

# EAST OREGONIAN

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## OUR VIEW

# Fake news fixation has the power to reshape our world

An early scene in George Orwell's legendary dystopian novel "1984" has the main character rewriting history to suit a repressive government's political agenda. What we actually have in 2016, 32 years after the Orwell's fictional world, is a news environment in which private citizens and those who want to manipulate us can create, share and often believe fake news — fictions that have the power to reshape our government.

Newspapers and other "legacy" organizations don't have a monopoly on the truth. We are prone to our own biases — often a nearly unconscious belief in moderate politics and incremental change for the common good. Even so, we are traditionally reliable curators of the news, providing a record of the facts that is literally printed in black and white. Falsehoods and biases are fairly easily spotted and challenged. A newspaper that too often blatantly disregards the facts doesn't stay long in business. Those that have longevity have done so by building credibility within the communities they serve and keeping it on a daily basis by diligently working to separate fact from fiction.

Slippery do-it-yourself news of the kind so commonly found on Facebook isn't so easily policed or punished by the marketplace. It has neither cost nor consequences. In fact, as Americans increasingly seek validation rather than objective information, there are rewards for even flagrant lies online, so long as they achieve enough popularity to be shared among people with like beliefs.

"People most readily believe that which they can believe most conveniently," Cliffs Notes observes in its essay about "1984." This is almost the definition of modern U.S. politics, in which many Americans choose to believe or disbelieve stories based on complicated personal and political preconceptions.

It is a fact of modern life that more Americans get information from Facebook posts than directly from the entities that actually do the hard work of fact-gathering. If you have friends with diverse political beliefs and levels of education, you are certain to encounter Facebook posts with conflicting reports on

climate change, immigration, terrorism or many other hot issues. There was, for example, a posting last week that boldly asserted Donald Trump overwhelming won the popular vote, despite the objective fact that the opposite is true.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has struggled with a response to widespread accusations that his company aided and abetted the dispersal of falsehoods that warped the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. In essence, his problem is how to maintain Facebook as a freewheeling marketplace for ideas, while somehow not allowing it to be an easily manipulated stooge that regurgitates lies that are packaged in superficially believable ways.

After initially denying it was the problem, Facebook now reportedly is looking into third-party verification services, better automated detection tools and simpler ways for users to flag suspicious content.

In a Nov. 18 column in *The New York Times*, John Herrman notes that these fake news items are "indefensible, easy to identify and extraordinarily viral." The bigger problem, in his opinion, is the more subtle manipulation of people through a clever blending of out-of-context "facts" that mesh with reader biases and preconceptions.

Herrman is pessimistic about Facebook actually correcting a profitable system in which its members get to decide on alternative versions of reality. "Those who expect the operator of the dominant media ecosystem of our time, in response to getting caught promoting lies, to suddenly return authority to the companies it has superseded are in for a ... surprise," he observed.

Even on Facebook, it is possible to be a sophisticated news consumer. Double check the credibility of sources and look for stories by organizations that have a direct financial and reputational stake in being reliable.

Ultimately, there actually is a true version of the facts. Any community that wants to play for real and actually succeed can best do so by embracing reality. Facts, not fantasies, are the path to success.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

## Culture corner

Scrutinizing a remote cornfield for clues to where in the world it is located presents the ultimate challenge for geography buffs in the online game Geoguessr.

The game virtually drops players into a random image on Google Street View and asks them to figure out where in the world they are.

Google is allowed, as are translation apps and any other resource a player can think of. When a player thinks they know where they are, or when the timer is about to run out, they drop a pin on a world map. Points are awarded based on how close the digital pin is to the actual real-world location.

Sometimes, the answer is easy, as a quick look around a city street reveals several business and street names. Other times players spend two minutes scrolling down a lonely rural road looking for signs before desperately Googling "purple flowers

along mountain road" and dropping a last-minute pin somewhere in the middle of Canada. It's always a little embarrassing if it turns out the road was actually in Russia.

The game comes in an untimed single player mode or timed two-player challenge mode. Playing in challenge mode with a friend in the same room or connected to Skype is the best way to play. It gives the

opportunity to laugh about how far off you both were, or do a little bragging about your sleuthing skills when your challenger asks how in the world you figured out the location was in France.

The game is also educational — the more you play, the more you begin to recognize the distinctive guard rails, traffic signs and road striping patterns of various countries.

To play Geoguessr, create a login at [www.geoguessr.com](http://www.geoguessr.com).

— Jade McDowell is a reporter for the East Oregonian.

**GEOGUESSR**

## OTHER VIEWS



INAUGURATION DAY

## Why corruption matters

Remember all the news reports suggesting, without evidence, that the Clinton Foundation's fundraising created conflicts of interest? Well, now the man who benefited from all that inuendo is on his way to the White House. And he's already giving us an object lesson in what real conflicts of interest look like, as authoritarian governments around the world shower favors on his business empire.

Of course, Donald Trump could be rejecting these favors and separating himself and his family from his hotels and so on. But he isn't. In fact, he's openly using his position to drum up business. And his early appointments suggest that he won't be the only player using political power to build personal wealth. Self-dealing will be the norm throughout this administration. America has just entered an era of unprecedented corruption at the top.

The question you need to ask is why this matters. Hint: It's not the money, it's the incentives.

True, we could be talking about a lot of money — think billions, not millions, to Trump alone (which is why his promise not to take his salary is a sick joke). But America is a very rich country, whose government spends more than \$4 trillion a year, so even large-scale looting amounts to rounding error. What's important is not the money that sticks to the fingers of the inner circle, but what they do to get that money, and the bad policy that results.

Normally, policy reflects some combination of practicality — what works? — and ideology — what fits my preconceptions? And our usual complaint is that ideology all too often overrules the evidence.

But now we're going to see a third factor powerfully at work: What policies can officials, very much including the man at the top, personally monetize? And the effect will be disastrous.

Let's start relatively small, with the choice of Betsy DeVos as education secretary. DeVos has some obvious affinities with Trump: Her husband is an heir to the fortune created by Amway, a company that has been accused of being a fraudulent scheme and, in 2011, paid \$150 million to settle a class-action suit. But what's really striking is her signature issue, school vouchers, in which parents are given money rather than having their children receive a public education.

At this point there's a lot of evidence on how well school vouchers actually work, and it's basically damning. For example, Louisiana's extensive voucher plan unambiguously reduced student achievement. But voucher advocates won't take no for

an answer. Part of this is ideology, but it's also true that vouchers might eventually find their way to for-profit educational institutions.

And the track record of for-profit education is truly terrible; the Obama administration has been cracking down on the scams that infest the industry. But things will be different now: For-profit education stocks soared after the election. Two, three, many Trump Universities!

Moving on, I've already written about the Trump infrastructure plan, which for no obvious reason involves widespread privatization of public assets. No obvious reason, that is, except the huge opportunities for cronyism and profiteering that would be opened up.

But what's truly scary is the potential impact of corruption on foreign policy. Again, foreign governments are already trying to buy influence by adding to Trump's personal wealth, and he is welcoming their efforts.

In case you're wondering, yes, this is illegal, in fact unconstitutional, a clear violation of the emoluments clause. But who's going to enforce the Constitution? Republicans in Congress? Don't be silly.

Destruction of democratic norms aside, however, think about the tilt this de facto

bribery will give to U.S. policy. What kind of regime can buy influence by enriching the president and his friends? The answer is, only a government that doesn't adhere to the rule of law.

Think about it: Could Britain or Canada curry favor with the incoming administration by waiving regulations to promote Trump golf courses or directing business to Trump hotels? No — those nations have free presses, independent courts, and rules designed to prevent exactly that kind of improper behavior. On the other hand, someplace like Vladimir Putin's Russia can easily funnel vast sums to the man at the top in return for, say, the withdrawal of security guarantees for the Baltic states.

One would like to hope that national security officials are explaining to Trump just how destructive it would be to let business considerations drive foreign policy. But reports say that Trump has barely met with those officials, refusing to get the briefings that are normal for a president-elect.

So how bad will the effects of Trump-era corruption be? The best guess is, worse than you can possibly imagine.

Paul Krugman joined *The New York Times* in 1999 as a columnist on the *Op-Ed Page* and continues as professor of Economics and International Affairs at Princeton University.



## LETTERS POLICY

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