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"When Did We Start Just Making Shit Up": Origins of U. S. Pseudocracy

Hans Ostrom

University of Puget Sound, ostrom@pugetsound.edu

William Haltom

University of Puget Sound, haltom@pugetsound.edu

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When Did We Start Just Making Shit Up?

Origins of U. S. Pseudocracy

William Haltom and Hans A. Ostrom

University of Puget Sound

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Panel 10.05

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Now all the truth is out,
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honor bred, with one
Who were it proved he lies
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbors' eyes;
Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play
Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

William Butler Yeats¹

What we have learned is not what we were
told.
I watch the snow, feel for the heartbeat that is not there.

Weldon Kees²

“In the world of advertising,
there's no such thing as a lie.
There's only expedient exaggeration.”

Roger Thornhill in “North by Northwest”³

¹ William Butler Yeats, “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing” *Poetry* (May 1914)
www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/2085; last accessed 8 January 2012.

² Weldon Kees, “Early Winter,” *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* Revised edition, edited by Donald Justice. (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1975) p. 27.

³ www.imdb.com/title/tt0053125/quotes; last accessed 13 February 2012.

The Question

Early in 2011, a colleague asked, “When did we start just making shit up?” By “we,” she meant Americans but also, more specifically, those involved in politics—directly or as interested parties.

We answer her question variously in this paper.⁴ But our overarching answer is that **politicos started flatly concocting misinformation when our propaganda polity mutated into a pseudocracy.**

We wend our way to that answer as follows. After reviewing answers we deem insufficient, we provide two sorts of tentative, rough answers. Our first answer is that the stretching of what counts as an untruth combined with the lengthening of political con jobs yielded “pseudocracy,” a system in which falsehoods proliferate, both absolutely and as relative to definable, defensible truth and honesty. Our second sort of answer is that before “we” started just making shit up, propagandists in general and mass media, mass marketing, and mass electioneering in particular started from and adhered to verifiable or at least plausible renderings of reality as much and as well as they could. Through the latter parts of the 20th century and continuing into the present century, we then argue, developments in old and new media, “advances” in marketing, and innovations in electioneering evolved multiple ways in which to purvey untrue, misleading claims, shibboleths, innuendos, and propagandas.⁵ Once permanent campaigners used mass marketing and mass media to just make shit up, pseudocracy overwhelmed mere propagandas and liars were usually free to lie with a minimal or negligible penalty—or with no penalty, or with reward. This is how we reach our conclusion that politicians started just making shit up when the risks of just making shit up receded, when the rewards of just making shit up and when our polity became ever more willing to euphemize lies as “spin” and long cons as practices expected in politicking.

⁴ We take the “we” in her question to refer mainly to the United States polity as a whole, but we concede that the question might embrace subsets of that polity: 1) politicians and those who work with them and for them; 2) those who pay for politicians’ services and tell them what to do or what to say; 3) pundits, news-readers, media-performers who talk politics; 4) professional and amateur partisans and ideologues; 5) academics like us; or some combination of subsets one through five. We do not, however, take our colleague to have meant the person in the street. That person is more likely to repeat shit than to just make shit up, at least when it comes to politics.

⁵ Dictionaries may differ on the acceptability of “propagandas” as the plural of “propaganda.” We use that form primarily because we want to remind readers that multiple forms and practices of propaganda are involved in cooperation, conflict, consensus, and cacophony. We prefer “propagandas” secondarily because our leading authority on propaganda entitled his book originally *Propagandes*. Our tertiary reason for going with “propagandas” is to remind etymologically venturesome readers that “propaganda” derived from *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, a title in which the “Propaganda” was feminine ablative singular rather than, as might be apprehended, some neuter plural. If we were true to our Latin roots, the plural of “Propaganda” would be “propagandis.”

Unhelpful Answers

Before we answer our colleague's question with our speculations about contemporary, proximate origins of making shit up in the United States, we inventory longstanding, distal sources of making shit up. Readers satisfied by these replies will save themselves the reading of the rest of our paper. We urge readers, then, to grasp at any of these answers as a labor-saving act.

Unhelpful Answer One—Humans started to make shit up when the species started to make shit.⁶ We deem this answer glib and unhelpful even if it is true.⁷ Our colleague included “just” in her question, and we preserved that adverb in our title. This inclusion, it seems to us, betokened a sense that the fabrication of falsehoods had worsened. We doubt that this first less-than-helpful reply meets our colleague's question.

Unhelpful Answer Two— Humans started to make stuff up when they started to create culture. This reply does not suffice for the same reason as above: Our colleague presumes that humans have always made up culture but perceives that the fabrications have of late become fiendishly mendacious and metastatic. We concede that every society abounds in narratives, sagas, hagiographies, myths, and dogmas that are not true, could not by laws of nature or science be true, and seem to outlanders bizarre. Classic statements about warfare, diplomacy, and commerce abound with falsehoods and feints.⁸ Imagination, literature, and letters exist to enable humans to make worlds and to make up worlds that make more sense and less sense, to mess up and to clean up, to satirize and to sanitize. Moreover, political philosophy from at least *The Republic* of Plato has teemed with lies by which to dominate people and peoples. On perhaps a less philosophic plane, Machiavelli counseled the prince on how to count and execute the ways of deceiving for gains in power and pelf. Hobbes described a political world in which implicit contracts and other deals are sealed, not on the basis of truth but on the basis of mutual interests. Locke and Rousseau joined Hobbes in imagining states of nature that were intrinsically and imaginatively contrary to human nature and history so that these thinkers might displace a world too much with them⁹ and might reconstruct social beings as isolated rational actors. John Rawls conjured ignorant, chary rational actors given to minimax-regret strategizing who contracted with one another from a position original with Professor

⁶ In the title and in this opening paragraph, we have followed our colleague's scatological formulation. Having been naughty enough, we shall in the name of propriety use “just making stuff up” or “fabricating falsehoods” as more pleasant forms.

⁷ In *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception* (Basic Books 2011), Robert Trivers provides an account of deception based on evolutionary biology, which would make deception and deceit pre-date *homo sapiens* and liken the labors of James Carville or the late Lee Atwater to the mindless mendacity of other lowlifes. We apologize to any viruses or bacteria whom we have just insulted.

⁸ Please see the recently released Martin Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics* (University of Virginia Press 2012).

⁹ William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much with Us, Late and Soon” (1806).

Rawls but otherwise greatly removed from the origins of human or other primate societies. We know all **that**. We all know **that**. Our colleague knows that.

Unhelpful Answer Three—“We” started to make stuff up from the time “we” started to make the United States of America. Even jingoes must admit the founding and evolution of the United States of America abound(ed) in flimflam and mendacity.¹⁰ “We the People”—shibboleth masquerading as intellectual construct—spoke and wrote of liberty while enslaving other Americans¹¹ and wiping out indigenous peoples. We the descendants of those people have targeted immigrants, poor, and females, and invented justifications for imperial invasions and toppling other nations’ governments as well as imprisoning Japanese Americans during World War II and imprisoning innocent men at Guantánamo more recently. Contrary to the Inquisition, 21st century Americans suborned the lie that water-boarding was not torture.¹² Nor was the illegitimacy of U. S. politics and government restricted to lying.¹³ All of the above conceded, however, recent flimflam seems flimsier and aimed at far baser ends than establishing or preserving a polity.

[Maybe] Unhelpful Answer Four—We have not yet begun to just make stuff up! What if the questioner errs in perceiving or imagining that of late falsity or mendacity have been increasing, deepening, expanding, or suffusing the culture? Perhaps greater attention, especially in news media or new media, to deviations from veracity have misled our colleague to suspect greater falsehood ruling the nation or globe. The preponderance of accounts of deceptions seems undeniable. When respected observers and thinkers—Arendt,¹⁴ Bok,¹⁵ Bailey,¹⁶ Edelman¹⁷—claim to detect among leaders of democratic republics resort to wholesale deceptions and self-deceptions that academics used to associate with leaders of lesser sorts of polities, we are disinclined to reject their perceptions

¹⁰ Regarding the systematic misleading of common folk, please see Ginsberg, *The American Lie: Government By the People and Other Political Fables* (Paradigm Publishers 2007) and Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (Viking 2004).

¹¹ And we then lied about freeing slaves whom we had in effect re-enslaved. View the recent PBS documentary “Slavery by Another Name” www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2011/slavery-another-name/ or read Douglas A. Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (Anchor 2009). See also Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Louisiana State University Press 2007).

¹² Who would have thought the Inquisitors too soft for modern American leaders and lawyers? To be fair, we know of only three persons waterboarded, so this particular lie has not been visited on as many victims as many other lies.

¹³ Theodore J. Lowi, “Bend Sinister: How the Constitution Saved the Republic and Lost Itself,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* Volume 42 pp. 3-9.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics” in *Crises of the Republic; Lying in Politics; Civil Disobedience; On Violence; Thoughts on Politics and Revolution* (Mariner Books 1972).

¹⁵ Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Vintage; Updated Edition 1999).

¹⁶ F. G. Bailey, *The Prevalence of Deceit* (Cornell University Press 1991).

¹⁷ Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (Cambridge University Press 2001).

as overreactions to a mass-mediated society. When academic as well as popular presses proliferate studies of deceptions in the late 20th century or early 21st century,¹⁸ a decent respect to the opinions of observers requires that we entertain the proposition that propagandizing, dissembling, deception, and mendacity have increased of late. When a noted historian¹⁹ as well as respected journalists²⁰ trade in the proposition that electioneering

¹⁸ Arendt, “Lying in Politics;” David Wise, *The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy, and Power* (Random House 1973); Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (Vintage 1976); Bailey, *The Prevalence of Deceit*; Bok, *Lying*; Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left to Lie To: Values of the Worst Family* (Verso 1999, 2000) [*n. b.*, on the hardcover edition and other than on the cover of this paperback edition, the subtitle reads “The Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton”]; Os Guinness, *Time for Truth: Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype, and Spin* (Baker Books 2002); David Corn, *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception* (Three Rivers Press 2003); Ann Coulter, *Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right* (Three Rivers Press 2003); Al Franken, *Lies and Lying Liars Who Tell Them* (Plume 2004); Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer, and Brendan Nyhan, *All the President’s Spin: George W. Bush, The Media, and the Truth* (Touchstone 2004); Eric Alterman, *The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)leads America* (Penguin 2004); Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (Penguin 2004); John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents that Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (The New Press 2004); Paul Waldman, *Fraud: The Strategy Behind the Bush Lies and Why the Media Didn’t Tell You* (Sourcebooks Inc. 2004); Mary Mapes, *Truth and Duty: The Press, the President, and the Privilege of Power* (St. Martin’s Griffin 2005); Larry Beinhart, *Fog Facts: Searching for Truth in the Land of Spin* (Nation Books 2005); John W. Dean, *Worse Than Watergate: The Secret Presidency of George W. Bush* (Warner 2005); Jack Huberman, *Bushit! An A-Z Guide to the Bush Attack on Truth, Justice, Equality, and the American Way* (Nation Books 2006); Gregg Jackson, *Conservative Comebacks to Liberal Lies: Issue by Issue Responses to the Most Common Claims of the Left from A to Z* (JAJ Publishing 2006); Bill Bowman, *Savage Lies: The Half-Truths, Distortions, and Outright Lies of a Right-Wing Blowhard* (Truth to Power Media 2006); Elizabeth Blackney, *Sex, Lies & Politricks* (BookSurge Publishing 2007); Frank Rich, *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush’s America* (Penguin 2007); Benjamin Ginsberg, *The American Lie: Government By the People and Other Political Fables* (Paradigm Publishers 2007); John W. Dean, *Conservatives Without Conscience* (Penguin 2007); Marcy Wheeler, *Anatomy of Deceit: How the Bush Administration Used the Media to Sell the Iraq War and Out a Spy* (Vaster Books 2007); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Brooks Jackson, *unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* (Random House 2007); Scott McClellan, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception* (PublicAffairs 2008); Kevin Jackson, *The BIG Black Lie: How I Learned The Truth About The Democrat Party* (Black Sphere 2009); Angela McGlower, *Bamboozled: How Americans are being Exploited by the Lies of the Liberal Agenda* (Thomas Nelson 2009); Larry Schweikart, *48 Liberal Lies about American History (That You Probably Learned in School)* (Sentinel Trade 2009); Joshua Holland, *The Fifteen Biggest Lies about the Economy: And Everything Else the Right Doesn’t Want You to Know about Taxes, Jobs, and Corporate America* (Wiley 2010); Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: The Right Wing Distortion of the Reagan Legacy* (Free Press 2010); Charles P. Pierce, *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free* (Anchor 2010); Andrew P. Napolitano, *Lies the Government Told You: Myth, Power, and Deception in American History* (Thomas Martin 2010); Jesse Ventura *American Conspiracies: Lies, Lies, and More Dirty Lies that the Government Tells Us* (Skyhorse Publishing 2011); Ron Suskind, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President* (Harper, 2nd Edition, 2011); Geoffrey Dunn, *The Lies of Sarah Palin: The Untold Story Behind Her Relentless Quest for Power* (St. Martin’s Press 2011); James B. Stewart, *Tangled Webs: How False Statements Are Undermining America: From Martha Stewart to Bernie Madoff* (Penguin 2011); and Joe McGinniss, *The Rogue: Searching for the Real Sarah Palin* (Crown 2011).

¹⁹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (Scribner 2009).

²⁰ Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (Vintage 1976).

has qualitatively decayed and that as a result America has become only more divided and more polarized in the 21st century, we are informed by their erudition. Perhaps most momentous, when a cable parodist's coinage of "truthiness" possesses such descriptive resonance that the American Dialect Society names it Word of the Year for 2005, we defer to such linguistic expertise. Perhaps not as momentous but as demoralizing: when political analyses provided by parodists and stand-up comedians are often more incisive and reliable than that provided by columnists, the media's political "consultants," "hosts" of political television-shows, and other analysts, we attend more to deconstructions of deceptions by Dave Chappelle than to dissemination of deceptions by Wolf Blitzer. [Indeed, which would you choose for more trenchant analysis: "The Best Political Team on Television" from CNN or Jon Stewart followed by Stephen Colbert on Comedy Central?²¹]

When we advance below our answer to our colleague, then, we acknowledge the replies above. Indeed, we incorporate some of them. We even end this paper with [maybe] unhelpful answer four, which will look more helpful once we have propounded. Nonetheless, we insist that the kinds and amounts of stuff being made up constitute a qualitatively greater phoniness and falsehood that has not just afflicted our body politic but that has taken it over. We call this system the pseudocracy, the rule of falsehood(s).

Our Individual-Level Answer—We Political Participants Started Just Making Stuff Up When We Started to Overstretch Truths and to Distend Short Cons to Far Longer Cons, Yielding a Reign of Falsehoods that We Coauthors Call Pseudocracy.

At base we mean "pseudocracy" to stand for a system in which falsehoods or deceptions routinely prevail over truths or candor. We intend "pseudo-" in the coinage to range from flat-out lies to strategic and tactical feints to "wedge-issues" and impression-management and all the way to "dog-whistle" appeals to racism or misogyny. We mean "-cracy" to range from sway and suasion to power and force.²² Let us address each range briefly.

²¹ Please indulge an irony here: Were it not for "The Daily Show" or "The Colbert Report," wouldn't CNN's marketing of "The Best Political Team on Television" be akin to hawking the Washington Generals for being the Harlem Globetrotters' greatest opponents all-time? [Given that those faux news shows exist and persist, CNN's slogan is at best overstatement, at least an empty boast, and at worst a lie.] Contrary to Professors Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius's "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Volume 24 (2007) pp. 263-272 and consistent with W. Lance Bennett's "Relief in Hard Times: A Defense of Jon Stewart's Comedy in an Age of Cynicism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Volume Volume 24 (2007) pp. 278-183, we coauthors insist that the blatherfests on CNN and other mainstream media justify the gibe "lamestream media" if anything in the reality-based culture can. "The Best Political Team on Television" is, in the authors' opinions, not false and not a lie because because it is a content-free slogan without cognitive content.

If we seem too harsh, please contrast Mitt Romney's contradicting himself within seconds in a GOP Debate and the mainstream media's overlooking that. Look at www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-january-9-2012/indecision-2012---two-debates--one-gop; last accessed 13 March 2012 and compare noncoverage on mainstream networks.

²² We grant that "pseudocracy" is humble if not poor coinage. We insist, however, that "pseudocracy" is better than "television," which combines an Ancient Greek root for "far" with a Classical Latin root for "seeing." No one familiar with television would characterize it as "far-seeing." Anyone familiar with U. S. politicking and governing would admit that falsehoods rule. Indeed, philosopher Arthur Fonzarelli stated in the first episode of "Happy Days" [www.sitcomonline.com/season1.html]; last accessed 13 March

... **When We Started to Overstretch Truths**—Politicos commonly characterize their opponents as purveyors of untruths and their supporters as sources of truths.²³ Such characterizations oversimplify when they do not defame, so declaring that “they” lie while “we” tell the truth—or Representative Wilson’s shouting “You lie!” at President Obama in September 2009—may be commonplace instances of “making stuff up.”²⁴ “Making stuff up” in a more academic manner for this paper, we presume a multiplicity of ways in which politicians and citizens may avoid telling the truth or may accuse opponents of dishonesty rather than error, of deception rather than misunderstanding, etc. We further presume that resembling or dissembling truth is a matter of degrees. From every absolute truth, then, we might imagine one or more continua of relative truths, relative falsehoods, and so on, each continuum extending toward an absolute falsehood and deliberate deception that will almost never be reached or admitted.²⁵ These continua allow proliferations of alternatives to telling the truth that can be differentiated from absolute deceit, although neither absolute truthfulness nor absolute mendacity need be out of play.²⁶

“Stretching truths,” then, is a gradual but imposing way in which to define deviancy down.²⁷ We all uphold truthfulness as an ideal, but then we each dishonestly distance some spin, euphemisms, doubletalk, and other deceptions from absolute mendacity so that what is not true will appear relatively true or almost true rather than merely not perfectly false. When “we” stretch the truth, “we” define dishonesty downward.

The “pseudo-” in “pseudocracy,” on our presumptions, may stand for any number of expressions, acts, or practices that fall short of or rise above standards for lying or for truth-

2012] that “Bull makes the world go round,” so we may be limiting ourselves too greatly by focusing on the United States alone. Please compare Eric Alterman’s coinage “punditocracy,” which combines Sanskrit and Ancient Greek. *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Washington Punditocracy* (Cornell University Press, 2000; revised and updated edition).

²³ Brendan Nyhan, “Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate,” *The Forum* Volume 8 [“The Politics of Health Care Reform”] Article 5 discusses selective perception and partisan attributions of truth or falsity.

²⁴ Characterizations of truth and falsity and of veracity and mendacity vary just as truth-telling and falsehood-spreading vary. When President Harry S Truman proclaimed that he did not give Republicans hell but told the truth about Republicans and Republicans thought it hell—if indeed President Truman said such rather than some flak fabricated it—he may have believed that his accounts were reasonably accurate, but he must have admitted that he spun the record to the advantage of himself and the Democratic Party. Still, as far as we know President Truman’s conceits about verity and falsity stopped short of egregious prevarication. Alas, the same could not plausibly be claimed of most of President Truman’s successors.

²⁵ Need we add that over time absolute truth(s) and absolute falsehood(s) or lying may shift, thereby stretching continua of verisimilitude to a greater degree?

²⁶ F. G. Bailey defines multiple gradients from truth to its many opposites in *The Prevalence of Deceit* (Cornell University Press, 1991) Ch. 1 and p. xvii.

²⁷ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Defining Deviancy Down,” *The American Spectator* Vol. 62, no. 1 (Winter 1993) pp. 17-30.

telling. Honest mistakes may be negligibly different from inadvertent truth-telling. Reckless untruths and thoughtless verities may be placed at some greater remove from dedicated truth-telling. Spin and other interpretive arts by which truths are fabricated or exaggerated to hide inconvenient truths or perilous untruths are not quite lies for many or most political observers. Harry Frankfurt has distinguished bullshitting from truth-telling and lying, so we suspect that bullshitting would fall between candid honesty and cunning mendacity. Statements that are technically true but inferentially false are crafted to be something less blameworthy and less detectable than brazen lies, we suspect. Most politicians regard distortions of opponents' remarks and mischaracterizations of opponents to be standard tactics or at worst sharp practices rather than foul, reprehensible lies. Frankfurt also asserts that, in our anti-foundational age, sincerity often replaces logic and evidence; if you profess sufficient sincerity in your belief, that belief is tantamount to truth. We leave it to readers to retrieve examples of this syndrome from their own experience. Our experience suggests that some readers' examples will come from academia. That said, we ought also to note that this particular formulation from Frankfurt runs counter to Orwell's sense of things in his famous essay, wherein he often blames insincerity for the deliberate imprecision found in our public discourse.²⁸

We refer to “continua” between honesty and dishonesty because we conceive of more than one spectrum along which to array descriptions of expressions or acts or character flaws. For example, the scale used in barrooms, in our experience, is very different from the scale used in courtrooms. Tall tales and self-aggrandizing sagas in casual settings may carry the narrator far from truth or truthfulness, whereas deviations from “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” may carry a witness far toward a jail cell.

Is it obvious without our adding it that the middle range between honesty and dishonesty varies by the perspective of the political observer or participant? If **my** candidate or our party frightens or threatens a group with tales of what opponents may be up to, the candidate or the party are not “just making stuff up” but may be exaggerating for impact [and to secure an advantage]. However, if **their** candidate or their party deploys hyperbole, I or we will shift such exaggerations toward dishonesty or mendacity. I and they will likely reinforce our position with sincerity (see reference to Frankfurt above). Pitched battles to label “them” as habitual liars while defending “us” as occasionally overreaching [solely to vindicate some important truth, of course] are thus a predictable feature of spectra between telling the truth as best we can and various forms of error or dishonesty. Moreover, by inducing us to identify with “my” or “their” alleged views, pseudocrats addict us to pseudocracy. Partisanship is a gateway drug to pseudocracy.

For example, when Senator Jon Kyl stated that more than nine-tenths of Planned Parenthood's activities or services related to abortion then was confronted with a figure closer to one-thirtieth, he was neither simply lying nor just making statistics up. That is, Senator Kyl did not abut the mendacity endpoint of the continuum. The Senator was citing a number that had been rattling about and thus may not have known that he was stretching

²⁸ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon* (April 1946) pp. 252-265 and *The New Republic* (June 17, 1946) www.tnr.com/book/review/politics-and-the-english-language; last accessed 11 March 2012.

the (un)truth.²⁹ When the Senator's staff defended his misstatement by saying that Senator Kyl had not intended his remarks to be taken as a statement of facts, "The Daily Show," "The Colbert Report," and other cable media joined broadcast and print in lampooning Senator Kyl. Pundits and politicians have some leeways in moving acts and statements this way or that along one or another continuum and those leeways lessen as the attempted placements approach either precise measurements or convenient flimflam. At the same time, it is also reasonable to claim that Kyl's staff at once lied and did not lie in defending him. If stating a statistic were not intended as some approximation of fact, then what was it intended as—a celebration of the concept "nine-tenths" or an illustration of the decline of arithmetic in 21st century America? So the staff cannot be speaking the truth. However, the staff may also have been speaking a truth: Senator Kyl did not intend to speak precisely or accurately but rhetorically and effectively.³⁰ If so, his statement ranged between mendacity and veracity on some continuum of verisimilitude.

²⁹ See, for one example of arithmetic derring-do in defense of the "greater than 90%" statistic, the 11 April 2011 release of LifeNews.com on the topic. www.lifenews.com/2011/04/11/politifact-misleads-in-bashing-jon-kyl-over-planned-parenthood/ The authors of this paper, each baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, regret to note that this peculiar arithmetic was propagated by at least one site that purports to be Roman Catholic. forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=551963 The LifeNews release faulted Politifact for its classifying Senator Kyl's pseudo-statistic as "False." Please see www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/apr/08/jon-kyl/jon-kyl-says-abortion-services-are-well-over-90-pe/ for Politifact's rating of the Kyl statement. At least one columnist faulted Politifact for not bestowing a "Pants on Fire" on the Kyl quotation. Please see www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2011/apr/08/jon-kyl/jon-kyl-says-abortion-services-are-well-over-90-pe/ [last accessed 14 March 2012] and especially note the comments archived thereat.

³⁰ Of course, maybe Kyl lied sincerely. Philosopher Harry Frankfurt, in *On Bullshit*, diverges from George Orwell by suggesting that in the contemporary world of bullshit—including academia—professing sincerity has largely replaced adducing evidence. When a bullshitter is sincere about his or her bullshit, he or she feels as authorized as anyone in possession of convincing evidence. Orwell believed insincerity to be a major culprit. Frankfurt thinks professed sincerity may be as potent, especially when the bullshitter deludes himself or herself into a conviction that belief sincerely held makes a "technically false" statement approximately true. Senator Kyl may have been spreading and consuming false information—political coprophagy is common—for so long that what he once knew to be an exaggeration of political arithmetic became truer with each repetition. To see how political operatives may be taken in by their own fabrications, see Marc Galanter, "An Oil Strike in Hell: Contemporary Legends about the Civil Justice System," *Arizona Law Review* 40(3) (Fall 1998) pp.717-752.

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat noted that Planned Parenthood also fudges the truth, perhaps nearly as much as Senator Kyl:

Planned Parenthood likes to claim that abortion accounts for just 3 percent of its services, for instance, and this statistic has been endlessly recycled in the press. But the percentage of the group's clients who received an abortion is probably closer to 1 in 10, and Planned Parenthood's critics have estimated, plausibly, that between 30 and 40 percent of its health center revenue is from abortion.

By way of comparison, the organization also refers pregnant women for adoption. In 2010, this happened 841 times, against 329,445 abortions.

www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/douthat-the-medias-blindness-on-abortion.html?_r=1&ref=opinion; accessed 5 February 2012.

We place “pseudo-” at the beginning of “pseudocracy” because falsehoods seem of late to have proliferated the means by which politicians as well as others may seem to be what they cannot be. The art is to seem to be truthful while expressing words or sentiments that are more useful than they are true. As pseudocrats stretch their truths further and further from what once they would have defined as honesty and truthfulness, they exaggerate whatever distance remains between their practices and abject mendacity. Our polity, we speculate, started just making stuff up when more and more politicians defined dishonesty downward.

... When We Started to Distend Short Cons into Longer Cons—Whether the “-cracy” [from ancient Greek for rule or dominion] in pseudocracy overstates matters depends on the nature of the falsehoods and contexts in which they are deployed.³¹ Short cons may rule or ruin polities less than longer cons.³² A polity ruled or even riven by “short cons” may soon enough reaffirm its faith in truth and honor and, more important, a common expectation that political discourse will tend to be reasonably truthful and acceptably honorable. On the other hand, a transient, temporizing, routine lie may entangle in webs of deceit a government’s attempts to deceive.³³ A society ruled or riven by “long cons” may cleave into irreconcilably opposed contingents each of which must persist in its core (un)truths rather than risk self-destruction, but such a society may “merely” deploy one or more “long cons” as myths or sagas. Moreover, as we have shown in discussing the stretching of (un)truths along continua of verisimilitude, short cons and long cons and other cons in between may each and all be located as short of falsehood as they are of truth.³⁴

Deliberate deceptions may sway the credulous or baffle opponents or postpone reckonings but need not rule many people for very long. Indeed, costly deceptions may expedite confessions that may be good for the soul of a nation even when the soul of the confessor lies beyond redemption. Under such circumstances the short con may not lead élites or masses to deviate much or far from workaday honesty, sincerity, and candor. We are not confident that we can identify or estimate the ramifications of short cons, but we suggest some short cons have proved not very harmful. For example, when Representative Gingrich and Senator Santorum claimed that if not for the 7 January 2012 debate they were involved in they would be watching the national championship college football

³¹ Please consult Bailey’s *The Prevalence of Deceit* on how collusive or cooperative falsehoods combine in polity and society.

³² For our purposes, the “short con” is transitory, a single-shot deception or fraud from which a deceiver may quickly escape. A “long con,” in our usage, is a deception or fraud that takes longer to develop and usually demands that the deceiver find ways to stay on the scene. *The Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary on CD-ROM*, by contrast, treats a “short con” as simpler confidence game involving a smaller amount of money than more intricate, more lucrative “long con.”

³³ Please see John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 38-39.

³⁴ If La Rochefoucauld formulated “Hypocrisy is a tribute vice pays to virtue,” he may have meant “tribute” in the sense of a due respect.

game that would be played two evenings later, they may have been victims of faulty staffing or losing track of schedules or simply foggy memories.³⁵ For another example, the Eisenhower Administration lied about Francis Gary Powers' U-2 mission in 1960 but was embarrassed when their lies were easily exposed by Khrushchev.³⁶ This incident was a short con, understandable in the context of Cold War espionage, and perhaps largely undone months later with the election of President Kennedy, who would lie in a similar manner about planning of the Bay of Pigs.

When President Clinton used lies and evasions to play for time as the Monica Lewinsky scandal began to break, he committed a short con with greater consequences than slips at a debate or diplomatic misrepresentations. The sheer risibility of "It all depends on what the meaning of 'is' is" and Clinton's impeachment and trial in the Senate may have re-established the superiority of truth-telling [however problematically], even though the Lewinsky matter fit a pattern of deceit by President Clinton and his administration.³⁷

Contrast such fibs or feints with untruths or half-truths that transmogrify into durable, lasting "truths" accepted by respectable, reported figures who do not subscribe to some fringe. A polity may be so riven with untruths firmly held that no consensus regarding truth or truths may be effected. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander assembles a narrative, with abundant and convincing evidence, about the continued systematic oppression of Black Americans. She starts the narrative with the Reagan Administration's decision to put a Black female face on all federal assistance programs and to create a drug-crisis where there was none.³⁸ Alexander demonstrates that these decisions were accompanied, literally, by campaigns similar to election campaigns in which mass media and marketing sold decisions and policies by means of imagery and catchphrases. A result of the war on drugs and the demonization of Black women and men is that the U.S. imprisons more ethnic minorities than Russia and China combined. In the Old Jim Crow system, Blacks were disenfranchised, terrorized by the threat and fact of violence, systematically mistreated by the "justice" system, and imprisoned into a form of slavery by another name. In The New Jim Crow system, Blacks are disenfranchised by being turned into felons via new federal drug-laws that are selectively and racially enforced. They are also taken out of the economy in disproportionate numbers, jailed, imprisoned, and/or placed on probation. Our point is that *if* Alexander's analysis is correct, *then* the Black

³⁵ For more examples of passing innocuous falsehoods, see [now Senator] Al Franken's *Lies and Lying Liars Who Tell Them*.

Senator Santorum admitted on 22 February 2012—the 280th birthday of the president who apocryphally could not tell a lie—that he rued his having voted for "No Child Left Behind" but said he took one for the GOP team—on a measure that passed the Senate with more than 80 votes. See crooksandliars.com/karolirick-santorum-booe-taking-one-team-nclb; accessed 23 February 2012. Such an inept excuse may not even count as a con. If it was a con, it was quite short.

³⁶ Compare Alterman's *When Presidents Lie* with Mearsheimer's *Why Leaders Lie*.

³⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left to Lie To: Values of the Worst Family* (Verso 2000).

³⁸ Please consider that President Reagan's felicity with stories about welfare queens may have facilitated his administration's "blackface" of welfare, in turn foisting the fiction that most recipients are not white.

face of “welfare,” the war on drugs, the demonization of Black males, etc., constitutes a very long con with multiple serious and lasting costs, especially to African Americans (and other ethnic minorities), but also to American society in general.³⁹

Between trivial, temporary falsehoods and substantial, enduring falsehoods we might array various intermediate cons.⁴⁰ We do so with utterly no confidence in our own ability to assay ramifications, to approximate the cons’ proximity to or distance from truth or falsity, or to judge the sincerity or cleverness of those who originated or disseminated falsehoods. Was elective or preemptive warfare in Iraq after 2001 premised on sincere beliefs about weapons of mass destruction more than expedient rationales that flew in the face of seemingly ample evidence? We do not know and, far more to the point, cannot know—by the design and practices of the pseudocracy. Were associations between Saddam Hussein and 9/11 pure humbuggery or plausible connections of intelligence dots? We do not know and cannot know—by the design and practices of the pseudocracy. Did Secretary of State Colin Powell lie for some greater good, or did he persuade himself that the information that he dispensed was inferentially true if technically less than true or technically true if inferentially false?⁴¹ We do not know and cannot know—by the design and practices of the pseudocracy.⁴²

³⁹ We coauthors suspect that it would be no great feat to multiply examples of long cons that surface and slumber but “run in the background” while mass media and mass marketing regale viewers and listeners with spectacles and infotainment. Please consider “the welfare state,” a shibboleth that often but not always re-presents misinformation about class and welfare in the United States and may account for profoundly mistaken beliefs and attitudes. Please see Christopher Howard, *The Welfare State Nobody Knows: Debunking Myths about U. S. Policy* (Princeton University Press 2008) and Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (University of Chicago Press 2000). Please consider as well corporations’ use of mass media, mass marketing, and political campaigning to manufacture doubts that protect the corporations’ products or prerogatives. Other public relations specialists and political operatives have learned how to paralyze reform by contesting scientific findings and broadly accepted truths. Please see Naomi Oreskes, *Merchants of Doubt How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury Press 2011); David Michaels, *Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (Oxford University Press 2008); Raymond S. Bradley, *Global Warming and Political Intimidation: How Politicians Cracked Down on Scientists as the Earth Heated Up* (University of Massachusetts Press 2011); Shawn Lawrence Otto, *Fool Me Twice: Fighting the Assault on Science in America* (Rodale Books 2011); and Wendell Potter, *Deadly Spin: An Insurance Company Insider Speaks Out on How Corporate PR Is Killing Health Care and Deceiving America* (Bloomsbury Press 2010).

⁴⁰ Attentive, astute readers will notice that we here simplify two dimensions—triviality/importance and transience/persistence—into a single spectrum. To be certain, a thorough examination of the characteristics of cons would require at least a Cartesian two-space rather than our prose two-step.

⁴¹ In the film “Absence of Malice,” Kurt Luedtke deftly captured one distinction that complicates assessments of statements neither true nor false when he had one reporter ask another “That’s true, isn’t it?” only to have the other reporter reply, “No, but it’s accurate.” www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/a/absence-of-malice-script-transcript.html, accessed 5 February 2012. Parts of Secretary Powell’s speech were, like the 16 words with which President Bush linked Iraq and Niger, perhaps accurate but certainly not true. In *Plan of Attack* reporter Bob Woodward argued that Secretary Powell did his duty as a member of the Bush team but never believed or pretended to believe that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Our major point is that, awash in pseudocracy, we shall not likely learn to what extent Secretary Powell was truthful.

Hence, pseudocracy stretches (un)truths and stretches out cons.

... **Yielding a Reign of Falsehoods that the Coauthors Call Pseudocracy.**—We mean by “Pseudocracy,” we hope that we have established, that discourse in the United States has teemed with misinformation more and more over the last decades and that the misinformation has obstructed reforms, distorted debates, sidetracked policies, and otherwise impaired democracy.⁴³ We began to just make stuff up when pseudocracy began to overmatch more honest propaganda. When communications, images, and messages distended ever further from truth but were reckoned spin or bombast or cunning rather than dishonest—stretching (un)truth—and when misinformation and disinformation became more common, more consequential, and more persistent—short cons grew longer—the rule of falsehoods dominated the U. S. polity more and more.

Perhaps the signal instances of pseudocracy since 1993 have concerned “death panels” in health care plans forwarded by the Clinton and Obama Administrations. The existence of death panels in either “Hillarycare” or “Obamacare” was always dubious because Presidents Clinton and Obama faced enough hurdles without sneaking euthanasia into their bills.⁴⁴ Yet “death panels” continue to taint discourse as we write this paper.⁴⁵ We submit that the “death panels” canard reveals both the interplay of mass media, mass marketing, and permanent campaigning during and after the Clinton Presidency and the stretching of (un)truths and lengthening of con jobs.

Brendan Nyhan and others have suggested how Betsy McCaughey transformed a dubious objection to Hillarycare into office in New York state and recycled the myth of death panels in opposition to Obamacare⁴⁶ (And we might note that, like those who engage in

⁴² We decided to avoid redundancy in noting that Birthers, Truthers, Swift-Boaters, and everyday claims by campaigns and campaigns likewise involve claims that might in some sense or to some extent be true but that are in one or more senses and to some extent untrue or misleading.

That said, we find it instructive that the *New York Times* in early 2012 incited a prose riot when its public editor asked whether the *Times* should police the truth or falsity of politicians’ statements. See publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/should-the-times-be-a-truth-vigilante/?pagewanted=all and especially the florid comments thereon. *Times* columnist Paul Krugman had inveighed against the presidential contest as a post-truth campaign. See www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/opinion/krugman-the-post-truth-campaign.html; last accessed 22 December 2011.

⁴³ F. G. Bailey noted in *The Prevalence of Deceit* that English has developed ever more words for dishonesty that stops short of abject mendacity.

⁴⁴ Indeed, Ms. McCaughey’s protests about nonexistent features may indirectly attest to her judgment that the actual choices or features were insufficiently alarming.

⁴⁵ Chris Gentilviso, “Rick Santorum ‘Death Panels’ Speech: Mitt Romney ‘Incapable’ of Making Case Against ‘Obamacare’ ” *Huffington Post* (February 6, 2012) www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/06/santorum-death-panels-mitt-romney_n_1257542.html; last accessed 12 March 2012.

⁴⁶ Brendan Nyhan, “Why the ‘Death Panel’ Myth Wouldn’t Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate”

the practice of attaching a Black face to “welfare,” opponents of comprehensive health-care reform deployed “Hillarycare” and deploy “Obamacare” to link one personality to complex proposals and policies, thereby blocking—they hope—any attempt at sober, nuanced discussion. If “Hillary” or “Obama” [not President Obama—that’s too respectful] are for it, then you ought to be agin’ it.) We hope we do not shock the reader by arguing that Dr. Nyhan’s suggestions match our contentions in this paper. Moreover, we note that whatever the shortcomings of Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama or their plans, both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama were attempting to solve a grave problem:⁴⁷ upwards of 40 million citizens of “the greatest country on Earth” and the wealthiest nation on Earth had no healthcare insurance. How many citizens died prematurely—and in fact—because of this situation, as opposed to the fantastical, counterfactual world of “death panels?”

Ms. McCaughey and, later, Governor Palin pulled off the remarkable political jujitsu of directing attention to conjured “death panels” to misdirect attention from actual deaths by stretching untruths along continua of verisimilitude and by distending what might have been and should have been short cons into longer cons. Talk of “death panels” was never provable or disprovable given the prolixity of health care plans and bills. Hence, opponents of death panels could stretch truths and untruths across expanses between demonstrable truths and demonstrable falsehoods, perhaps along multiple spectra of verisimilitude. Hence, opponents of universal health care could distend a canard into a longstanding objection, an objection more plausible the longer it endured without ever quite being eliminated. Hence, opponents of Hillarycare and Obamacare risked little and stood to gain notoriety and attention [and in the case of Ms. McCaughey, high state office!] by stretching (un)truth and distending a short con into a two-decades-long [and counting⁴⁸] con job.

Professor Nyhan demonstrates obstacles to exposure of myths and lies but argues as well that shaming works. In other words, amid the pseudocracy we may be able to escape the trap that Yeats articulated in our epigraph. Yeats wrote of “... one / Who were it proved he lies / Were neither shamed in his own / Nor in his neighbors' eyes;” Professor Nyhan writes of Betsy McCaughey’s shaming on Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show” as an example of shaming that finally silenced McCaughey.⁴⁹ That shaming did not, we regret to point out, stop the myth of death panels, which persists into the current campaign for the presidency.

⁴⁷ Alas! We coauthors intended the pun on “grave.”

⁴⁸ Please see thinkprogress.org/health/2012/01/06/399525/gingrich-end-of-life-counseling-is-terrific/?mobile=nc [last accessed 13 March 2012]; www.brendan-nyhan.com/blog/2010/07/the-persistence-of-the-death-panels-myth.html [last accessed 13 March 2012]; www.huffingtonpost.com/brendan-nyhan/death_panel_shaming_works_but_b_725865.html [last accessed 13 March 2012].

⁴⁹ Please review www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-august-20-2009/betsy-mccaughey-pt--1 [last accessed 13 March 2012]; www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-august-20-2009/exclusive---betsy-mccaughey-extended-interview-pt--1 [last accessed 13 March 2012]; www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-august-20-2009/betsy-mccaughey-pt--2 [last accessed 13 March 2012]; and www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-august-20-2009/exclusive---betsy-mccaughey-extended-interview-pt--2 [last accessed 13 March 2012].

What is more, as stretching (un)truths and distending cons decrease the risks or costs of dissembling, distorting, or deceiving, such pseudocratic arts increase the incentives to dissemble, distort, or deceive. Reasonable observers might disagree about whether exemplary pseudocrats such as William Jefferson Clinton, Karl Rove,⁵⁰ John Yoo,⁵¹ Judith Miller,⁵² and Oliver North each practiced to deceive, profited from deception, and paid far less than they might have if they had adhered to truth. We doubt, however, that any reasonably objective observer would pronounce any shaming as all that effective. We do not say, of course, that no one ever pays for lying, obstruction of justice, or other pseudocratic endeavors. Paula Jones, Gennifer Flowers, Juanita Broaddrick paid for the lies of President Clinton; Dan Rather paid for airing a fabricated report; Marianne Gingrich was recently called a liar; and Scooter Libby served as the fall guy for the outing of Valerie Plame Wilson, who paid dearly for the Machiavellian mendacity of powerful politicians.

Between the more august and powerful who suffer minimally or prosper mightily for dissembling and the less celebrated and powerless who suffer much more we might array those who achieve celebrity or power through pseudocratic arts. Blogger Andrew Sullivan names awards⁵³ after fellow blogger Michelle Malkin [Ann Coulter is excluded from the competition], Michael Moore, and Hugh Hewitt but such ridicule seems not to drive them from the field or hinder sales or circulation if such the authors enjoyed beforehand.

Besides, when dishonesty is occasionally detected and remarked, the pseudocrat has at his disposal many responses. Speaker Gingrich has in the ongoing presidential campaign demonstrated his virtuosity at “attacking the attacker.” Attacks on Politifact diminish ability of that service to expose “Pants on Fire” and lesser untruths. Attacks have to be neither scientific nor intellectually credible to neutralize or dilute fact checkers’ efforts.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ See, for examples, Paul Alexander’s *Machiavelli’s Shadow: The Rise and Fall of Karl Rove* (Modern Times 2008); James Moore, *Bush’s Brain: How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential* (John Wiley and Sons 2004); and James Moore and Wayne Slater’s *Rove Exposed: How Bush’s Brain Fooled America* (John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 2006).

⁵¹ To understand Professor Yoo’s pseudocratic ways, please peruse Jack Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency: Law and Justice Inside the Bush Administration* (W. W. Norton and Company 2009); and Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals* (Anchor 2009).

⁵² Ms. Miller spent 25 years at the New York Times insinuating misinformation into her reportage, was found out regarding WMD and other stenography, and proceeded to the Fox News Channel, the Manhattan Institute, and Newsmax. See among other places, Alex Pareene “From the Times to the Nuts,” Salon.com 12-30-2010 and Marcy Wheeler, *Anatomy of Deceit: How the Bush Administration Used the Media to Sell the Iraq War and Out a Spy* (Vaster Books 2007).

⁵³ <http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/awards.html>; last accessed 6 March 2012.

⁵⁴ “PolitiFact” has been decried from the Right: politifactbias.blogspot.com/ and newsbusters.org/forums/topic-discussion/bias-politifact and newsbusters.org/forums/topic-discussion/bias-politifact provide examples. Some on the Left have responded by criticizing PolitiFact for cowering before the Right, as when PolitiFact overstrained to find fault with MSNBC talking head Lawrence O’Donnell’s using the word “welfare” when he might have used “dole.” See www.politifact.com/texas/statements/2012/feb/17/

When critics alert reporters to falsehoods, expect pseudocrats to take refuge in false equivalences that columnist and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman has detected in “The Post-Truth Campaign:” “Oh, Mr. Romney will probably be called on some falsehoods. But, if past experience is any guide, most of the news media will feel as though their reporting must be ‘balanced,’ which means that every time they point out that a Republican lied they have to match it with a comparable accusation against a Democrat — even if what the Democrat said was actually true or, at worst, a minor misstatement.”⁵⁵

No pseudocratic reduction of risk or cost is as common, in our judgment, as changing the subject as the pseudocrat answer answers. A citizen confronts Speaker Gingrich regarding his continual demonization of Blacks. Speaker Gingrich answers that because he worked with Powell and Rice, he is aware of African American achievement. Fine, but what about that demonization we were discussing? Asked about Osama Bin Laden, President Bush answers “I just don’t think about him that much.” Thanks for the glimpse of your mind, but what about the hunt for Osama Bin Laden? Speaker Gingrich in the last presidential debate before the South Carolina primary attacked John King’s opening question about Speaker Gingrich’s second wife by accusing mass media of the very sorts of demonization and other arts of personal destruction for which a retiring Barney Frank blames Representative Gingrich more than any other human.

To Summarize the Foregoing and to Anticipate the Forthcoming—Political participants started just making stuff up 1) when we started to tolerate the overstretching of (un)truths and the distention of short cons to longer cons as “politics as usual;” and 2) when we accommodated ourselves in our own political thinking, acting, and advocating to truths that we knew to be untrue but expedient and to longer cons that served our immediate, personal interests far better than sincerity or candor would. “We” started just making stuff up when we each and all adapted to or adopted the reign of falsehoods that we coauthors call pseudocracy. That is our individual, psychological, behavioral, or cognitive answer. Our answer, of course, presumes or overlooks institutional developments that conditioned or reinforced individual-level habituation to pseudocratic truthiness. When and how did we the polity start just making stuff up?

Our Institutional Answer—We the American Polity Started Just Making Stuff Up When Pseudocracy Overwhelmed Mere Propagandizing, which Made Things Up Based on Facts, Using Mass Media to Elaborate Facts, Mass Marketing to Embroider Facts, and Electioneering to Spin Selected Facts; Mass Media, Mass Marketing, and Permanent Campaigning, Separately and In Concert, Made Stuff

lawrence-odonnell/lawrence-odonnell-says-critics-called-original-gi-/; last accessed 13 March 2012 and www.mediaite.com/online/politifact-rates-lawrence-odonnell-lean-forward-ad-mostly-false-for-comments-about-gi-bill/; last accessed 13 March 2012 and fellow MSNBC talking head Rachel Maddow’s responses at www.mediaite.com/online/politifact-responds-to-rachel-maddows-criticism-we-dont-expect-our-readers-to-agree-with-every-ruling/; last accessed 13 March 2012 for counterexamples.

⁵⁵ www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/opinion/krugman-the-post-truth-campaign.html; last accessed 13 March 2012.

Up for “Current Events Citizens” until Media, Marketing, and Electioneering Made “Current Events Citizens” Suckers for Falsehoods.

If we answer our colleague that we just make stuff up as a pseudocracy emerges from previous, more honest propagandizing, it behooves us to inform our colleague and our readers what we understand about propaganda and especially the relationship of propaganda to respect for truth. Almost everything we comprehend about propaganda we learned from Jacques Ellul. In his magisterial *Propagandes* Professor Ellul offered a dire dilemma: democratic states could not survive or compete with other states unless they engaged in propagandas, but propagandizing populaces crippled democracies.⁵⁶ Propagandizing followed from a fierce pragmatism and fixation on effectiveness in shaping the attitudes and actions of polities and populations. The technologies of propagandizing were most effective, Ellul argued, when they suited propagandas to what common men and women regarded as factual or true. When propagandas shifted from adhering to facts and rehearsing widely held truths to fabricating falsehoods and perpetrating cons, we answer our colleague, our polity and our population started just making stuff up.

... **Mere Propagandizing Made Things Up Based on Facts**—In his trenchant, prescient articulation of the American way of social, psychological, political, and cultural life, Jacques Ellul imagined a polity based on fabrications and fantasies. However, in Ellul’s propagandizing polity facts and factuality were integral to the paramount goal of effectiveness. Ellul understood modern democracies to depend on knowledge about the truth of matters if they were to shape attitudes and manage populations effectively. We return to Ellul’s classic study, then, to recall that credibility and verifiability once mattered a great deal more than they do nowadays, which is one reason why nowadays we just make things up.

Ellul theorized that by the end of the 19th century the United States was tasked to assimilate its population of immigrants drawn from various cultures, economies, and societies into a distinctively American system. In the 20th century the United States had solved its problem through “psychological standardization” of the population around an American Way of Life. This standardization made economic demand more predictable and marketing more accurate even as it created mass consumers befitting the mass production at which the United States was becoming ever more adept and mass audiences befitting the mass media with which the United States was becoming ever more suffused. This American Way of Life also unified masses and individuals within masses around a cultural, social, and political standard, which in turn created the dialectical opposite “un-American.” This “consensus” formed and continues to form a diffuse and variable but broad and unflinching foundation for more direct, partisan, ideological, and organized shaping of attitudes and opinions through propaganda. Ellul presumed that his readers would be quite familiar with propagandas that agitated individuals, mobilized them to act,

⁵⁶ To put Ellul’s overall thesis in such a manner reminded us of Woody Allen’s graduation speech: “More than at any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.” “My Speech to the Graduates” <http://quotes.yourdictionary.com/mankind>; accessed 13 February 2012.

and encouraged them to conform their attitudes and opinions to propagandists' designs; Ellul presumed it might not have occurred to his readers that propagandas also integrated individuals, orchestrated their agreements and beliefs, and thereby made management of a consumerist, mass-mediated, plebiscitary polity more manageable.

To be sure, Ellul's founding narrative for the American Way of Life explains "just making stuff up" as an ongoing, fundamental process of agitating and acquiescing, of dividing and integrating, of matching centripetal to centrifugal forces, and of cleaving "American" from "un-American" so that "true Americans" may cleave to the American Way of Life. In Ellul's version of genesis, Mass Production begat Mass Consumption, which begat Mass Standardization of Consumers, which begat more predictable, effective, and convenient Marketing and other manipulations of Public Opinion.

Among Ellul's seminal contributions to understanding of modern marshaling of public opinion was that the process of concocting widely shared ideas—the politer form of "making stuff up"—consisted less in Big Lies and tall tales than in diffuse promotion of ideas, attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices. Modern propagandas might promote orthodoxies, rationalized doctrines, programmes, and calls to action, but centripetal, unifying, conformity-inducing calls to solidarity and orthopraxy have integrated what centrifugal, divisive, heteronomy-creating mobilizations have threatened to disintegrate. Professor Murray Edelman would elaborate this reciprocating sequence in *Politics as Symbolic Action*: agitation propagandas aroused, inspired, and mobilized to actions as well as beliefs, while complementary propagandas assuaged, reassured, and demobilized.⁵⁷

Ellul provided an interesting, fertile account of the founding of the American Way of Life, but Ellul's decisive contribution to understanding our descent into pseudocracy (and our answer to our colleague) lies in Ellul's insistence that the most (in)famous propagandists—Nazis, Fascists, Communists, and Madison Avenue—strived to make propaganda as factual as they could manage. At least they strived not to stray too far toward the provably false.⁵⁸ Goebbels and other dark lords of propaganda stressed factuality, precision, and accuracy as prerequisites to believability and, therefore, to effectiveness. Bernays exemplified "expedient exaggeration,"⁵⁹ an art of playing up helpful appearances that were not demonstrably untrue and playing down actualities that were true but un-

⁵⁷ Indeed, Professor Edelman packed the reciprocating processes into his subtitle: *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Markham Publishing Company 1971). The late Professor Edelman explicitly analyzed elite orchestration of arousal and quiescence via symbols. We have "retrofitted" his formulations to Professor Ellul's analyses of complementary political and sociological propagandas. Edelman did not cite Ellul.

⁵⁸ We do not, of course, assert or assume that propaganda tends to consist in statements that can properly be said to be true or false. Hierarchies among values, fantastic interpretations, invocations of myths, fanciful origins, and so on have long suffused culture, society, and polity and, amplified by modern media, are far more common and ubiquitous than before.

⁵⁹ Cary Grant in "North by Northwest" intoned that "In the world of advertising, there's no such thing as a lie. There's only expedient exaggeration." <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053125/quotes>; accessed 5 February 2012. The third epigraph for this paper.

helpful to advertisers or other molders of opinion. Ellul showed how and why the propaganda that suffused 20th century societies, economies, and politics to such a degree that modern politicians, marketers, and leaders must propagandize or fail, but he also articulated why modern, effective propaganda demanded adherence to known facts and therefore a willingness to discover what those facts are or might be. In sum, we take from Ellul the insight that propagandists once relied on facts rather than convenient falsehood because factuality could be more effective longer than could falsehoods that would be found out too soon for any “long con” to work.

How could effective propaganda build on or at least not contradict facts? Ellul taught us propagandists trafficked in that which was not easily verified or verifiable. Statements that have no obvious truth-value—in the study of logic, capacity to be designated either “true” or “false”—afforded propagandists opportunities to assign motives, to interpret, or to associate freely.⁶⁰

Moreover, Professor Ellul instructed us, propagandas sensitized propagandees to propagandists’ preferred themes and de-sensitized propagandees to competing themes [such as those of other propagandists].⁶¹ Professor Ellul rendered the process of sensitization starkly: an individual passionate to act in pursuit of some good or to fend off some evil takes from propagandas instruction and, through concomitant actions, becomes ever more committed to the themes, values, and myths that the propagandas promulgate. As mass media drown their targets in information and mass marketing inundates consumers in appeals, propagandas simplify information into responses as appropriate to the propagandee as to the propagandist. De-sensitization is the opposite process: Propagandas make propagandees progressively impervious to objective, reasonable, or factual information that might contradict or undermine propagandas. The one-two punch of sensitization and de-sensitization renders propagandees ever less capable of escaping propagandas.

Professor Ellul explicitly invoked the techniques of mass media and mass marketing as means by which propagandists totally encircled individuals isolated within masses. To understand Ellul’s vision better, let us now examine in turn mass media, mass marketing, and the perpetual campaigning and electioneering that media and marketing spawned. We shall see how, despite technological and cultural innovations, each relied on factuality to marshal credibility.

⁶⁰ “*Intentions and Interpretations*. This is the real realm of the lie; but it is exactly here that it cannot be detected. If one falsifies a fact, one may be confronted with unquestionable proof to the contrary. (To deny that torture was used in Algeria became increasingly difficult.) But no proof can be furnished where motivations or intentions are concerned or interpretation of a fact is involved.” Ellul, *Propaganda*, p.57.

⁶¹ Ellul or his translators or both used “sensibilization” and “mithridatization” as the psychological effects of propaganda. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 183-187. We re-translate and simplify those terms to “sensitizing” and “de-sensitizing,” respectively. “Sensibilization” is too Austenian for the less literate coauthor. And Mithridates? Really? Seriously?

... **Mass Media Once Made Things Up by Elaborating Facts.**⁶²—Mass media are essential to Ellul’s vision of modern propaganda, which subordinated dogmas, doctrines, and ideologies to the service of propagandas that shaped attitudes and elicited actions.⁶³ Ellul emphasized that the dominion of propaganda demanded that propaganda so suffuse a society as to surround individuals within masses. To reach and to surround individuals in masses in turn demanded orchestration of modern mass media. Size—communication broad and deep—matters.

For media-generated and media-disseminated appearances to supplant actualities required careful husbanding of credibility and authority, as classic and contemporary studies of mass media have demonstrated.⁶⁴ To be sure, some fictionalization or journalistic license was involved, but flat-out falsification was to be avoided so that reporters and editors could be said to report the news more than to make the news.⁶⁵ The gist of Edward Jay Epstein’s *News From Nowhere*, for example, was that ABC concocted its narratives from no one’s point of view rather than faked the news to generate pseudo-facts. Mark Fishman’s *Manufacturing the News*, to cite a second example, delved into how beats and other journalistic routines crafted news from files and other authorized sources of facts or truths. News values issued ersatz realities to be sure, but not deliberately false realities. Indeed, flat-out fabrication and reckless disregard for truth defined libel and differentiated serious journalism from tabloid journalism.

⁶² “If you’re gonna hype it, hype it with the facts.” Robert Redford (Bob Woodward) to Dustin Hoffman (Carl Bernstein) in “All the President’s Men” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074119/quotes>; accessed 28 February 2012.

⁶³ Although “attitudes” made the subtitle, Ellul could not have stated more clearly that actions mattered more than attitudes. Ellul noted that analysts and theorists had supposed propaganda to be about orthodox beliefs but that modern propagandas aimed more at predictable actions that would commit the propagandee to the propagandist’s designs. For Ellul, then, orthopraxy—correct actions or practices—outweighed orthodoxy.

⁶⁴ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1922); Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (Ig Publishing 2004); Edward Jay Epstein, *News From Nowhere: Television and the News* (Ivan R. Dee 2000); Claus Mueller, *The Politics of Communication: A Study in the Political Sociology of Language, Socialization, and Legitimation* (Oxford University Press 1973); Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (The Free Press 1980) esp. “Webs of Facticity;” W. Lance Bennett, *News—The Politics of Illusion* (Longman 2011); Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (Northwestern University Press 2005); Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (University of Texas Press 1988); Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (C Q Press 2009); W. Lance Bennett, Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (University of Chicago Press 2007); and Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy* (Oxford University Press 2009). To appreciate changes in credibility and verifiability across the decades, one might contrast “The Front Page” (1931), “His Girl Friday” (1940), and “All the President’s Men” (1976) with “The Paper” (1994), “Network” (1976), or “Broadcast News” (1987).

⁶⁵ Please contrast the movie “Network” with “Broadcast News” to see how the plot of the latter turned on fakery while the former concerned creating actual events to be reported—pseudo-events.

... Mass Marketing Once Made Things Up by Embroidering Facts.—At about the same time that Professor Ellul was penning *Propagandes*,⁶⁶ Dr. Daniel Boorstin was penning *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. This landmark account of U. S. culture documented how modern mass marketing had made systematic and disciplined the management of expectations and, to recall one of Boorstin’s central contentions, the fanning and then seeming to fulfill extravagant expectations.⁶⁷ Boorstin’s central coinage, prominent in his subtitle, was the “pseudo-event,” an artificial happening created to be reported. Both “pseudo-event” and “Pseudocracy” begin with the same Greek root; however, the difference between the two could not be starker. The Pseudocracy is all about falsehoods and deceit; pseudo-events are all about creating actual experiences with far more attention to audiences not immediately present than to those “actually experiencing” the event. In sum, whatever the flaws of pseudo-events and pandering to extravagant expectations, pseudo-events are not lies.⁶⁸ Rather, according to Professor Boorstin, pseudo-events related to reality but in ambiguous ways that permitted those who created pseudo-events to control messaging. Publicists and planners exploited ambiguities that they build into pseudo-events to be certain, but the necessity of maintaining the ambiguity—the notion that reality and facticity were represented if not present—disciplined image-makers and kept them from simply making things up. In sum, events created to be reported had to be plausibly newsworthy or they would not be reported. Planners and publicists had to understand and supply “news-worth,” which in turn demanded some minimum relation to the verifiable.

Mass marketing encourages flackery but eschews flat-out falsification as surely as the mass media to which marketing is inseparably joined. The further from truth and the closer to deliberate deceit, the more morally blameworthy and commercially deadly the deception. It is therefore convenient that “branding” and “rebranding,” to select but two examples of flackery, can seldom be properly called false.

... Permanent Campaigning Once Made Things Up by Spinning Selected Facts.—Modern propaganda, mass media, and mass marketing shaped campaigning and electioneering, in which deliberate deception and flat-out lying were to be avoided or minimized or hidden. Modern campaigns strived to control candidates’ images but treasure credibility, simulate sincerity, and avoid provable mendacity. Campaign operatives created “photo opportunities” and otherwise catered to the deadlines and proclivities of mass media reporters. Image-makers applied up-to-the-minute marketing technologies to carry messages they have carefully honed and tested with focus groups. Joe McGinniss’s account of Nixon’s media and marketing, for example, showed how

⁶⁶ Professor Ellul first published *Propagandes* in France in 1962. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* was published in the United States in 1965. Boorstin first published *The Image* in 1961.

⁶⁷ Mass marketing not only traces retrospectively to Ellul’s foundation of the American Way of Life in mass production and mass demand—consumerism—but ramifies prospectively to the ways of modern electioneering.

⁶⁸ Disparage pseudo-events as “artificial” if you will, but humans create rituals and gatherings and even families.

elaborately Nixon's marketing team constructed his pseudo-events to dramatize themes and to make their broadcasts if not "real" then realistic.⁶⁹ From Spencer-Roberts in his first gubernatorial success through Michael Deaver's choreography of his first election as President, Ronald Reagan perfected his part in surely fictionalized but nonetheless real-appearing pseudo-events. Campaigns and conventions continued to feature the buncombe but little flat-out prevarication.⁷⁰ Naïve citizens who read about "the making of the president" learned of cunning, clever subterfuges, and sophistry but discovered presidential campaigners to be propagandists more than liars.

Even as campaigns and electioneering ever more dominated governing in "permanent campaigns" by and for Presidents Nixon,⁷¹ Carter,⁷² Reagan,⁷³ and Clinton, the decline of political parties in the management of electioneering, dealignment, and highly personalized presidential campaigns had/have made Caddell's "permanent campaign" memorandum from December 1976 prescient or self-fulfilling. Still, lying was risky, therefore rarer. Moreover, presidential image-makers prospered by understanding journalists' jobs better than journalists understood the president's men and women.⁷⁴

Indeed, campaigning became so permanent that activists extended campaign techniques to such confirmation fights. This yielded unseemly bouts of "Borking." While Judge Bork and his allies decried the smearing of Judge Bork to keep him from becoming Supreme Court Justice Bork, they never succeeded in demonstrating that charges against Bork were unmoored from reality.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Candidate Nixon's campaign invented "man in the arena" infomercials. The candidate stood before a crafted audience, fielded their questions, and delivered answers that resounded with the candidate's experience and expertise. The "man in the arena" was a dramatic pseudo-event in which laypersons could seldom if ever throw the seasoned campaigner off his game. Soon-to-be President Nixon appeared alone before the people but emerged unscathed in live encounters in part because his agents and advance men had set their candidate up to convey campaign themes and flattering impressions. More authentic and less mediated in 1960 and 1962, former Vice President Nixon lost; more mediated and better staged in 1968, former Vice President Nixon became President-elect Nixon.

⁷⁰ The perhaps apocryphal story that Lyndon Baines Johnson got elected to Congress in 1948 in part by spreading a report that his opponent had carnal knowledge of barnyard animals might be an untruth of an intermediate variety.

⁷¹ Schell, *The Time of Illusion*.

⁷² See Kathleen Hall Jamison, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (Oxford University Press 1996) p. 397 on "Rafshoonery."

⁷³ Richard Reeves, *Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (Simon and Schuster 2006) and Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (PublicAffairs 2000) and *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (PublicAffairs 2005).

⁷⁴ Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (Schocken 1989).

⁷⁵ We coauthors realize that we risk dissent in asserting that Judge Bork's opponents based their campaign against Judge Bork on at least arguable facts. Judge Bork in his *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* claimed that attacks on him were baseless, but we insist that Judge Bork's book itself supplies factual bases for some of his detractors. We agree that Senator Kennedy's infamous screed

Even perpetual electioneering based in verisimilitude will stretch (un)truth and lengthen cons, thereby risking greater and greater pseudocracy in the polity. According to Howard⁷⁶ and Gilens⁷⁷ the stretching of (un)truths and the lengthening of con jobs so disinformed Americans that they came to know much about their system of social welfare that was not true.

At a less systemic, workaday-politics level, antagonists must stretch truth or face their opponents or enemies with only honesty to fend off dishonest attacks. If a target sticks mostly to the truth or to short cons, that target may invite more attacks as mass media amplify untrue or unfair charges into longer cons.

... Mass Media, Mass Marketing, and Permanent Campaigning, Separately and In Concert, Once Made Stuff Up for “Current Events Citizens” Before Media, Marketing, and Electioneering Started to Make “Current Events Citizens” Suckers for Falsehoods.

To be effective, propaganda, mass media, mass marketing, and perpetual electioneering must shape news even as news appears to shape actions and actors. Critical thought or reflection impair the effectiveness of even propaganda based securely in facts. Hence, news media, advertising, campaigning and other arts of 20th century propaganda aimed to surround and to deluge citizens attentive to day-to-day reports. This was why, Ellul argued, “There is never any awareness -- of himself, of his condition, of his society -- for the man who lives by current events.” This “current events citizen,” then, is particularly vulnerable of the polity shifts from propagandas based securely in the demonstrable or verifiable to reports and appeals based on distortions or deceptions. Academics and intellectuals, Ellul noted, are especially susceptible to propagandas and to appearing to be up to date.

“Current events citizen” seldom has the time, training, or inclination to investigate reports or rumors or to connect news items himself or herself. Instead, “current events citizen” lives in a mediated milieu in which propagandists are only too happy to connect dots or to “get to the bottom” of disputes. “Current events citizen”⁷⁸ adapts to a mass-mediated

stretched the truth, but even Professor Henry J. Abraham, no admirer of Senator Kennedy’s speech against Judge Bork, stopped short of claiming that Senator Kennedy lied or just made things up. *Justices and Presidents: A Political History of Appointments to the Supreme Court* (Oxford University Press 1992) (3rd Ed.) p. 357.

⁷⁶ Howard, *The Welfare State Nobody Knows*.

⁷⁷ Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*.

⁷⁸ “And, in fact, modern man does not think about current problems; he feels them. He reacts, but he does not understand them any more than he takes responsibility for them. He is even less capable of spotting any inconsistency between successive facts; man’s capacity to forget is unlimited.”

polity by becoming immersed in today's news⁷⁹ and vulnerable to propagandists, journalists, publicists, and politicians. Propagandist, journalists, publicists, and politicians alike relate superficial, spectacular happenings that may be actual, verifiable, objective facts but may be apparent, putative, subjective impressions. Propagandas, reports, advertisements, and campaign spots become "current events" by means of dissemination rather than verification or verifiability.

If those who follow news assiduously and thereby feel events acutely and take positions on issues routinely—the readers of this paper and their students in classes relating to current events or policies are probably examples—live at the mercy of propagandists, media, marketers, and campaigners when factuality and verifiability are essential to effectiveness, imagine the plight of "current events citizens" when pseudocrats begin to stretch (un)truths and lengthen con jobs.⁸⁰

When Permanent Campaigners, Marketers, and News Media and New Media Started to Just Make Stuff Up, the Pseudocracy Overwhelmed Mere Propaganda.

As much as one may lament public relations, marketing, and other expedient exaggerations that shape or condition opinions and attitudes, each and all demanded attention to and knowledge of what was true, or relatively true, or probably true. Expedient exaggerations and consumerist flackery yielded extravagant expectations, which in turn elicited imagery, dramaturgy, and symbols and rituals to furnish what politics and government could never in fact produce. Politicos and officials, to succeed in the short run [without which short-run success there is no long run in the view of many politicians and officials], deployed short cons: symbols, catch-phrases, image politics, and the like to arouse citizens and to mobilize support as well as to manage opinion and to induce acquiescence.⁸¹ Management of extravagant expectations and exploitation of imagery, rhetoric, and so on stretched truth along continua of verisimilitude. Alternatives to truth proved so advantageous in marketing, impression management, and electioneering because PR delivers to consumers, audiences, and voters imagery and words that selling or governing by means of truth cannot. Orwell's denunciations of political humbug, euphemism, and even lying

⁷⁹ "This is one of the most important and useful points for the propagandist, who can always be sure that a particular propaganda theme, statement, or event will be forgotten within a few weeks. Moreover, there is a spontaneous defensive reaction in the individual against an excess of information and -- to the extent that he clings (unconsciously) to the unity of his own person -- against inconsistencies. The best defense here is to forget the preceding event. In so doing, man denies his own continuity; to the same extent that he lives on the surface of events and makes today's events his life by obliterating yesterday's news, he refuses to see the contradictions in his own life and condemns himself to a life of successive moments, discontinuous and fragmented."

⁸⁰ Behold the sense of Ellul's observation that learned sophisticates who pride themselves on their insusceptibility to propaganda are far more vulnerable to propaganda than those who do not strive to stay current.

⁸¹ We here borrow "arouse" and "acquiescence" from the subtitle of Murray Edelman's *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*.

were to a great extent hyperbolic in ways his caricature of advertising need not have been before mendacity truly came to rule.

Neither the etiology of propagandas to agitate and to quiet the masses by turns nor the evolution of mass media, mass marketing, and the permanent campaign necessitated stretching the truth, by which we mean moving ever further from the verifiable toward that which is not demonstrably false or dishonest. However, we contend that the absolute and relative predominance of “just making stuff up” has increased. If making stuff up absolutely has increased and if the ratio of deliberate deceptions relative to the stretching of truth along continua of verisimilitude has grown, then “we” have begun “making stuff up” as never before. If you render truthfulness quaint, you usually don’t have to lie unless you derive pleasure from lying.

The amplitude of mendacity seems to us to have grown in the latter half of the 20th century. Let us stick with “succeeding” presidencies. Presidential lying did not start with Watergate,⁸² but for some time dissembling and dishonesty seemed to be deviations from reasonable approximations of nearly honest and almost honorable conduct. When presidents strayed, presidents [and often their constituents] paid. We mentioned President Eisenhower and the U-2 incident *supra*. His successor, President Kennedy, lied to protect the Bay of Pigs operation before it went fiasco. President Johnson’s credibility gaps may have been minor relative to the lies by which the Nixon Administration attempted to cover up their nefarious activities and to hold on to office, yet Presidents Johnson and Nixon were each driven from the Oval Office in part for their lying ways. By contrast, President Reagan’s administration, including President George Herbert Walker Bush, paid far less for lying about the Iran-Contra Affair.⁸³ If President Reagan demonstrated the utility of lies to temporize over Iran-Contra, President Clinton confirmed that demonstration when Monica Lewinsky loomed over his second term after hovering over the First Phallus. That the Clinton Administration exploited almost every alternative to truthfulness before performing modified, limited hang outs seems beyond dispute.⁸⁴ [That the two presidents excepted from this list of trimmers, trucklers, and temporizers⁸⁵ were one-term presidents reputed to be quite honest does credit to President Ford and Carter if discredit to the growing pseudocracy of presidents in the latter part of the 20th century.]

⁸² Victor Lasky, *It Didn’t Start with Watergate* (Dell 1977).

⁸³ See Lawrence E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up* (Norton 1998) and Theodore Draper, *The Iran-Contra Affairs* (Hill and Wang 1991).

President Reagan also “benefited” from the presumption that the affable, elderly gentleman lurched into error rather than mendacity. Mark Green, *Reagan’s Reign of Error* (Pantheon 1987).

⁸⁴ The late Christopher Hitchens analyzed many other fibs and falsehoods in *No One Left to Lie To*.

⁸⁵ William B. Hesseltine and Rex G. Fisher, *Trimmers, Trucklers & Temporizers: Notes of Murat Halstead from the Political Conventions of 1856* (Wisconsin State Historical Society 1961).

All presidents and presidencies from Lyndon Baines Johnson to William Jefferson Clinton, however, did not prepare us for the presidency of George Walker Bush.⁸⁶ The sheer quantity of works on duplicity, deceit, dishonesty, and other stretching of the truth and lengthy con jobs by and amid the administration of George Walker Bush might be laid to Bush Derangement Syndrome, but the length of any list of book titles alone beggars the imagination. Other nations whose judgments and opinions the U.S. customarily respects regard one or members of the Bush Administration as war criminal(s), not just political bullshitter(s).⁸⁷

That the *Washington Monthly* drolly offered “The Mendacity Index”⁸⁸ while President George W. Bush was in office suggests a quantitative if not qualitative increase in misleading and misstating during or before the turn of the 21st century. “The Mendacity Index” relied on a panel of experts to assign numbers to the second President Bush and his three immediate predecessors to “measure” their deviations from truthfulness. Beyond its vaudevillian scoring, however, “The Mendacity Index” showed how truly problematic it has been for presidents since 1981 to approach either endpoint of any continuum of verisimilitude: Presidents Reagan, Bush 41, Clinton, and Bush 43 have avoided absolute candor and flat-out lies alike. One result of these presidents’ artful dodging is that the question, “What did he know and when did he know it?” is obsolete, belonging to the tender, naïve Age of Watergate.

The creation of fact-checking websites in the 21st century confirms a perception that disinformation and dishonesty were common or rampant throughout the polity.⁸⁹ The tendency of one or more of those sites to bend to pressure and to purvey misinformation in the name of balance exemplifies the metastasis of pseudocracy of late.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ In *When Presidents Lie* Alterman entitled his final chapter “Conclusion: George W. Bush and the Post-Truth Presidency.” See also Eric Alterman and Mark J. Green, *The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)leads America* (Viking 2004).

⁸⁷ Indeed, we take seriously the protests of supporters of the Bush Administration that suspicions or accusations of war crimes are **outlandish**. [Claims that such suspicions/accusations are outrageous, in contrast, might be dismissed as workaday bombast {or “combat” – combative/communicative bombast} in which outrage is an important product/service.] Propositions plausible or persuasive outside the pseudocracy in and of the United States are literally outlandish when confronted inside the U. S. Pseudocracy. When allies protest that what the Bush Administration did was well within bounds of media, marketing, and campaigning propagandas in the United States, they are to a great extent correct.

⁸⁸ www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0309.mendacity-index.html; last accessed 12 March 2012.

⁸⁹ Ben Fritz, Bryan Keefer, and Brendan Nyhan offered “Spinsanity” from 2001 until 2005. PolitiFact.com has been a service of the *St. Petersburg Times* since 2007. FactCheck.org has been a service of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania since 2003. FactCheckEd.org has complemented FactCheck.org since 2005. *The Washington Post* created “The Fact Checker” in 2007 and started it up anew in 2011. The Annenberg Public Policy Center started FlackCheck.org so recently that we do not include it in this paper.

⁹⁰ For example, Jeff Dyberg and Bryan White started “PolitiFact Bias” in 2011 to document biases they attribute to PolitiFact. See politifactbias.blogspot.com/p/about-politifact-bias.html; last accessed 12 March 2012.

These and other instances of dishonesty that we might cite show that, at the least, our society and polity have moved away from “honesty is the best policy” and toward ever more stretching of the less-than-truth. Along various continua, we are dramatizing Zeno’s Paradox: we more and more approximate abject, deliberate lying but find excuses for our lying and memorialize those excuses with relatively euphemistic labels. Publicists, spinmeisters, and other professional prevaricators craft those labels, of course, to overstate the distance and the difference between a lie and the label.

... **As Marketers Started to Just Make Things Up**—To understand how image-making has transformed propaganda into pseudocracy, one may need only to juxtapose two renowned incidents.⁹¹ The first incident, repeated in studies of mass media for more than 20 years, concerns the late Richard Darman’s response to Leslie Stahl’s exposé on President Reagan’s propagandists and their image making. Ms. Stahl had crafted an extensive report on contradictions between imagery and reality in President Reagan’s first term. She felt that her piece was devastating but factual. After her report took nearly six minutes [roughly a quarter] of the “CBS Evening News” Mr. Darman, an assistant to President Reagan, called Ms. Stahl. Instead of the ferocious response she feared, Mr. Darman thanked her for broadcasting the expertly-crafted images. When Ms. Stahl reminded him that her piece had contrasted President Reagan’s posing and posturing with his administration’s practices, Mr. Darman dismissed the words as lost on the audience. Stahl’s audience, Darman maintained, would remember the Reaganauts’ images and forget Stahl’s words. What was more, he marveled that television journalists could not seem to master that fact of political life.⁹²

Contrast Mr. Darman’s calm sophistication regarding imagery’s propensity to overwhelm facts with Karl Rove’s much-remarked brio in reporter Ron Suskind’s 2004 study of the Bush Administration:⁹³

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and

⁹¹ Republicans and conservatives should note that Ms. Stahl’s report aired on CBS during the general election of a Republican incumbent and Mr. Suskind’s article appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* early in the year in which President George W. Bush sought re-election,

⁹² Leslie Stahl, *Reporting Live* (Simon and Schuster, Touchstone 2000) p. 210.

⁹³ Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *The New York Times Magazine* (17 October 2004) retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?_r=1&ex=1255665600&en=890a96189e162076&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland 15 February 2012.

that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

Many analysts have focused on Mr. Rove’s hubristic notion of the United States as an empire remaking reality as it acts. For our present purposes the more interesting aspect of this “sound bite” would be Mr. Rove’s revelation of his conception of political problem-solving. For Mr. Rove problem-solving involves the dramaturgy and stage-domination of permanent campaigning and eternal public relations rather than experiences of actual citizens.⁹⁴ Out of President Bush’s actions and Mr. Rove’s propagandizing on behalf of those actions, a transcendent reality emerges. The empirical exertions or explanations of intellectuals, journalists, or pundits keep the chattering classes busy and current-events junkies distracted, we read Mr. Rove nearly to boast, but Mr. Rove and modern technologies are creating the shared reality that will matter far more for politicking, governing, and policy.⁹⁵

Mr. Darman’s confidence that audiences disregard facts and language if the images and dramaturgy are crafted well and Mr. Rove’s cockiness that bold actions matched to expert staging create reality irrespective of facts and reason show us how two very different image-makers stretched truth and lengthened cons. Mr. Darman and the Reagan image-makers “made stuff up” by constructing pseudo-events and photo opportunities that arrested the eye and occupied the mind. They largely circumvented the truth with glitter, a longstanding device of public relations. Ms. Stahl did show that actual conditions contradicted the upbeat images, but she did not claim that President Reagan or his staff were stretching the truth beyond emphasizing the best and camouflaging the rest. Mr. Rove, by contrast, “made stuff up” with such alacrity that he derided those concerned with reality and facts. Mr. Rove did not confine his contempt to the marks who believed his bunk; Mr. Rove extended his derision to more sophisticated suckers who thought that facts or actualities mattered in politics or government.

Mr. Rove’s stretching of truth and lengthening of cons seem to us to have prevailed and thus to mark a qualitative shift from the propagandizing of Patrick Caddell, James Car-

⁹⁴ Mr. Rove hardly invented such attention to spectacle and dramaturgy. Political operatives and politicians had for years and over many campaigns innovated along lines that Dr. Boorstin had delineated and anticipated in *The Image*. To understand approximately how political marketing and electioneering had evolved, please consult Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (University of Chicago Press 1988).

⁹⁵ Indeed, a student of 20th century politicking in the United States cannot but contrast Walter Lippmann’s naïve faith in facts and fact-finders who would through mass media tutor public opinion with the incapacities of modern public opinion to grasp facts or to the capacity of modern public opinion to embrace falsehoods. Edward Bernays’ charming belief in informing consumers through mass marketing gave way to Bernays’ break with PR and marketing in 1950s when he saw that modern mass media and modern mass marketing supplanted facts with fantasies. Lippmann and Bernays would each live to see mass media and mass marketing techniques revolutionize electioneering; indeed, each lived to see at least the beginning of permanent campaigning as means by which to spread helpful untruths and suppress unhelpful truths.

We leave for some future venue, perhaps the 2013 Western Political Science Association meetings in Hollywood [!], a systematic contrast between, say, Dr. Frank Luntz and Mr. Karl Rove and Dr. Bernays and Mr. Lippmann.

ville and George Stephanopoulos, or Lee Atwater. 21st century public relations has invented ever more ways of displacing and denying facts and factuality, truth and truthfulness. Whether in Dr. Frank Luntz's phrasings or in Dr. George Lakoff's framings or in Dr. Drew Westen's appeals to the limbic, the confidence games favored in this century aim to avoid reality, intellect, and rationality. In these formulations truth and facts are inconveniences to be destroyed or dispensed with. This seems to the coauthors to resemble "just making stuff up" a great deal more than the factually more fastidious marketing of Richard Nixon or Rice Krispies.

Dr. Luntz has invented too many stylings that stretched truth and sustained bunkum for us to recount and deconstruct them here,⁹⁶ but we draw attention to his book's title and to his infamous interview on NPR. Dr. Luntz's title indicts itself in our view: In *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*. Unless Drew Westen or George Lakoff serves on the jury, Dr. Luntz must be found guilty of pseudocracy in the first degree. Both in that book and on his book tour, Dr. Luntz reimagined "Orwellian" as a compliment. On NPR's "Fresh Air" Dr. Luntz informed Terri Gross that Dr. Luntz's work adhered to the standards that George Orwell advocated in "Politics and the English Language" and thus was virtuous: "To be 'Orwellian' is to speak with absolute clarity, to be succinct, to explain what the event is, to talk about what triggers something happening ... and to do so without any pejorative whatsoever."⁹⁷ To listen to or to read Dr. Luntz or Dr. Westen or Dr. Lakoff or other pseudocrats is to experience what Ellul meant when he said that the propagandist's purpose was to make the target feel rather than to think. That is the explicit end of pseudocratic public relations.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, for all the coauthors know, some viewers may perceive Dr. Luntz as a reliable journalist as they watch him conducting focus-group sessions or moderating discussions between, say, Herman Cain and former Speaker Newt Gingrich.⁹⁹

Some of these marketing geniuses work short cons. Other marketing marvels work longer cons and stretch (un)truths even further. Big Tobacco pioneered some such public relations work in the latter half of the 20th century by interesting reporters in the Tobacco Institute and other pseudo-scientific dissemblers underwritten by tobacco companies. In the 21st century corporations have used longer cons to play mass media and to preserve profits.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ May we recommend the screed at rationalwiki.org/wiki/Frank_Luntz as a devastating take?

⁹⁷ We secured the wording from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Luntz on 18 February 2012. The hilarity continues throughout Ms. Gross's interview with Dr. Luntz; please download this interview at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6761960, last accessed 18 February 2012.

⁹⁸ The coauthors refer any reader who suspects that we caricature Dr. Luntz to Dr. Luntz's own words at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/interviews/luntz.html, last accessed 18 February 2012.

⁹⁹ If we score Dr. Luntz for his resemblance to Zelig, we should note that George Stephanopoulos has worked much the same transmogrification from the Democratic side.

¹⁰⁰ To see how modern producers deploy the tactics and strategies of advertising and marketing to manage doubts and ignorance to preserve profits and images, please consult Wendell Potter's *Deadly Spin: An In-*

... **When News Media and New Media Started to Just Make Things Up**—If 21st century mass media have amplified pseudocratic public relations by featuring the likes of Mr. Rove, Dr. Luntz, Dr. Westen, Dr. Lakoff, and other spinners on broadcasts and in print, they have built on longstanding practices of 20th century news media. 20th and 21st century news media alike have covered pseudo-events and actual events in ways divorced from, even contemptuous of, facts or verifiability.¹⁰¹ The multiplicity of venues in which Rove, Luntz, and innumerable other operatives may work their cons is a feature of the pseudocracy, too, we suggest. One may run a campaign, work in the White House, appear on many media, be hired by other media, and create the “information” one is hired to analyze all at once. Is there really anyone unqualified to be a political analyst, a Democratic/Republican “strategist,” or a “contributor” to Fox or CNN? Matthew L. Schafer and Regina Lawrence have shown how reports of and commentaries about have exploited “He Says, She Says” formats to keep death panels alive, for example.¹⁰² The “Some Say” or “Some Would Say” formulations permit commentators to insinuate claims that they could not support with more credible sourcing if any credible sourcing were demanded.¹⁰³ False equivalences have long abounded in news media committed to seeming fair and balanced, especially when the subjects and objects of coverage are neither fair nor balanced.¹⁰⁴

Before any obvious advent of pseudocracy, news media remained solvent by covering the sensational whether it was news or not and by pursuing other proclivities that communications scholars amply documented.¹⁰⁵ In the 20th century Professor Boorstin had presumed that pseudo-events played off and played on events’ and persons’ ambiguous relations to reality. In the 21st century reporting of and about Truthers, Swift Boat Veterans

Insurance Company Insider Speaks Out on How Corporate PR Is Killing Health Care and Deceiving Americans (Bloomsbury Press 2011) or David Michaels’ *Doubt Is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health* (Oxford University Press 2008) or Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway’s *Manufacturing Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury Press 2010).

¹⁰¹ To review the lenses and frames that impair exposure of untruths and deceptions, please see Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World* (Oxford University Press 2004).

¹⁰² See www.niemanlab.org/2011/05/sarah-palins-2009-death-panel-claims-how-the-media-handled-them-and-why-that-matters/; last accessed 12 March 2012.

¹⁰³ Media Matters for America has documented this species of “source-ery” on Fox News. See, for example, mediamatters.org/research/201112020017; last accessed 13 March 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Krugman recently decried false equivalences that balanced away misstatements by Governor Mitt Romney amid his campaign for the presidency: “Oh, Mr. Romney will probably be called on some falsehoods. But, if past experience is any guide, most of the news media will feel as though their reporting must be ‘balanced,’ which means that every time they point out that a Republican lied they have to match it with a comparable accusation against a Democrat — even if what the Democrat said was actually true or, at worst, a minor misstatement.” www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/opinion/krugman-the-post-truth-campaign.html; last accessed 4 March 2012.

¹⁰⁵ See, for just one example, Bennett, *News*.

for Truth, Rathergate, and Birthers have demonstrated that news media easily stretch tenuous relations to reality far beyond Boorstin's pseudo-events and extend confidence games at least through the next Election Day.

However, the performance of news media has of late become desultory in ways that Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston formulate as an irony:¹⁰⁶

The great irony of the U. S. press system is that it generally performs well—presenting competing views and vigorous debate—when government is already weighing competing initiatives in its various legal, legislative, or executive settings. Unfortunately, quite a different press often shows up when policy decisions of dubious wisdom go unchallenged in government arenas.

This irony not only means that the mainstream press are least useful when most needed but also means that the mainstream press will often most vigorously vet hackneyed claims and familiar position-taking in a ritual of apparent vigilance, which may lull readers and viewers into the supposition that if the press does not arouse debate that not very much is amiss or at stake. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston show that the political press often inadvertently highlight a public face of democratic-republican debate and pluralism and inadvertently underplay the less democratic, less republican, less pluralistic, and less public faces of power.¹⁰⁷

Alongside these proclivities of old-style media just to make stuff up, “new media” expand the domain of pseudocracy. Mark Hertsgaard's exposé of the Reaganauts' control of media and Howard Kurtz's analyses of the Clintonistas' manipulations and collaborations with news media nowadays appear archaic relative to the ways in which new media make things up. The advent of CNN, CNBC, and other cable news channels has exacerbated bias and spin without doubt in part owing to the expectation of filling 24 hours six or seven days per week. Talk radio amplified the fabrication of falsehoods as well as the trashing of news reports that met established canons of journalism.¹⁰⁸ To provide “fair and balanced” coverage from ideological, partisan points of view, Rupert Murdoch and Fox News pioneered just making stuff up.¹⁰⁹ New media, combined with older media

¹⁰⁶ W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Cambridge University Press 2007) p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ See Peter Bachrach and Moton S. Baratz, “Two Faces of Power,” *American Political Science Review* Volume 56 (December 1962) pp. 947-952 and Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Palgrave Macmillan 2004).

¹⁰⁸ David C. Barker, *Rushed to Judgment? Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior* (Columbia University Press 2002).

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Sullivan mocks “fair and balanced” with his motto “Biased and Balanced.” See David Brock, Ari Rabin-Havt, and Media Matters for America, *The Fox Effect: How Roger Ailes Turned a Network into a Propaganda Machine* (Anchor 2012).

that disseminate reports on new media, have created an “echo chamber” in which concoctions reverberate and persist.¹¹⁰

Old-style and new-style media have in the last decades fomented polarization; polarization exacerbates the complementary sensitizing and desensitizing that Ellul analyzed as psychological effects of propaganda, but with a twist as 21st century propagandas stray further and further from verifiable or even knowable foundations.¹¹¹ “Liberated” to a large extent from canons of veracity, factuality, or credibility, polarized and polarizing pseudocrat-journalists may indulge dramaturgical convenience and extend short cons via expedience or expedients. The recent death of Andrew Breitbart provides only the most recent illustration of differential desensitization and sensitization that polarization has worked. Mr. Breitbart blogged hard and died young, which compelled commenters to trace a razor’s edge between speaking truth and speaking ill of the dead.

Moreover, in cyberspace, everyone can hear you scream . . . forever.¹¹² Images of your screaming may go viral. Your most baseless fabrications not only go around the world at nearly the speed of light, but opinions you would take back if only you could ripple into the blogosphere and collective cyber-memory far beyond your power to call them back or call them off. The Internet and the WWW magnify the mendacity and misinformation to which we are subjected even as new media and cyberspace magnify exposure of mendacity.

New media have shortened some cons but not extinguished cons or fabrications. Who knows how long Betsy McCaughey might have cited page numbers on which “death panels” were authorized or mandated in one or more health care bills if Jon Stewart had not made her look up the passage on air? But did that stop Rick Santorum from invoking death panels in early 2012? Who knows how many long cons have been truncated by “Crooks and Liars” or flackcheck.com only to pop up anew?¹¹³ Through new media as well as old media partisan propagandists may revive con jobs that have lain latent since being exposed as tricks and lies. Indeed, whatever utility folderol possessed before it was debunked folderol retains once a “docent interval” has passed. Cyberspace furnishes daily audiences unaware that bunk has been debunked repeatedly and decisively. Even

¹¹⁰ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford University Press 2008).

¹¹¹ Professor Nyhan treats polarization as an independent or contextual variable alongside media choice. We subsume polarization as a consequence of some of the choices among “new media.” We take old media, new media, and choices among media to be inextricably connected to recent polarization. We therefore do not mean to contradict Professor Nyhan.

¹¹² Marketing for “Alien” (1979) included the tagline “In space no one can hear you scream.”

¹¹³ For example, please see “The Democrats’ ‘End Medicare’ Whopper, Again,” at factcheck.org /2012/03/democrats-end-medicare-whopper-again/; last accessed on 10 March 2012.

those vaguely aware that a claim was “problematized” may not recall what the problem was, and it would be so convenient if the claim were once again available.¹¹⁴

Behold yet another way in which Ellul’s “current events man,” that atomized individual who is reached by himself even as he remains part of the mass, may be induced to feel rather than to think. Cass Sunstein has published multiple editions of his fears of information cocooning, echo chambers in cyberspace, and other mass atomizations. Ellul posited the psychological effects of propagandas in sensitizing and de-sensitizing propagandees; Sunstein’s nightmare of cyber-targets isolated amid masses represents a considerable upgrade and degradation of propagandees amid the pseudocracy.

Even worse, much of cyberspace’s “force multiplier” is largely or completely anonymous. Isolating information cocoons and selectively de-sensitizing and sensitizing echo chambers shield serial prevaricators from many or most consequences of lying even as the stretching of the continuum permits those who profit from the lies to call lies spin or exaggeration to make a point. “We” use talk radio or email or social media to expound claims we read on this blog or heard on cable news or picked up in a chain email or appeal for donations. We often can do so under an assumed name or a clever handle that protects us from responsibility for the “facts,” “truths,” and “information” that we dump into cyberspace.¹¹⁵

New media and the blogosphere, of course, operate on and alongside established media, and the rule of falsehoods depends on mutually reinforcing agitating and integrating propagandas. The 21st century “political conversation” becomes each year more a euphemism for speakers that dominate the foreground with manipulative and mendacious themes while political subwoofers broadcast political cacophony and noise that, among some, passes for a lively exchange of ideas.

In sum, once media old and new began to just make stuff up and “current events men and women” acquired means by which to swell the chorus of misinformation, the pseudocracy began to supplant propagandas based on facts and veracity.

... And When Permanent Campaigners Started to Just Make Things Up

¹¹⁴ Regarding new media and their effects on politicking, please see Eric Boehlert, *Bloggers on the Bus: How the Internet Changed Politics and the Press* (The Free Press 2009); Bill Kovach, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media* (Century Foundation Press 1999), and Howard Rosenberg, *No Time To Think: The Menace of Media Speed and the 24-hour News Cycle* (Continuum 2009).

¹¹⁵ Please consider, for just one example, the reviews of books or films at amazon.com or the Internet Movie Database or similar sites. At such sites “users” may attack books they have never read and films they have never seen. More to the point, “users” may anonymously fill reviews and responses to reviews with invective, ideological claptrap, talking points, and other misinformation and disinformation. When Matthew Yglesias tweated that blogger Andrew Breitbart’s death made the world a slightly better place, for example, Mr. Breitbart’s supporters took to amazon.com to attack Yglesias’s new e-book. Please see www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/06/andrew-breitbart-fans-matthew-yglesias-amazon_n_1324362.html?ref=media; last accessed 10 March 2012.

In an age of 24/7 cable news and cyberspace technologies that often seem to swell beyond 24/7, politicians and other politicians exploit marketing techniques and media proclivities to engage in 21st century perpetual electioneering to transform those paying attention into dupes and compulsive watchers. Let us briefly review two examples: Terri Schiavo and global warming.

Ghastly exploitation of comatose Terri Schiavo for partisan and ideological ends built on no or almost no discernable or verifiable facts, for example, but kept controversy alive after Ms. Schiavo's death and autopsy.¹¹⁶ For the purposes of this paper we need not rehearse such matters as the Florida legislature's authorizing Governor Bush's intervention with the decisions of the attending physicians or Senate Majority Leader Frist's appearing to diagnose Ms. Schiavo from a redacted video tape or other sensational developments. Instead we direct attention to the vehemence and persistence of fierce, dogmatic contentions echoing about the blogosphere and cyberspace.¹¹⁷ Rather we direct attention to how much of the conflict was conjured out of very little verifiable information or, more important, concern for verifiable information. As in modern electioneering, adversaries loosed speculations, innuendo, and spin and old and new media alike amplified the blather. Truths and untruths were stretched; short con jobs were distended; misstatements and disinformation went unpunished and perpetrators largely unshamed, as far as we can determine.¹¹⁸ Just as campaigners aim for the Election-Day finish line with little concern for veracity or credibility thereafter, politicians utilize media and marketing to perpetrate and to perpetuate falsehoods. The politicians deluge media with information of at best questionable veracity without serious risk or cost.

Climate change shows us that, as with Ms. Schiavo, mastery of marketing and of media means never having to say either that you're sorry or that you were wrong.¹¹⁹ Instead of depending upon our political leaders and policy makers to hash out the findings and recommendations that spring from the science of global warming, American dupes are per-

¹¹⁶ We rely on Dr. Timothy E. Quill, "Terri Schiavo—A Tragedy Compounded," in *The New England Journal of Medicine* Vol. 352 (April 21 2005) pp. 1630-1633. www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp058062; last accessed 8 March 2012. Although an autopsy resolved all issues regarding Ms. Schiavo's persistent vegetative state in favor of the medical experts and disinterested authorities who had pronounced her condition beyond hope, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8225637/ns/us_news/t/schiavo-autopsyshows-irreversible-brain-damage/#.T1iiv3mLKso; last accessed 8 March 2012. Blogger Michelle Malkin, among others, persisted in raising issues to rally the "pro-life" side of the controversy. michellemalkin.com/2005/06/16/the-schiavo-autopsy-a-sober-look/; last accessed 8 March 2012.

¹¹⁷ These echoes are still with us. Please see the "Terri Schiavo Life & Hope Network" at www.terrisfight.org; last accessed 10 March 2012. Dr. Luntz's addendum on the Schiavo matter may be of interest as well. Luntz, *Words That Work*, pp. 318-319.

¹¹⁸ We realize that Dr. Frist has been mocked for his mock-diagnosis. However, Dr. Frist's conduct in the Schiavo matter has also found defenders. www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/050404/4culture.b.htm; last accessed 8 March 2012.

¹¹⁹ "Love means never having to say you're sorry" appeared in *Love Story* and "Love Story."

manently detained in a Twilight Zone that allows one major party to deny humans' contribution to global warming without serious risk or serious cost—to them.¹²⁰

The death panel imbroglio and “The Mendacity Index” exemplify how Pseudocracy has almost eliminated possibility of lies or lying to which liars or their allies must admit and disincentives to lie. We are confident that other controversies about honesty and dishonesty would likewise conform to the stretching of the not-quite-true-but-not-flatly-false expanse between truthfulness and mendacity. Beyond mentioning a few here, we leave that demonstration to a later paper.

Our Inventory of Answers to Our Colleague's Question

We have argued above that “we” just started making stuff up when propagandists and politicians learned how to use technologies of electioneering, marketing, and mass media to stretch (un)truths and to distend ephemeral short cons into enduring long cons with plausible deniability that reduced penalties for or notice of the few lies that needed to be admitted or widely acknowledged.

Our answer, of course, is not very precise. We have argued that sometime between the assassination of President Kennedy and the re-election of George W. Bush electioneering, media, and marketing so stretched (un)truths and so distended short cons into much longer cons that the polity shifted from merely propagandistic to fiercely pseudocratic. At some point in the last half-century, we coauthors answer, we Americans started just making shit up.¹²¹

To assist readers and our colleague in assessing whether we coauthors have said anything at all [at great length] above, we furnish our inventory of answers. We began to just make stuff up when ...

1. ... governments from fascist to democratic-capitalist felt compelled to surround masses of atomized individuals with images, fictions, slogans, and other conditioning to secure orthodoxy and, more important, orthopraxy;
2. ... late 20th century mass-marketing and consumerism in national and international campaigns of advertising took ever more liberties with facts and veracity;

¹²⁰ Please see James Hoggan, *Climate Cover-Up: The Crusade to Deny Global Warming* (Greystone Books 2009) as well as Oreskes' *Merchants of Doubt*, Bradley's *Global Warming and Political Intimidation* and Shawn Lawrence Otto's *Fool Me Twice*, all cited *supra*.

¹²¹ We coauthors promised to stop with the scatological references. We ~~had~~ underestimated our own scatological tendencies.

3. ... perpetual electioneering effaced boundaries between governing and campaigning to such an extent that missions could be accomplished via sound bites, shibboleths, and spin without any reasonable prospect of demystification;
4. ... “current-events” citizens, information addicts moved the polity from the sunny “a good citizen is an informed citizen” to the sardonic “an informed citizen is an easier mark;”
5. ... journalism became so much more a matter of stenography concerning official pronouncements that it became ever less insulting that bloggers, pundits, and others who traffic in screeds are often called “journalists;” and
6. ... boundaries among professional roles such as political operative, governmental employee, journalist, creator of news, disseminator of news, contributor, and professional analyst of new melted (think Stephanopoulos and Rove); and
7. ... “agreed upon facts” became ever less possible or plausible.

The above is the coauthors’ inventory. Less sympathetic assessors might proliferate the answers to our colleague. That inventory might reach double figures.

The coauthors intend to aim for a bit more precision in “ascertaining” when the U. S. polity started just making shit up. The Western Political Science Association should watch for our future efforts. The coauthors believe that disbanding the Western Political Science Association on that account alone would be precipitous. However, the coauthors would not see banning the coauthors from future meetings of the Western Political Science Association as unjust.

Just as the coauthors’ worse may be yet to come, the polity’s pseudocratic worse may be yet to come. We coauthors see no reason to presume that the pseudocracy has stopped (d)evolving.

So what, in the interim, do the coauthors propose to do about people “just making stuff up?” We answer first [and curtly] that we set out in this paper to explain systemic developments in U. S. politicking and governing, not how to reverse decades of descent into truthiness.

Moreover, if we are at all correct, “What is to be done?” underestimates the Pseudocracy even as it greatly overestimates the two of us, not to mention overestimating the agency of academics and the rest of the impotent citizenry. Regarding the last point, let us ask you a non-rhetorical question: How many academics do you know that willingly perpetuate political shit, for one reason or another? The difficulties, indeed disabilities, to which we attribute the Pseudocracy will continue to shield the Pseudocracy from ready reform(s). Continua of verisimilitude make charges of lying ever easier to evade because undeniable, unavoidable proof of deliberate, material deception tantalizes

us: this distortion, that spin, a cunning ruse, some play on words, misuse of words, ...¹²² And, in the less and less likely event that charges of lying stick, penalties for lying are minimal. While the forces that we have analyzed in this paper seem to us to shield the Pseudocracy from ready reforms, some responses seem more sensible than others.

Nonetheless, we review obstacles to easy fixes and guess at how such obstacles might be overcome by individuals or by collectivities.¹²³

Our first advice is to ration your exposure to news media and new media. We think Ellul was correct to argue that close attention to mass media and popular culture exposes individuals and collectivities to “isolation within the masses.” As individuals we are too easily seduced or silenced by themes that suffuse public spaces. We tend to succumb to what everybody knows; in an age of propagandizing, mass media, mass marketing, and the permanent campaign, we succumb to many “everybody knows” claims that most people would deny if they understood. Do not make yourself a news or current events junkie. We think as well that Professor Sunstein was and is correct to argue that new media, especially new media that isolate users/consumers, exacerbate the tendencies to both desensitization and sensitization that we mentioned above.

Our second advice qualifies our first: attend much more to debunking and deconstructing of news, mass media, marketing, campaigning, and propaganda than to news, mass media, marketing, campaigning, and propaganda. If your job, lifestyle, or interest demands that you “follow” news, you will pick up enough from arguments about news events and recycled rhetoric to keep up around the water cooler. “NewsBusters” and its patron the Media Research Center strive to expose liberal or left-leaning bias in mass media. Whatever your inclinations regarding “the liberal media” or “the lamestream media,” you certainly may use NewsBusters to monitor the most persuasive cases to be made for one sort of propaganda, truthiness, or misinformation. A small set of fact-checkers and truth-tellers should alert you to some controversies and thereby induce you to suspend judgments.

Our third advice follows from our first two palliatives: use new media to alleviate some pseudocracy. Since the Internet and other new media exacerbate your isolation amid various masses and subject you to reciprocating sensitization and desensitization, let selected cyber-media ameliorate the false and the fallacious. For example, when electronic media permit audience members to comment or respond to pundits or other opinion leaders, the dialectics often edify.¹²⁴

¹²² In a recent instance Representative Steve King insisted that the mendacity as well as the integrity of Speaker Boehner and Leader Cantor were well established. www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsXM6FSpb9U

¹²³ I presume that the rest of this § will introduce various examples as candidates for flat-out “making stuff up,” but then note that each example remains contestable along continua of verisimilitude and/or that each example carries few risks and minuscule penalties.

¹²⁴ We have alluded already to a hubbub over “Should the Times Be a Truth Vigilante?” The hundreds of comments at publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/should-the-times-be-a-truth-vigilante/?pagewanted=all; last accessed 12 March 2012.