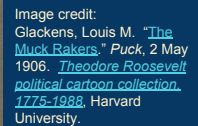


# Reframing Alternative Independent Media



Welcome to “Muckraking 2.gonz0.” Muckraking is Theodore Roosevelt’s pejorative for the emerging investigative journalists of the Progressive Era, many of whom you see featured in this 1906 political cartoon from the satire magazine *Puck*. Incidentally, prior to his 1906 “Man with the Muck Rake” speech, Roosevelt had a friendship with writer Ray Stannard Baker, whom he consulted as an advisor and to whom he leaked information.

# Information warfare is real

*Groupthink is a strategic vulnerability*

# Alt-Media are 21st c. gonzo muckrakers

*Teaching to the “least factual, most accurate” media*

# Intellectual freedom stakes are high

*Ethics for fulfilling our “special obligation”*

Since we only have eight minutes together I'll restrict myself to three big claims: first, that as librarians we need to take the concept of information warfare seriously; and that in the context of information warfare, groupthink is a strategic vulnerability. Second, I reframe contemporary alternative independent media as gonzo muckrakers as a proposed instructional strategy to teach about and with this content. Third, as librarians / information scientists and journalists, I call upon our ethical commitment to conditions of intellectual freedom to critically examine our disciplines' response and responsibility to 'fake news', misinformation and propaganda. Also, while it's not my style, I will be reading from prepared remarks to stay within the allotted time.

## My biases: **Freedom** and **Skepticism**

“The trouble with fighting for human freedom is that one spends most of one's time **defending scoundrels**. For it is against scoundrels that oppressive laws are first aimed, and oppression must be stopped at the beginning if it is to be stopped at all.” *H. L. Mencken (attributed)*

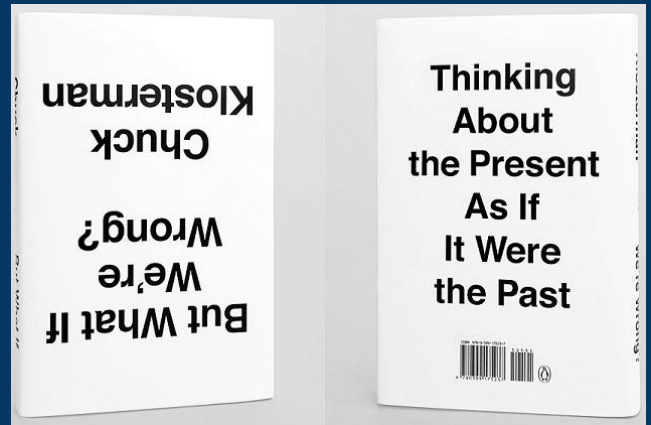


Image credit:  
Ben Casnocha, Book Review: But What If We're Wrong? via [casnocha.com](https://casnocha.com)

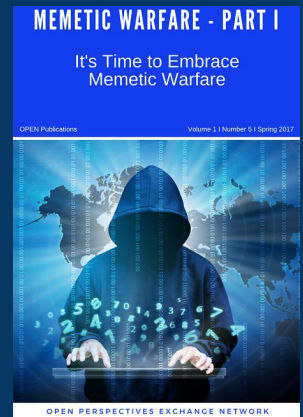
Since personal biases are in play when we talk about pursuit of the truth, I will start with two of mine -- as I tell my students, being a diehard 1st Amendment defender means I'm no stranger to strange bedfellows. I also try to consider the unintended consequences of my ontology (sense of reality) and I think Chuck Klosterman provides a useful thought experiment in his subtitle, "Thinking About the Present As If It Were the Past." This is one lens through which I examine the 'first draft of history.'

# Verbum Vincent

“...[T]he possibility arises that **the very ‘facts’ of an event can be manipulated** via multimedia techniques and widely disseminated. Conversely, there may be a decreased capability to build and maintain domestic support for controversial political actions. One implication is that future U.S. administrations may include a robust Internet component as part of any public information campaign.”

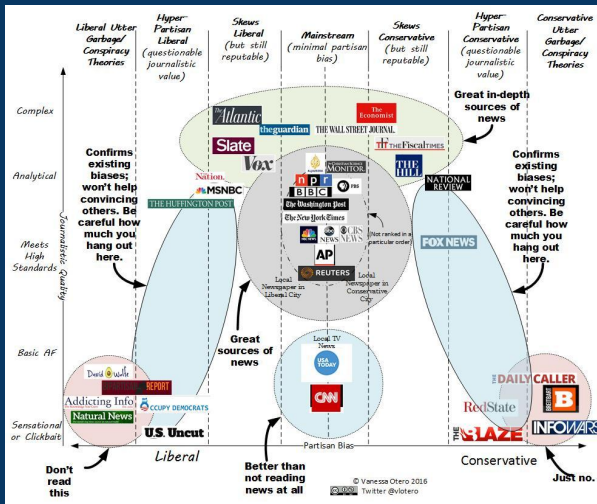
RAND, “Expanded Role for Perception Management,” [Strategic Information War](#), 1996

See also:  
J. Gieseke, “It’s Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare,” *Defense Strategic Communications* (NATO StratCom), 2015.  
D. Muldowney, “Info Wars: Inside the Left’s Online Efforts to Out White Supremacists,” *ProPublica*, 30 Oct. 2017.  
J. Seigel, “Is America Prepared for Meme Warfare?” *Vice Motherboard*, 31. Jan. 2017.  
Wikileaks [Vault 7](#)



RAND started reporting on cyber and information war in 1993 and conducting wargame exercises in 1996. One of the outcomes of that ‘96 exercise were recommendations for an “expanded role for perception management,” otherwise known as propaganda or psyops. More recently, NATO StratCom’s journal published an article about memetic warfare in 2015, which Vice Motherboard references in a Jan. 2017 article. (Whatever your feelings about Trump, he was the candidate who launched a thousand memes.) Then in March 2017, we learned from Wikileaks of the CIA’s “anti-forensic” Marble Framework used to make state-sponsored cyber attacks appear to originate from foreign adversaries, including attributes in Chinese, Russian, Korean, Arabic, and Farsi. This is evidence of our government’s “perception management” and cyber antagonism, and creates a new preliminary burden of proof to clear the CIA and, since the CIA lost control of these assets, other unknown actors as the perpetrators of cyber offenses that would otherwise be attributed to these state actors.

# Groupthink is a strategic vulnerability

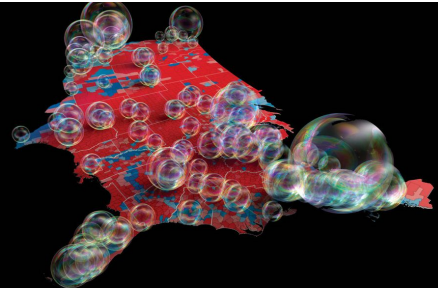


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 Jan 5 · 11 min read

## Did Media Literacy Backfire?

"liberal" "urban" "coastal"



**The Media Bubble Is Worse Than You Think**  
 We crunched the data on where journalists work and how fast it's changing. The results should worry you.  
 by JACK SHAFER and TUCKER DOHERTY | May/June 2017

I introduce information warfare as a context to critique our response to the 'fake news' meme, because in an information war, groupthink is a strategic vulnerability.

So, let's unpack this viral Dec. 2016 News Quality infographic produced by patent attorney Vanessa Lotero and distributed on her blog, *All Generalizations Are False*. It was widely disseminated by librarians and other educators. Lotero presents media as a bell curve, with "mainstream (minimal partisan bias)" sources represented as the ideological mean. Each standard deviation is presented as a partisan departure from that mean, until you reach the "just no" platforms at the extremes. We'll come back to that. A month later in January 2017, danah boyd asks "Did Media Literacy Backfire?" Her primary claim is that we've encouraged excessive skepticism in our students. Central to her argument is that the mainstream media is not as "liberal" "urban" or "coastal" as their detractors claim (scare quotes original).

Fast forward to the May/June 2017 issue of Politico Magazine, which investigated how the mainstream media failed to predict the 2016 election outcome. Their conclusion? Groupthink, perpetuated by the fact that a significant majority of media jobs are located in -- you guessed it -- liberal, urban, coastal districts. This is based on their analysis of BLS, census, and voting record public data.

So, groupthink is a problem. Liberal, urban, coastal cultural bias in media is a problem. But what does the News Quality graphic do? It shames anyone who dares to venture more than one standard deviation away from this skewed ideological mean. It socially rewards groupthink.

Incidentally, Lotero wrote about her “reasoning and methodology” behind the News Quality Graphic. She discloses that she is “not a media expert” and uses the word ‘subjective’ 11 times.

# Journalism in Culture Wars of Yore

## Progressive Era (1902-12) **Muckraking**

Mavericks, renegades and cranks

Corruption - big government and big business

Investigatory methods

- Embedded, covert operations

- Informant / source cultivation, 'gotcha' journalism

Rhetoric

- Sensationalist, polemical

- Exposés, tabloid culture

- Narratives with heroes and [elite] villains

Media disruption

- Emergence of monthly magazines

- Inversion of editor-writer control

Populist social consciousness

- Laissez faire to welfare state

Censorship by financial sabotage

## 1960s **Gonzo** New Journalism

Leading figure: Hunter S. Thompson

"self-created literary image as a drugged-out, slightly out-of-control angry man drowning in a sea of personal irony while railing against a creeping American fascism" (Burroughs)

**"Least factual, most accurate"** (Mankiewicz)

Rhetoric

- Creative nonfiction

- Explicitly subjective; author is central

- Hyperbolic

- Satirical; tongue-in-cheek

- Provocateur (trolling)

- Countercultural (Thompson: NRA to NORML)

Media disruption

- Alternative / fringe outlets

I think it behooves us to explore the margins of our current events media, and I think the history of journalism gives us some useful waypoints - namely, the muckraking journalism of the Progressive Era, and the gonzo and New Journalism genres of the 1960s. These styles were characterized by renegade practitioners who completely disrupted the accepted mainstream media practices of their day. They engaged in controversial investigatory techniques, exposed the corruption of big government and big business, wrote hyperbolic and sensational polemics, upended editors' control over content, blurred the lines between reporting and entertaining, placed themselves at the center of the story, and faced both hard and soft censorship. In other words, this is not the first time we've had to grapple with "least factual, most accurate" news.



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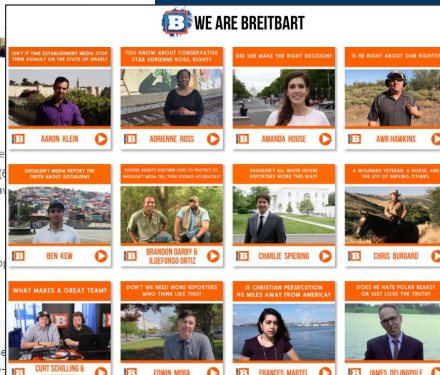
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# Gonzo Muckrakers



This is just a sample of the gonzo muckrakers of our time -- those “just no” platforms from the News Quality graphic. As Julian Assange observed, this is where many people - perhaps, young men in particular - are seeking information. For that reason alone, we can’t ignore them. They are also the subjects of joint ventures in censorship between big tech and big government.

I also want to make the observation that these independent and citizen journalists are not as homogeneous, demographically or ideologically, as we might assume from our perch at the height of the News Quality bell curve. You probably recognize Alex Jones of InfoWars, pictured here in conversation with former Federal Housing Commissioner under Bush, Sr., Catherine Austin Fitts, who subsequently blew the whistle on HUD corruption and now publishes her own economic news in the Solari Report. To the left is Candace Owens who vlogs as ‘Red Pill Black’ and is a critic of extremist rhetoric and violence associated with Black Lives Matter.

Below Candace is a sample of featured Breitbart writers; Next to Candace is Brandon Tatum, former military, current law enforcement officer, whose commentary on the NFL anthem protests went viral on YouTube. Below Brandon is James O’Keefe, Project Veritas founder and no stranger to controversy for releasing undercover videos exposing political bias and collusion of mainstream and social media in his American Pravda series. Next to Brandon, we’ve got Mike Cernovich, who brought the Susan Rice unmasking scandal to light on Medium.com, and Laura Loomer, who self-identifies as Jewish, challenged the mainstream narrative on the Mandalay Bay event with information from hotel staff sources, and is an admitted ‘troll.’

# Intellectual Freedom and Information Warfare

## Censorship

Chilling effect (self-censorship)  
Algorithmic, crowdsourced, manual  
Ban / Account suspension  
Flagging / Age-restricted ratings  
Shadowbanning  
Deplatforming  
Demonetization (online ads)  
DMCA Takedowns  
Good ol' fashioned defamation suits

## From Confirmation Bias to Cognitive Dissonance

Burst the filter bubble  
Acknowledge misrepresentation  
Challenge censorship  
Redirect skepticism  
Humility before the truth  
“All silencing of discussion is an  
assumption of infallibility.”

John Stuart Mill, [“Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion”](#)

I'd like to see us move from the confirmation bias encouraged by conventions like the News Quality graphic toward a more nuanced appreciation for the reality that no one - not librarians, not the so-called papers of record, not the government - no one has a monopoly on the truth. To ignore or deny the censorship of alternative media, whether directly, technologically, financially, or socioculturally through a shame-based 'chilling effect', is an abdication of our responsibility as information professionals to intellectual freedom. I challenge us to burst our own filter bubbles by proactively seeking information from outside the ideological mean, to acknowledge that these gonzo muckrakers are routinely misrepresented by mainstream media (whose business model they directly threaten), and to redirect (rather than reduce) skepticism toward our own information habits and behaviors. We need to acknowledge and question the censorship faced by nonconformist independent media. Most importantly, I want for us to recognize that we are no less fallible than the alternative media we routinely malign.

## **Society of Professional Journalists** **Code of Ethics**

Seek Truth and Report It

Minimize Harm

Act Independently

Be Accountable and Transparent

## **ALA Professional Ethics**

- I. Equitable, courteous, unbiased service
- II. Oppose censorship
- III. Protect privacy & confidentiality
- IV. Respect intellectual property rights; uphold fair use
- V. Treat colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith
- VI. Act independently; do not advance private interests
- VII. Distinguish between personal convictions and professional duties
- VIII. Strive for excellence through lifelong learning

# *Intellectual Freedom*

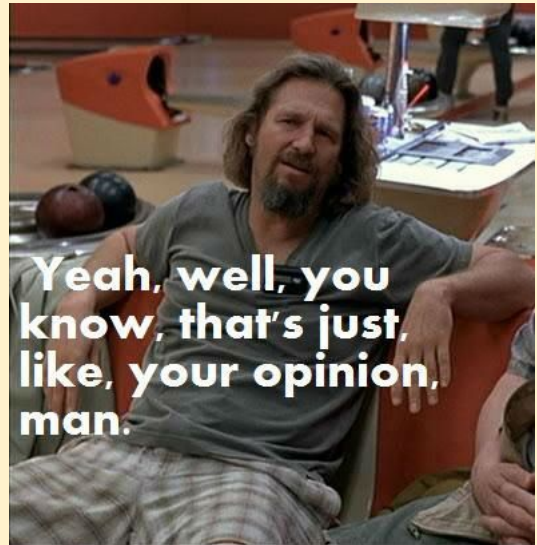
On a practical level, both journalists and librarians have long-standing ethical codes which guide our professional actions when, as the ALA code states, “values are in conflict.”

As librarians, we are called to be unbiased, to oppose censorship, to act independently, and to “distinguish between personal convictions and professional duties” in our work. These ethical guidelines ensure the fulfillment of our special obligation to intellectual freedom.

Sun Tzu observed that “all warfare is based on deception.” And in the context of undeniable information warfare, in which groupthink is an actual strategic vulnerability, intellectual freedom - our ability to question, to investigate, to publish, to discuss, to make, admit and learn from mistakes; our right to nonconformity - must be central to our survival strategy.

*Thank you*  
for your consideration

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**Yeah, well, you  
know, that's just,  
like, your opinion,  
man.**

*The Big Lebowski*