the external voices from the media any more than we can shut off the internal voices inside our heads. And if we ignore these ubiquitous media voices, they still drive the narratives that describe our world to our friends, family, colleagues, leaders, and heroes.

What we can and must do is become *conscious* about these voices. We must become *aware* of what each media source wants us to see, think, and feel. We can learn their origins and their aims.

The goal of this book, then, is not just to instill media literacy but to ignite what we will call *media consciousness*, a state of awareness that grants the possibility of both spotting a constructed narrative and glimpsing the truth beneath it.

Our culture is at a tipping point with separate media bubbles steadily diverging. *Media consciousness* is a worthwhile goal for the sake of understanding your friends and family, comprehending the world's problems and possibilities, and surviving and thriving on a complex planet. But more profoundly, without this consciousness, your understanding of the world will be distorted, and your mental health will waver at the mercy of those who seek to manipulate your beliefs for the sake of their agenda.

Many choices you make have a profound impact on your life. At some point in your life, you will likely choose where to live, what career to pursue, whom to vote for. You'll contemplate whether or not to join a union, support

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a nonprofit organization, undergo invasive surgery, try alternative medicine, or take a vaccine. You'll decide whether to travel to a foreign country, attain a college degree, buy a home, or have children. Each choice will be heavily influenced by the media narrative that you are living in. Your belief about the world, its perils and possibilities, will be dictated in large part by the story you believe about current events.

Just as attaining a mature awareness about the holidays required us to recognize that Santa Claus does not exist, coming of age in American culture requires that we acknowledge that the corporate news narrative manipulates our beliefs about what is going on in our world.

Ultimately, our goal is to empower ourselves to peel back the veil on the dominant narratives in order to more easily connect with each other and more wisely make our lives' most consequential choices.

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE, BUT FIRST IT WILL PISS YOU OFF

MY PERSONAL MEDIA AWAKENING BEGAN AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-TWO. I grew up on the East Coast of the United States before I spent a year in China, where I taught English, traveled the country, and endeavored to pick up the language. As my Chinese skills improved, I noticed how the local media covered events very differently from the American media. The UK handed the wealthy island of Hong Kong to China while I was there, and the differences in the headlines at the time were stark. The American media covered the event with concern for the people of Hong Kong and the freedoms of the Press and Speech that they enjoyed. The Chinese media published stories that were uniformly celebratory and triumphant. While I didn't yet notice the manipulation in the American coverage, the naked propaganda in the Chinese media taught me my first lesson in news distortion, and it confused and angered me: the Chinese media simply never covered or discussed any concerns of the people of Hong Kong. I saw their place and my place in a media narrative.

I returned to the United States in time for the 2000 presidential election,

the second one for which I was old enough to vote. I followed the presidential campaigns closely and became fascinated by American politics. For the first time, I noticed distortion in news coverage. The fact that the two wealthiest and most politically-connected candidates, George W. Bush and Al Gore, received virtually all the media coverage, intrigued and infuriated me. Meanwhile, the candidate who seemed to me the most inspiring, capable, and popular—Ralph Nader—was routinely insulted if given any attention at all. Even when his events attracted over 10,000 people, the mainstream media treated the Nader campaign as if it were of no interest to anyone. I attended Nader events and wrote about what I witnessed for the benefit of friends and family. Why wasn't this capable candidate getting a fair shake?

Three years later, during the buildup to the Iraq War, I was a young blogger deputized by the *San Francisco Chronicle* to cover an appearance by a senator named Joe Biden. By this time, I had a slightly broader understanding of the media. Biden spoke at a fancy, downtown hotel. He was an articulate and forceful speaker at the time, and he expounded at length, advocating for an invasion. He almost convinced me, but nowhere did he mention the potential cost to the Iraqi people in lives and environment for a war that was ostensibly for their benefit. I found this troubling. I wrote up my report, and the piece was published, except for the part finding fault with Biden's case for war. Once again, the corporate media infuriated me, and this time, I grew curious as to how this censorship was occurring. Who had chosen to strike that section from my article? In a subsequent piece for the *Chronicle*, which happened to be about the phenomenal growth of Craigslist, a reference to George W. Bush was deleted prior to publication. That experience made it clear that the major newspapers were willing to provide endorsements by omission, and I looked for it in other sources.

I published an online political magazine of my own in San Francisco at the time, focusing primarily on issues that didn't get into the big papers, such as ownership of media, election fraud, and the underlying stories about the Iraq War, third parties, 9/11, and domestic surveillance. I noticed censorship and propaganda distorting virtually every major story in the corporate media, and it inspired me to look more deeply. I learned to distinguish everyday editorial decision-making—which is not censorship—from imperiously silencing viewpoints or entire stories on account of *systemic* or *nefarious bias*, which is indeed *censorship*.

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In 2016, I wrote about the Bernie Sanders campaign for *Huffington Post*. I witnessed the way the corporate media treated Sanders and his supporters. It was eerily reminiscent of the way Ralph Nader's campaign had been treated sixteen years before. CNN, NPR, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* ignored and denigrated the campaign. I noticed how effectively that manipulation deceived people about Sanders. In my articles, I pointed out the stark difference in outlook between those regularly reading a broad media diet that included independent media and those only taking in corporate media news. I wrote about it until, that is, my writings were censored by *HuffPost*. I recount those events in Chapter 4. It was the third time—but by no means the last—that the corporate media infuriated me.

I wrote this book to open the eyes of Americans about the ways our corporate media is censored, biased, and deliberately distorted, and how detrimental this is to our individual happiness and to our shared future as Americans. If I spark a conversation as to how we can become more thoroughly and truthfully informed citizens, then I've achieved my goal. While I am a longtime progressive, and I wrote about the Sanders campaigns out of both interest and support, I wrote this book because I'm more committed to transparency and uncovering the truth than I am to any political party or candidate.

The task of writing this book became both easier and harder as I went. I witnessed systematic censorship and narrative management in 2020 and 2021 that I had never envisaged and could not ignore when writing this book. New examples of news distortion and propaganda emerged daily that I felt I needed to include, and at times I wondered whether I would ever complete this book. Yet, my thesis became easier and easier to illustrate. Far more journalists than I expected became complicit in news distortion. While there are many journalistic heroes out there, the majority of corporate media journalists and editors who I've met on my journey are not, in fact, idealists striving to hold the powerful to account or tell the underlying truth about events. Most journalists in the corporate media, in my experience, are ordinary professionals seeking career stability and advancement, hoping perhaps someday to be famous and wealthy media personalities.

Today, the corporate media controls the narratives that appear on cable television and mainstream newspapers more tightly than ever. Some people see this control, some don't, but the clear trend across this great nation of ours is that people are noticing this deception, this comprehensive bias, and it is for

them I spent three years researching and writing. This deceit forms a set of blinders that obscures the true state of our world, leaving us in a deceived state I call “red, white, and blind.” It simultaneously befuddles Americans and angers us, stoking our collective thirst for alternatives, hastening the rise of independent media. This is how I know the New Enlightenment is here. With or without this book, *media consciousness* is already sprouting among us, dismantling manufactured narratives, dissolving consensus reality, and preparing us for a better, more honest world. It is both scary and exciting. Let’s dive in.

DARE TO THINK FOR YOURSELF

TWO CHALLENGES WILL ARISE ON THE PATH TO *MEDIA CONSCIOUSNESS* as you turn these pages. First, you’ll wonder how you can overcome despair once you see the propaganda-riddled predicament we’re in. Secondly, you’ll wonder how you can rise to the occasion, find time in your day, become informed about current events, and, despite the difficulties, walk a path toward understanding the news.

To address the first challenge—despair—I’ll remind us of the benefits of *media consciousness*. Awareness of underlying truths awaits. *Media consciousness* makes us healthier individuals as well as more knowledgeable and more collaborative members of our families and communities.

To address the second challenge—walking the path—we’ll explore a Balanced Media Diet guide in Chapter 13. The Diet is a diverse set of media sources that allows anyone with thirty minutes a day to attain awareness of current events. Following the Diet will also grant knowledge about the biases in news coverage and the underlying truths they aim to conceal.

In my experience, reading broadly doesn’t bring on depression. Rather, witnessing the ways propaganda distorts our news media leads to an invigorated mind that increasingly enjoys considering opposing ideas. Much as a balanced food diet scares us at first but ultimately leads to strength, health, and vitality, broadening our media diet enables us to listen not just to *what* is said but to *who* is saying it and to *how* it aims to make us feel. This listening will stimulate our minds and broaden our awareness.

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We aren't alone. A media awakening is unfolding all over the country. Media censorship and propaganda are increasing but so is awareness of this distortion. This isn't the first book on this, and it won't be the last. It has become cliché lately to say a battle is being fought for the minds of Americans, but that's because it's true. This battle is part of a larger war going on all across the world in this era of accelerating technology, globalization, and wealth inequality. This war is between, on the one hand, *reactionaries* who seek greater *centralization* of power into the hands of national and global governing bodies, something that the internet and globalization enable. Opposing them are those whom I call *progressives* who seek *decentralization* of power and a return of sovereignty to smaller communities and individuals, things that the internet also enables in a way never before possible. Will the internet enable a small new set of rulers to *centralize* global power and run the world, or will its extraordinary ability to distribute information and knowledge fuel an enlightenment? The former could happen using modern surveillance, facial recognition, monitored biometrics, controlled social media, and manufactured media narratives. The latter, however, could establish a new *decentralized* world of smaller, freer, more autonomous communities and nations. The presence or absence of Free Speech and a Free Press will in part determine the outcome of this great power struggle.

The propaganda besieging us will increase as this war wages and as the New Enlightenment unfolds. The first Enlightenment, the one that was ushered in by the movable-type printing press 500 years ago, toppled the centralized power of monarchs and popes, and it unleashed a magnificent flowering of literacy and publishing that advanced human potential. Prior to the printing press, there were only an estimated 50,000 books in existence in all of Europe; after its invention, within just fifty years, more than twelve million books were in people's hands. That time witnessed the unprecedented spread of philosophy, democracy, and written constitutions, including our own groundbreaking Bill of Rights that guarantees the rights of all people freely to speak, write, and print ideas that run counter to the government's interests.

Today, as we'll see in the pages of this book, these freedoms are under grave attack, and we are at the inflection point. We must understand this. This new Age of Information, birthed by the internet, has the potential to advance those remarkable rights and to thereby create another magnificent flowering of human culture. Just as the serfs and peasants in medieval Europe did in

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the 1500s, we Americans must utilize this new power to communicate with one another, and, as the Enlightenment motto goes, to *sapere aude*, “dare to think for ourselves.” It is our time to claim the knowledge, creativity, and sovereignty over our own affairs that are our inalienable human rights. It is our time to understand what distorts our vision of the world. It is our time to see clearly.