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crackpots, in some cases including what Alex Jones is saying on Info Wars and what Ann Coulter is ranting and raving about. What do we gain by learning about the ramblings of these conspiracy theorists?

Miranda Blue: I think that it's important to know that we aren't just repeating these things because they're crazy. You take someone like Ann Coulter who is kind of a fringe person and says really offensive, outrageous things all the time, and that's her shtick, and why do we listen to interviews with her? Because it comes out that she helped the Trump campaign write an immigration policy paper. We follow people who we sense have, or are going to have, influence, and who should be exposed by exposing them in their own words.

E.G.: As someone who has been researching and writing about right-wing extremist movements for some time, can you describe the current landscape as it compares to before the 2016 campaign season?

M.B.: There have been some big shifts, but I think that it's more similar in ways that don't necessarily get attention. For instance, we do a lot of work following the religious right, and the religious right has enormous influence in Trump's administration – which can come as a surprise because Trump did not present himself as a Christian-right candidate at all. But you have religious right leaders invited to the White House on a regular basis, praying over Trump, and they made it a very explicit deal during the campaign that the Christian right leaders would turn out their base to elect him and he would give them their policy priorities: a Supreme Court justice, Neil Gorsuch, who was hand-picked by the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation; this recent announcement of a ban on transgender people serving in the military was a gift to the religious right; also going after abortion rights, reinstating the global gag rule and expanding it. There have been many policies like that coming out of the Trump administration.

Then, beyond the religious right, we really have seen an increase in the stature of a lot of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups – groups that have been working behind the scenes a long time but now see themselves in a position of power. For instance, Jeff Sessions had been a favorite of the main anti-immigration groups: Federation for American Immigration Reform and their allies. They've been working with him for quite a while, and now they have him in the Justice Department as attorney general.

Another example is a group called The Remembrance Project, which is a Texas-based group that whips up stories of actual Americans citizens who have been killed by undocumented immigrants. Very genuinely sad, tragic stories, but their goal is to try and create the false impression that undocumented immigrants, as a whole, are dangerous people. This was a pretty fringe group that did not have a lot of influence until Trump came along, and now they're boasting of their connections to the Trump administration.



PHOTO BY LUCAS JACKSON/REUTERS

Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones speaks July 18, 2016, at a Cleveland rally in support of Donald Trump. Jones, founder of the radio news show InfoWars, has propagated many bogus stories, including that white supremacists at the Charlottesville, Va., rally last week were left-wing Jewish actors.

And then, finally, you have the “alt-right,” which has been brewing off in the worst corners of the internet for a while that has really come into its own in the Trump administration, and that's an area that's newer for us and that we're trying to do more work on – discovering who they are and what they're up to.

E.G.: You already touched on this a little, but I want to talk more about the evangelical influence on Trump. This morning you published an article about how the mega-church pastor Robert Jeffress gave Trump God's permission to take out North Korea.

Are you seeing that some of these evangelical leaders – are they exploiting his narcissistic tendencies, or do you think they really believe God has sent him to push through their policies?

M.B.: It's hard to see into somebody's heart, but I think it's a combination of both. I'm not going to say that these people don't believe what they're saying about God sending Trump, but I think that part of that genuine belief comes from this idea that was propagated (during the Obama administration that the United States was persecuting Christians, and Trump caught on to that during his campaign. He told the religious right, “You won't be persecuted anymore in America. You can say Merry Christmas.” So we're seeing a lot of religious right leaders saying, “The Trump administration may not be perfect, but it's given us a reprieve. Hillary Clinton would have doomed Christianity in America forever, but Trump has given us some breathing room to rebuild the church and rebuild our influence.”

I also think they've realized that Trump is very susceptible to flattery. And I can't

imagine that he minds having people telling him that he was picked by God to save America.

E.G.: There appears to be a multifaceted effort to replace the mainstream media with a combination of extreme right and state-sponsored media, for example Breitbart, increasingly Fox News and, most recently, Trump's own self-propagating news channel broadcast out of Trump Tower. Where do you see this effort heading?

M.B.: I think I have my head a little bit in the sand about this because it's one of the more troubling trends happening in politics as a whole. I think that it's been a long time coming, as the right-wing media has consistently said that the mainstream media is telling lies, and people have been siloed into hearing the news from people that they already agree with. The rise of fake news and Trump

blurring the line between what is fake news and what is reality has really exploded this dynamic. I wish I could say that is not the direction things are heading in, but Breitbart is now living in its own universe. If you visit Breitbart, you're in an entirely different news universe than if you visit The New York Times, and Breitbart is able to shape people's opinions in ways that are favorable to the Trump administration and favorable to some of his most toxic policies, and that's a really disturbing trend. I don't know where it goes.

E.G.: In an age of Google, with all the information we need at our fingertips, how would you explain the willful suspension of disbelief that's required to continue to take Trump at his word, or to continue to believe whatever Alex Jones or Glenn Beck say when they go on these tirades?

M.B.: I think that the availability of information at our fingertips works both ways, in that you can easily find reliable accurate information, but you can also easily find bogus fake information. And increasingly, there's been a willful effort to keep people from telling the difference between those two. That's how if you Google “immigration” and you land on Breitbart, you'll get a very different idea of the facts than if you look at The New York Times or The Washington Post or reports from reliable think tanks.

E.G.: There seems to be a lot of Russian ties that go beyond the current investigation into collusion. For example, how American activists played a role in Russia's anti-gay laws, similarities between Putin's and Trump's approaches to media, and even more ties explored in your colleague Casey Michel's report on Right Wing Watch. What do you see happening with the relationship between the Kremlin and American right-wing extremists?

M.B.: One thing that we've been seeing as this whole drama over the Trump campaign and Russia unfolds is that a lot of parts of the American right are already inclined to not make a big deal of it. But they are partly unconcerned because there has been a trend among certain factions of the right to actually admire Putin and admire what he's doing in Russia.

When Putin was launching his crackdown on LGBT people, we saw activists in the American religious right cheering him on. Brian Brown, who's the head of the National Organization for Marriage, traveled to Russia to speak in front of the duma in support of a law that would restrict adoptions to LGBT people. There was support from people in the (American) religious right for this anti-LGBT crackdown without looking at what Putin was using that crackdown as propaganda for – or without minding.

There is this idea in parts of the right that Putin was this macho Christian leader that Obama wasn't, and that idea stuck around. So it's been interesting to watch this Trump story play out with that dynamic in the background.

E.G.: Coming from a place of looking at money in politics in the past, where do you think we're seeing some connections between corporate influence and money to be made and some of these right-wing extremist agendas? Immigration reform efforts and private prisons, for example.

M.B.: That's a great example. The private prisons have been working behind the scenes for a long time to stop criminal justice reform and stop policies that cut down on the incarceration of undocumented immigrants. The Session's Justice Department is a great boon for them, and he is, in a lot of ways, stopping the progress that we were seeing on criminal justice reform.

I think that one under-recognized story is the traditional corporate players – the Koch brothers, the Chamber of Commerce and their think tank allies have a friend in the White House. Trump's White House is