



**Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper**  
**University of Oxford**

**KANYE WEST AND THE DIGITAL  
INFORMATION MATRIX**

*Lessons on misinformation from a hip hop artist*

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To all of these and many others for much more: thank you.

## 1. Introduction

After almost a year of social media silence, roughly a month after he began recording his eighth studio album, Kanye West flipped the lights back on in his Twitter profile and began clearing house.

By April 15, at the end of his first 24 hours back in the digital public eye, the artist had purged all of his old tweets.

Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey – perhaps sensing the months of scandal-driven user engagement to come – welcomed Kanye’s return to the platform with a retweet.

Kanye had been absent from the public eye since an onstage meltdown in November 2016, and – as we would learn from the interviews he conducted over the summer of 2018 – had spent the past year seeking treatment for a prescription opioid addiction, and bipolar disorder.

At the same time as Kanye was emerging from his seclusion, I had withdrawn from the everyday hustle of Yahoo’s UK editorial team and settled into the libraries of Oxford University. Halfway through a six-month research fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, I expected I would have the outline of an answer on how to use algorithms to tackle fake news.

Instead, after three months of reading, lectures, and discussions with my supervisor and peers, I had a lot of challenged assumptions and an ever-growing list of unanswered questions. So when I read Kanye’s tweet – “we’re in this so-called information age but we’re starving for wisdom” – I told fellows he had summed up the problem more succinctly than any of the research I had seen.

Over the next 30 days, what unfolded on West's timeline was a microcosm of the new ways we gather, share and amplify information in the digital age, and the challenges and opportunities inherent in trying to regulate its quality online.

## 2. The questions

My proposal to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism was to take a large sample of demonstrably “fake” news – articles written with the intention to deceive or sow discord for monetary or political gain – and analyse them for similar markers. In my mind, I had theorised that those markers might turn out to be similar language patterns, missing picture credits, or suspicious bylines.

In my first supervision meeting, as I perched nervously on the edge of a chair in a small room on the top floor of the institute, Lucas Graves asked: “What is the question you are hoping to answer with this research?”

‘Surely it’s obvious,’ I thought? Can we identify markers of fake news that could be used to train an algorithm to identify fake news in a stream, like a Facebook news feed, or Google Search results page?

What Graves didn’t say, but would spend the next five months patiently nudging me towards the realisation of, was that I wasn’t asking the right questions about my question.

Starting off simply: what is “fake news”<sup>1</sup>? A heavily politicized term that now means everything from disinformation to high-quality investigative journalism that upsets someone in power.

Let’s rephrase: what is misinformation?

First Draft News’ Research Director Claire Wardle lists seven types<sup>2</sup> of misinformation that can be classified by motive. So the original question evolves: “Can we identify markers of

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<sup>1</sup> Nabiha Syed (2017), *Real Talk About Fake News: Towards a Better Theory for Platform Governance*, The Yale Law Journal, Vol 127, p337 , Retrieved from <http://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/real-talk-about-fake-news>.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Wardle (2017), *Fake News: It’s Complicated*, Medium, Retrieved from <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79>

misinformation that could be used to train an algorithm to identify misinformation in a stream, like a Facebook news feed, or Google Search results page?"

And if Wardle's classification of misinformation boils down to motive, how do I intend to fairly assess motive? Will I be able to work out a way for algorithms to assess motive without impinging on freedom of expression? And which legal definition of that freedom?

Once I have successfully divined the definition of freedom of expression, and a way to classify motive (no biggie), who will decide what is true?

I can almost taste the angst created as my naivety collided with nuance.

After the questions started, they didn't stop. What are the inherent biases in the sample selector (me), and her (my) selection? What are the unexpected results of those biases?

If I do get to the stage of isolating new markers for an algorithm, how will I determine the weighting of each marker and under what authority? What will be filtered out or down-ranked in the stream as a result? Will more than the deceptive voices be censored as a result? Should they be?

Who gets to see and tweak the algorithm: the privately-owned platforms? The advertisers? A government? An international government body? An NGO? And under what value system? And with what unexpected results?

If a deciding body (platform, government, or other) manages to identify and suppress misinformation posing as news, what about the other degrees of misinformation? What do we do about those who are not necessarily deliberately spreading misinformation, but deliberately withholding some of the information to advance a politically expedient narrative? Or those that play on emotional arguments to create more thrilling narratives that drive better audience numbers?

How do we measure the overall quality of the information being provided by a news outlet or journalist? Will there be a blacklist? A whitelist? A scale of reliability? Is there a road to redemption for those found lacking? How do we tell the good-intentioned but poorly informed from the well-informed and destructively intentioned sources?

And increasingly: if every person is now capable of being their own publisher and broadcaster on Twitter or YouTube and hundreds of other platforms, should every individual be held to account for their information quality? By whom? And with what consequence? And through what enforcer?

Can and should any of these questions be answered when the definition of the organism we are discussing – the internet – is evolving at such a rapid pace?

With each book or paper read, lecture attended or debate entered into with students in Oxford common rooms (read: pubs), my list of questions grew. After a lecture by Dr Rasmus Kleis Nielsen on the political power of platforms<sup>3</sup>, I had a new set of questions.

Should the internet just be left to self-organise itself into self-policing power groups? If size of audience equates to share of power, should the size of one's audience determine the degree to which you are held to account for your information quality?

If that happens, how long will it take before someone weaponises vast networks of small audiences to spread disinformation? And is that happening already on encrypted platforms?

Stay with me: Do we need an equivalent of a political border so that groups are empowered to self-police, and self-determine truths and values? If we draw digital borders now, without understanding the populations at risk, what terrible and centuries-long problems might we be creating? Who will be held responsible for the resulting fall-out?

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2018), *Lecture: The Power of Platforms*, Retrieved from:  
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/lecture-power-platforms>

What if the internet becomes organised and fractured by different information quality algorithms, and we must choose to join one or the other to protect ourselves from misinformation? Could algorithms based on a set of beliefs and values become the new religions? Is society devolving to internet-based tribalism?

Or are corporations like Facebook, Google and TenCent the new nobility in a Feudal system? What does all of this mean for liberal democracy?

If newsrooms are in the business of providing high-quality information to inform individual and group decision-making and action, then is the way we create news still fit for purpose after the information evolution? Is our service still needed in the digital information age? Are the tasks we complete daily calibrated correctly to fulfill that task?

And are any of these questions I can research and write about in a meaningful way in six months?

### 3. There is nothing new in the world

Central to human nature and all of our mythologies are the concepts of truth and its distortion.

In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic origin story, no sooner has God finished creating Eden than a serpent appears to deceive mankind out of paradise. The Greeks name Dolos (deception) as the son of Gaia herself – a child who spends all his time in the company of the lying spirits, or Pseudologoi. And in the Sanskrit literature, Lord Brahma is cursed to never be worshipped again after convincing a flower to lie for him during a contest to determine hierarchy.

Around the world, the list of characters devised to explain the way we receive and categorise information quality continues. In Norse mythology: Loki plays on his victims'

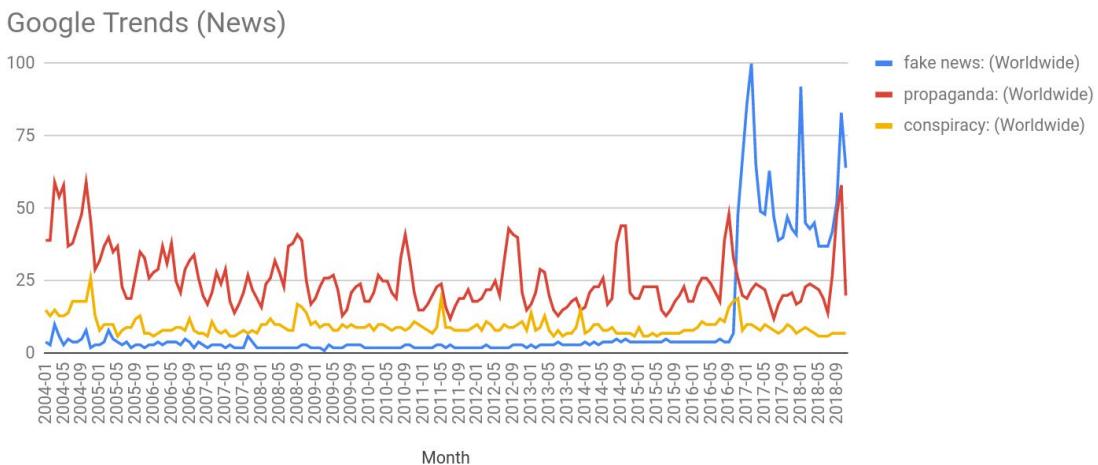
vanities. In Chinese legend, Sun Wukong and the eye of truth. In Ashanti lore: Anansi the spider, who brokered a deal with the Sky God to own all the stories.

It is Coyote who embodies the art of trickery and deception in Navajo lore, although he normally appears in human form, as a man with a moustache. This “Prince of Chaos” is not purely evil: from his foolishness, mortals learn wisdom. “Even if you do not like me, you will still need me for many things,” he tells First Man<sup>4</sup>.

While misinformation itself is not new, many journalists, researchers and politicians have lamented an anecdotal “growing disregard for facts, data, and analysis” [Kavanagh & Rich, 2018].

That rhetoric is underlined by the rise of terms like “fake news”, “misinformation” and “disinformation” in the public lexicon.

Google Trends, filtered for News and using the terms “fake news”, “propaganda” and “conspiracy”, show a steady public interest in the last two terms, and an October 2016 spike in searches for “fake news”.



Figure

One: Google News search trends, Jan 2004 - October 2018: fake news, propaganda, conspiracy

<sup>4</sup> Paul G. Zolbrod (1987), *Dine bahane': The Navajo Creation Story*, University of New Mexico Press, p.192

Comparing “fake news”, “lies” and “deception” under the same parameters shows a sustained human interest in searches for news with these keywords.<sup>5</sup>

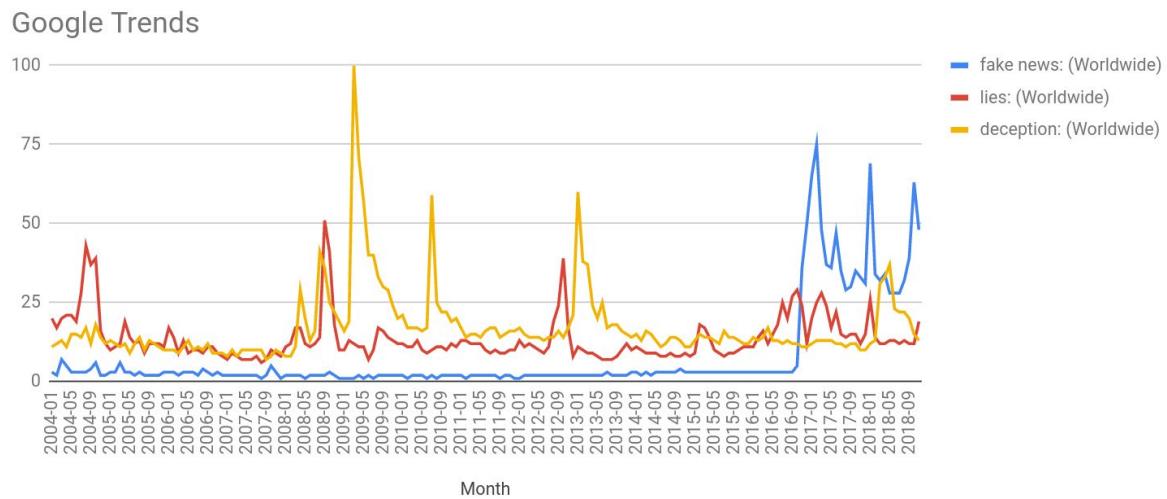


Figure Two: Google News search trends, Jan 2004 - October 2018: fake news, lies, deception

In their 2018 research report, authors Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich listed four trends of a phenomenon they call *Truth Decay*<sup>6</sup>:

1. increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data (for example the gap between how some Americans imagine violent crime rates to be rising, when the data shows otherwise).
2. a blurring of the line between opinion and fact (with examples given including shows like Sean Hannity's on Fox and Jake Tapper's on CNN).
3. the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact (a result of the 24-hour news cycle, and the economics of producing opinion over fact-based reporting)
4. declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.

<sup>5</sup> Unrelated, but for those curious about the March 2009 spike: Bernie Madoff's trial began on March 12. July 2010: Deepwater Horizon spill, and January 2013: the launch of an NBC soap opera named *Deception*.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich (2018), Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life, RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2300/RR2314/RAND\\_RR2314.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2300/RR2314/RAND_RR2314.pdf)

The outcome for journalism at the crash site of these four points? Audiences are turning away from mainstream media to what they see as “alternative news sources”: embracing social media influencers and opinion bloggers who are untrained, unmonitored, and unaccountable to any standards for the content they produce -- for audiences that are often many times larger than traditional outlets.

To refer to my misinformation muse briefly: Kanye West has 28.7 million Twitter followers<sup>7</sup>. That's 172% greater reach than *The Economist* and its 1,042,851 print readers in 2016<sup>8</sup>, more than the 11 million unique monthly users of their websites, and more than their 23 million Twitter followers. And his reach is further amplified by the mainstream news media who, according to a Google News search for “Kanye” between April 14 and May 15, wrote 160 articles reporting on his tweets and media appearances during the same time period<sup>9</sup>.

A small sample of the headlines from that time period: *A Day-by-Day Breakdown of Kanye West's Headline-Grabbing Return to Twitter*, Billboard (with 18 million monthly unique users according Jan 2018 Comscore); *A comprehensive timeline of Kanye's latest nonsense behavior*, Mashable (45 million monthly unique users, according to their own website), *Kanye West is life coaching on Twitter*, CNN (122 million unique multiplatform visitors in January, according to a January press release). Kanye's combined potential reach grows to 213 million in those three articles alone.

But is truth decay a new phenomenon? Or are we just more advanced in the ways we sort, store and distribute information in the Internet age? Kavanagh and Rich consider this in their writing, pointing to three decades in recent American history that exhibited some truth decaying trends: the Gilded Age of the 1880s, when newspaper circulation battles led to “yellow journalism” – sensationalised, exaggerated, and even fabricated news stories; the 1920s birth of the tabloid and “jazz journalism” (sensationalised stories of sex, crime, and

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<sup>7</sup> Twitter, November 2018

<sup>8</sup> Source: *ABC Worldwide Brand Report July-December 2016*, The Economist. Retrieved from: <https://www.abc.org.uk/Certificates/48621708.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> According to a Google News search delimited by date range May 14 to April 14. This result excludes sources not mapped to Google News, such as blogs.

violence) and a rise of radio broadcasting; and the 1960s–1970s, known for “New Journalism”, a style of writing that heavily incorporated writers’ own opinions and interpretations.

All three were decades of uncertainty marked by an evolution of journalistic practice in response to political and economic crises, and changing business demands.

Today is no different. The newspaper workforce in the US has shrunk by almost 40% in the past 20 years, Pew Research said in 2016<sup>10</sup>. Between 2000 and 2013, advertising revenue for America’s newspaper fell by more than 60% from \$63.5 billion to \$23 billion, according to the Brookings Institute.

Classified advertising spend has moved to Craigslist, Gumtree and Facebook Marketplace. Those who were once “looking to meet” now swipe through Tinder or Grindr apps, and those who “missed connections” download Happn. Unless famous, your obituary is likely to be posted on Facebook, or as a complimentary service on your undertaker’s website.

Thanks to the user data gathered by online platforms and publishers, advertisers who once spent \$1,000 on a few centimetres in a broadsheet (in the hopes of reaching some unknown number of potential customers) are now able to identify and deliver their messaging to a 1,000 likely customers for around \$10.

When John Reith launched BBC World Service in 1932, he told his audiences<sup>11</sup> the programmes would be “neither very interesting, nor very good”. He envisaged a service staffed by journalists with an ideology of telling nuanced truths, plainly.

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<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Center, June, 2016, [\*State of the News Media\*](#), p.9. Retrieved from:  
<https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> BBC Staff (2007), [\*World Service History\*](#), BBC Online, 2007. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070123\\_html\\_1930s.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history/story/2007/02/070123_html_1930s.shtml)

Today, those journalists are competing for attention for their dull truths not just with Kanye West's Twitter feed, but with literally billions of daily content creators who have absolutely no incentive for imparting nuance or plain truths.

#### 4. The (wrong) answer

Sitting at a picnic table in a college garden one evening in late April, as two professors nearby debated the merits of various schools of philosophy and a student at another table played tinny Schubert from his laptop speakers, I let myself type out the skeleton of answer instead of another question.

If the best traditional mass media outlets had upheld objectivity, transparency, and accountability as the hallmarks of high quality information, why couldn't the same be applied to online information to improve its quality?

The answer is not difficult: old media was able to enforce those values (if it chose to at all) because the centralised ownership of production meant there was a hierarchical structure small enough to allow for internal and external policing of quality and distribution, and a profit motive for maintaining a level of quality that readers and advertisers would continue to associate themselves with.

The internet, we thought in the 1990s, was the true democratisation of information: anyone with a connection is free to write a blog, record a video, start a podcast. Could we use information as currency to address structural inequality?

In many ways we were short-sighted in our failure to predict the centralisation of power to come. Ownership of the presses in a digital age was meant to be shared by all. Instead it quickly became a matter of degrees of share: of audience, revenue, attention. Held largely by Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google.

Our failure to predict this outcome meant we never thought to implement a series of self-sustaining controls that would allow us to transparently and objectively observe and assess information structures and quality.

But could we do so retroactively, in a way that continues to promote decentralisation of control? What if we were able to use this vast network of humans and the pieces of data they create to define a transparent and ever-evolving formula for assessing information quality without prescribing values, so that it can be used by experts in multiple fields and communities to deliver a structure for condensing and ranking news outputs in future?

This is what many aggregating platforms already do with their algorithms, by ranking for popularity. But that process is not transparent, and what is good is certainly not always popular.

So I formulated the idea for a digital experiment in which we could – en masse – begin to discern quality by creating a new set of data points around the news.

The first step: enlist the help of a popular news aggregator to beta test, and eventually make public, an API that will:

- Allow a user to highlight text in a written news article and flag an accuracy query, which gets put into a queuing system.
- Users can upvote or downvote queries to influence its position in the queue.
- Availability of this tool could be limited to (for example) the 20 most popular articles of the day to ensure resources are targeted at the most consumed information.
- Use automated fact-checking tools to compare the query to existing databases of answers to automatically return, where possible, True/False/Unclear verdicts by changing the colour of the highlighted text.
- Apart from “True”, “False” and “Unclear”, there would be a fourth colour for “Does Not Qualify” with the sub-categories: this is a statement of opinion, this is a

statement of satire, this statement does not assert a claim that can be verified without endangering anonymous sources.

- Any queries not answered by automated fact-checking tools are ranked by popularity of article and popularity of query, and placed in a queueing system for attention of human editors.
- The queue is shared between editors at the associated Fact Checking NGOs. The NGOs receive funding and traffic from the Aggregator to continue their work, making their function sustainable. Editors at the Aggregator may also be assigned to take on some of the queries.
- Those marked in the Unclear category would be catalogued in a database for further interrogation by academics from relevant fields at approved institutions, with links to peer-reviewed papers made available once work is done. This may even help guide academic research and investment by highlighting queries that are raised multiple times, with high upvoting.

The point of this exercise would *not be to create a mass fact-checking paradigm*. (Although it certainly doesn't hurt as an exercise in educating readers on what they should question and how to find answers.) The point of this exercise is to create data points around individual reporters and their publishers that can be further interrogated to begin to define an information quality matrix that can be extended outside of the news realm.

It also gives us a database from which to explore the schema and biases that different publishers are triggering in different users.

The number of statements queried does not necessarily correlate to the overall quality of the reporter's work. But we may be able to observe a correlation between the number of queries and the neutrality of tone. And data from factual queries can be combined with data from reaction buttons, sharing data, and comment sections.

Now we can begin to create formulae with different data-point weighting to test theories of information quality. For example: A publisher begins with 100 points and has points

variously added and subtracted based on sharing, sentiment, and the number of claims marked true, false, and so on.

Once a formula is created and tested, we will have a baseline from which to create information quality scores for reporters and publishers. The scores, the formula and the historical data informing it will be publicly available after the testing phase. This can be further adapted and extended to citizen journalists, social networks, and so on.

No individual or publisher would be obliged to submit to information quality indexing, but those who do are likely to have better performance results in feed algorithms that use the results to boost and suppress information based on quality scores.

By the end of the evening, I felt jubilant. I was sure I was onto something.

Just think of the advantages of this experiment:

It creates a public feed of data that can be used to help constantly refine a publicly held information formula, that can eventually (theoretically) be applied by different interest groups with fairly similar results.

It provides opportunities for journalists and editors to retrain and find new work as information quality assessors.

It provides incentive to fund and refer traffic to fact-checking NGOs, making them more sustainable.

It supports academia by providing database of popularly sought question for study, with supporting data to help secure funding. And it helps disseminate research papers to non-academic circles for the enrichment of wider public.

Ratings for bylines and publishers become available in a searchable database, including ranking by subject speciality.

Over the next months, I would begin to come to grips with why I was wrong and why we should all approach this solution – and others like it – with a healthy amount of caution.

It doesn't address anonymous sourcing of reliable information, a practice that has been key to many impactful and truthful pieces of journalism. It does not define an appeals process, or how we might adjudicate what is likely to be a mass of queries and objections.

Like any system, it can be gamed: it may encourage journalists to use staff bylines or pen names as a way to evade being scored.

Would journalists and editors be under pressure to re-calibrate their knowledge or beliefs for the economic advantage of performing well the information quality matrix? Does that stifle the evolution of thought?

## 5. Kanye as a Case Study

On April 21 this year, Kanye Omari West (or Ye, as he refers to himself now) tweeted: "I love the way Candace Owens thinks".

At the time, Ms Owens – a campaigner for Black Conservatism who has, in the past, aligned with some Alt Right organisations – was one of only four people Ye followed on Twitter, apart from his wife Kim Kardashian West, Kid Cudi (an artist from his music label), and gun control activist Emma Gonzalez from Stoneman Douglas High School.

It was a radical filter to apply to the information available on Twitter. But Ye had been telling us for many years that he feels burnt by the media, and by social media. This was a selection of people whose motives he believed he could trust.

For those paying attention to his Twitter feed and the media circus surrounding him since its reactivation earlier that same month, the pieces of Ye's information-consumption puzzle painted a disturbing picture.

But it was also a familiar picture, because we all have a little bit of Ye in us: choosing whom we accept information from based on how the message and messenger make us feel, wrestling to fit information into a matrix that helps us understand ourselves and feel understood. The main difference is that the vast majority of us do so in private.

### 5.1 The Life of Pablo

The son of a photojournalist-turned-counsellor and an English professor, Ye was 3 when his parents divorced. At 10, he moved to China with his mother for a year while she undertook an academic exchange in Nanjing. By the age of 13, Kanye was asking his mother for studio time to record his first rap. After graduating, he was accepted into Chicago State University to study English but dropped out by the age of 20 to focus on his music.

In a Netflix interview with David Letterman in April 2018, Jay-Z recalled meeting Kanye and giving him his big break in 2000. "He interrupted our studio session and stood on the table and started rapping, and we were like, 'Could you please get down?' And he was like, 'No! I am the saviour of Chicago!' He didn't [even] have a record."

But by 2009, after the release of four platinum albums, coverage of Ye was changing from "crazy genius" to just plain "crazy". The more he reacted to what he perceived as unjust coverage by trying to explain himself, the less in control he seemed and the worse the coverage became.

Chuck Klosterman, a pop culture critic and ethics columnist for *The New York Times Magazine*, weighed in on this cycle after Ye delivered a 15-minute speech during a concert at Wireless Festival in London in 2014.

"Kanye's central point seems to be that all celebrity journalism — and all of media, really — is an inherently immoral, inherently dehumanizing process. Which is a radical idea, but by no means insane. If the same point was made by Noam Chomsky or Janet Malcolm or Bob Dylan, I think a lot of people would concede that it's arguably valid," Klosterman told *Esquire*<sup>12</sup>.

Pressure continued to mount as his relationship with one-time mentor Jay-Z became increasingly fractured, and Ye developed a prescription opioid addiction following 2016 liposuction. This, combined with insomnia and undiagnosed bipolar disorder, would lead to West's eventual hospitalisation in November 2016, following another rambling 17-minute speech at a concert that went from praising Donald Trump to asking Jay Z not to have him assassinated.

When West returned to the public eye in April 2018 by reactivating his Twitter account, his messaging was about the new "free-thinking" mindset he had adopted while he was away.

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<sup>12</sup> Dan Hyman (Aug 6, 2014), *The Kanye West Theory of the Media*, Esquire Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a23822/kanye-west-media/>

"Often people working with the existing consciousness are jealous of those who are more in touch," West wrote on April 16, "and they become hard-core capitalist in hopes of creating the illusion that the value of money is worth more than the value of time and friends."

He continued dispensing his Yeezy truisms until late April, when he began endorsing personalities like President Donald Trump (whom Ye said shared his "dragon energy"), Dilbert creator Scott Adams and Candace Owens.

On May 1, a month before the release of his next album, West was a guest on TMZ with Ms Owens. He told the hosts he was off his bipolar medication, and that African Americans remaining in slavery for 400 years "sounds like a choice".

Was all of this a masterful lesson in publicity leading up to his June 1 album release; or an act of performance art? Or was it a vulnerable person's very public wrestle with his thinking?

## 5.2 Famous

Candace Owens is a 29-year-old who studied a B.A. in Journalism at the University of Rhode Island, then says she started her career at *Vogue* before leaving to work in private equity as an administrative assistant.

She first experienced media attention as a teenager in 2007 when a former friend left her three racist and threatening voicemails. In a 2016 interview with the Connecticut Post<sup>13</sup>, Owens says the ire may have been provoked by jealousy because of her new romantic relationship.

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<sup>13</sup> Amanda Cuda (March 5 2016), "*We were children. I wasn't the only victim.*", CT Post, Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20171103233235/http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/We-were-children-I-wasn-t-the-only-6872580.php>

"You better not (expletive) be there, because you might get a bullet in the back of your (expletive) head," the boy said in one message. In another, he says he is going to kill Owens because "you're (expletive) poor and you're black, OK?"

Two minors were arrested in connection with the case and charged with first-degree harassment and second-degree intimidation by bigotry or bias, although Connecticut Post reports the case was eventually dismissed.

While the wheels of justice turned, Owens did not feel safe returning to school and was kept home for six weeks. Owens' family sued the Stamford Board of Education in federal court for failing to protect her rights, and they were awarded a \$37,500 settlement<sup>14</sup>.

Owens told the *Connecticut Press* the experience left her feeling bitter and afraid for around seven years – so much so that she changed her name when she attended university.

In 2015, Owens left private equity to launch her own editorial website, Degree180. An archived version of the now-dormant site reveals it followed the same editorial strategy as many digital media startups: controversial op-eds on trending topics, designed to provoke social media shares. Or in other terms: a combination of Yellow, Jazz, and New journalism, designed to drive traffic.

Owens' own cache of articles include: *I think affairs are romantic*<sup>15</sup>, *How I scored an Adderall prescription without so much as a doctor's evaluation (3 easy steps)*<sup>16</sup>, and *Why I hate women so*

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<sup>14</sup> Staff Writer (January 23, 2008), *Racist threats case filed by Stamford High student settled for \$37,500*, The News Times (Danbury, CT). Retireved from:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180510213738/https://www.newstimes.com/news/article/Racist-threats-case-filed-by-Stamford-High-107476.php>

<sup>15</sup> Candace Owens (January 2016), *I think affairs are romantic*, Degree180, Retrieved from:  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20160419091026/http://degree180.com/i-think-affairs-are-romantic/>

<sup>16</sup> Candace Owens (September 2015), *How I scored an Adderall prescription without so much as a doctor's evaluation (3 easy steps)*, Degree180, Retrieved from:  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20160421105631/http://degree180.com:80/how-i-scored-an-adderall-prescription-without-so-much-as-a-doctors-evaluation-3-easy-steps>

*much*<sup>17</sup>, in which she writes: “In many ways, (and yes I am aware this is going to come off as arrogant), I feel that I am the female Kanye West.”

A year after launching Degree180, Owens launched a Kickstarter campaign for \$75,000 to fund her new initiative: SocialAutopsy.com. The site proposed to unmask trolls by creating a searchable database of hateful posts with the real identities of the posters, including identifying information such as place of work.

The practice of revealing online identities is known as doxing, and Owens was contacted by a prominent figure in the anti-bullying community, Zoe Quinn, who was targeted in GamerGate, to discourage the idea.

Owens, who despite aiming to launch an anti-bullying product admits she had never heard of Quinn or GamerGate, felt the concerns were unfounded and followed up their phone conversation with an email to say as much. Within 45 minutes of sending the mail, she says she began receiving hate mail.

Because Quinn had warned her of this possibility during their phone call, and because of the suspicious timing, Owens wrote a blogpost<sup>18</sup> claiming Quinn was actually the leader of GamerGate and had marshalled her own private cyber army against SocialAutopsy.

Kickstarter eventually suspended the campaign over community concerns that children would be doxed.

Being targeted by online trolls is unnerving and overwhelming, but Owens’ blog post made it clear that she had not fully researched the field she was entering, understood neither the

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<sup>17</sup> Candace Owens (September 2015), *Why I hate women so much. Spoiler alert: I am one*, Degree180, Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160419091025/http://degree180.com/why-i-hate-women-so-much-spoiler-alert-i-am-one-2/>

<sup>18</sup> Candace Owens (April 2016), *How a torpedoed Kickstarter campaign unintentionally revealed an unlikely unit of cyber-terrorists*, Degree180. Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160419085718/http://degree180.com/8686-2/>

technology nor the ethics of privacy, and had failed to prepare for the inevitable backlash. Her decision to publicise a conspiracy as the reason for the failure is equally troubling.

After suspending her Social Autopsy initiative in 2016, Owens says she took a year off to “become more informed”, and reemerged the following year as a Conservative YouTuber named Red Pill Black. She told Dave Rubin that Breitbart was the only media outlet that had covered SocialAutopsy fairly and that, as a result, she “became a Conservative overnight”.

“Trump on screen saying the media is lying began to resonate with me because I realised the media hired hitmen,” she said.

Soon after releasing her “coming out as Conservative” video, Ms Owens was head-hunted by Charlie Kirk of Turning Point USA (TPUSA), a non-profit right-wing organisation dedicated to exposing leftist bias in the tertiary education system, educating students about “true free market values” and protesting the censorship of Conservative voices on campus<sup>19</sup>.

Owens’ most-viewed video on YouTube in June 2018 was one filmed on behalf of TPUSA for PragerU, another Conservative non-profit, which makes “educational” videos on Conservative talking points.

In March this year, a federal court dismissed a case PragerU had brought against Google for giving their videos an age restricted classification and demonetising their channel.

In Ms Owens’ video, which had been viewed 2.8 million times on YouTube as of mid June, she addresses the concept of “playing the black card”.

“You can be poor, middle class or rich – it doesn’t matter. The black card will still confer on you an entire history of oppression, even if you’ve never been oppressed. Flash the black card, and most white people will cower. Play the black card expertly, and you can win

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<sup>19</sup> Kerry Lester (29 April 2013), *Perfect storm launches 19-year-old Wheeling native into political punditry*, Daily Herald, Retrieved from: <http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20130429/news/704299942/>

awards, make millions – all the while claiming that the people who got you there somehow hate you.

“You can call yourself a civil rights leader and shake down multinational corporations, or you can torch your own neighbourhood because you didn’t like the outcome of a grand jury verdict.”

Owens has also spoken out against Black Lives Matter, the Me Too movement, and other progressive causes that seek to redress past imbalances. During her 2007 ordeal, Owens received support from the NAACP, who walked her to school and gave her family legal advice. A decade later, in an interview with Dave Rubin, Owens said she hates the NAACP, calling it a “trash group” that “extort[s] black people’s emotions for pay”. Connecticut NAACP president Scot X. Esdaile told *Mic* her comments were “blasphemous”.

Speaking at the University of California<sup>20</sup> in April this year, Owens explained: “There is an ideological civil war happening: Black people that are focused on their past and shouting about slavery and black people that are focused on their futures, OK? That’s really what it comes down to, OK?”

My impression is that Ms Owens was used as a young woman by the Left for political gain, so she chooses to be used now as an adult by the Right for political gain – perhaps believing she can continue to enjoy the resulting fame without feeling used. Time will tell.

### 5.3 Ultralight Beam

Ms Owens’ critics in the black community say her rhetoric is based on cherry-picked facts that ignore the larger picture. In an article on *Medium*, Sonya Dickerson<sup>21</sup> takes aim at Owens’ claim that black people in Democrat-led cities fare worse than those in red states.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Harriot (23 April 2018), *Kanye West, Candace Owens and the Conservative Sunken Place*, The Root, Retrieved from: <https://www.theroot.com/kanye-west-candace-owens-and-the-conservative-sunken-place-1825473389>

<sup>21</sup> Sonya Dickerson (24 April 2018), *A Rebuttal to Candace Owens*, Medium, Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/@supermodelsonya/a-rebuttal-to-candace-owens-7734b24358b9>

“Republicans love to bring up ‘Democratic led cities’ that are not doing well but forget about ‘Republican led cities and states’ that aren’t doing well either. You want to bring up Baltimore and Chicago? Okay. Let’s talk about how the county that has the most residents on food stamps is in a Red state where they vote Republican overwhelmingly. That county is in Kentucky. Let’s talk about how many poor red states like West Virginia take more federal dollars than Blue states. Blue states that are more wealthy actually subsidize poorer red states. Let’s talk about how teen pregnancies are higher in red states. West Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi have the most recipients on welfare.”

So let’s hypothesise that a 39-year-old Ye is grappling with his identity and creative process following a new diagnosis of bipolar disorder<sup>22</sup>, and all the cognitive dissonance that comes with that. Where would a self-confessed “proud non-reader of books”<sup>23</sup> go to look for information in 2017? YouTube.

But how easy would it be for Ye to find voices to contradict Ms Owens’, like Dickerson’s? Particularly on YouTube, where the “Up Next” algorithm is designed to give the user more of what they like, cementing our human tendency to selective exposure.

YouTube’s recommendation algorithm has been touted by academics<sup>24</sup> as the “largest scale and most sophisticated industrial recommendation systems in existence”, but it has also come under fire this year by those who worked to develop it.

A cleared-cache search in March for videos about Candace Owen, for example, suggested more Candace Owens videos, or videos by a line-up of increasingly Conservative opinions

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<sup>22</sup> Anna Millard (3 June 2018), *Kanye West Opens Up About Being Bipolar & Mental Health In The US*, Refinery29. Retrieved from: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2018/06/200806/kanye-west-bipolar-diagnosis-ye>

<sup>23</sup> Staff (February 2015), *Kanye West Proud He Doesn’t Read Books?*, Snopes. Retrieved from: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/can39t-read-me-nothing/>

<sup>24</sup> Paul Covington, Jay Adams, Emre Sargin (September 15-19, 2016), *Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations*, RecSys ’16. Retrieved from: <https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/research.google.com/en//pubs/archive/45530.pdf>

from sources that range from Dave Rubin and Jordan Peterson, to The Liberty Hound and conspiracy outlet InfoWars. The huge volume of video content carrying the same message works to assure the user the information is correct, according to Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, et al. (2008)<sup>25</sup>.

The comment sections below these videos are also populated by those in agreement, with almost no dissenting opinions or facts on offer. The product seems to effectively identify a user's cognitive bias, and then cater to it.

"The recommendation algorithm is not optimising for what is truthful, or balanced, or healthy for democracy," according to former Google employee Guillaume Chaslot. Chaslot worked on the algorithm for several months before he was dismissed by Google. He told The Guardian's tech writer, Paul Lewis<sup>26</sup>: "YouTube is something that looks like reality, but it is distorted to make you spend more time online."

After being dismissed by Google, Chaslot started AlgoTransparency.org to replicate as closely as possible the content YouTube promoted during the French, British and German elections, global warming and mass shootings, and analyse for bias.

A spokesman for YouTube told Lewis: "Our search and recommendation systems reflect what people search for, the number of videos available, and the videos people choose to watch on YouTube. That's not a bias towards any particular candidate; that is a reflection of viewer interest."

But when viewer's interest is to find out more about the woman whose thinking Ye admires, or when the viewer is Ye himself, the algorithm is not designed to provide a nuanced view

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<sup>25</sup> Fischer, Peter, Schulz-Hardt, Stefan, Frey, Dieter (Feb 2008), *Selective exposure and information quantity: How different information quantities moderate decision makers' preference for consistent and inconsistent information*. By. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol 94(2), p231-244

<sup>26</sup> Paul Lewis (2 February 2018), 'Fiction is outperforming reality': how YouTube's algorithm distorts truth, The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth>

of racial identity and history, and the politics these inspire. It is designed to serve up more of the opinions you have already absorbed.

To be fair to the technology, it cannot programme dissenting moderate views if videos of dissenting moderate views do not exist. And they do not seem to. Perhaps because people with moderate ideologies do not typically feel a burning desire to promote balance and nuance. Perhaps because listening to someone speak about balance and nuance – as BBC founder John Reith put it – is not exciting.

As free-thinking and critical as we all wish to believe we are, the science is not grey in this area: even the brightest among us have flaws in the way we collect and store information.

“Consuming information that conforms to our ideas of the world is easy and pleasurable,” says Eli Pariser<sup>27</sup>. “Consuming information that challenges us to think in new ways or question our assumptions is frustrating and difficult. This is why partisans of one political stripe tend not to consume the media of another.”

As researchers<sup>28</sup> in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* explained: people use many different approaches and strategies to avoid or resist factual threats to their worldviews. These include criticising or disparaging the source of the conflicting information; questioning the validity of the information itself; and framing the rationale for beliefs in terms that are moral, emotional, or religious and thus unfalsifiable, rather than in terms that are fact-based and thus falsifiable.

To bring this back to our case study: Ye, like all of us, is programmed to seek out information that he agrees with. That information is more enjoyable to consume, so we consume more of it. The more we consume, the more convinced we become and the more uncomfortable and unpleasant it is to be confronted by an alternative version. In this way, a

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<sup>27</sup> Eli Pariser (20110, *The Filter Bubble*, The Penguin Press

<sup>28</sup> Justin P. Friesen, Troy H. Campbell, and Aaron C. Kay (2015), *The Psychological Advantage of Unfalsifiability: The Appeal of Untestable Religious and Political Ideologies*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 108, No. 3

person determined to embrace “free thinking” can end up promoting rhetoric that seem to be the antithesis of free thought. Thought is not free by virtue of its unpleasantness.

## 5.4 Yikes

After Ye’s meeting with Owens on April 28, he tweeted: “We’re being starved and anyone who starts asking unpopular questions gets demonized. Only free thinkers can change the world.”

Two days later, Ye visited the TMZ newsroom. He tried to explain his new passion for free-thinking, revealed he had been prescribed three pills a day that he was not taking, and put forward the idea that a people who stayed in slavery for 400 years must have made a choice to do so. Candace Owens, who had accompanied West to TMZ, also received some screen time and said black-on-black crime rates in Chicago were proof that African Americans are still mentally enslaved. (It is worth pointing out that white-on-white crime rates are similarly high).

The backlash was swift. Kanye explained some of it in the lyrics to *Yikes*, released on June 1:

*I said, "Slavery a choice"—they said, "How, 'Ye?"  
Just imagine if they caught me on a wild day  
Now I'm on fifty blogs gettin' fifty calls  
My wife callin', screamin', say, "We 'bout to lose it all!"  
Had to calm her down 'cause she couldn't breathe  
Told her she could leave me now, but she wouldn't leave*

Perhaps to defend his evolving viewpoints, Kanye tweeted a list of bookmarked Google searches seven days after TMZ.

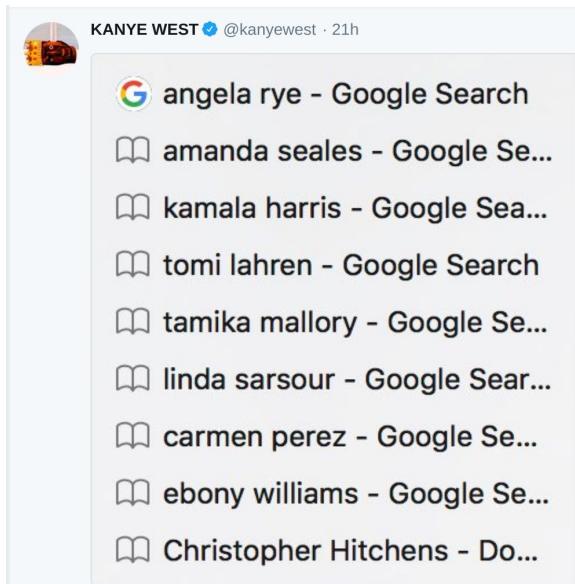


Figure three: Bookmarks from @kanyewest, Twitter, 7 May 2018

His “reading” list included: Angela Rye, Amanda Seales, Kamala Harris, Tomi Lahren, Linda Sarsour, Carmen Perez, Ebony Williams and Christopher Hitchens (although this seemed to be linked to a specific video result, not a Google search result). Through retweets during this period, he also referenced Scott Adams, Candace Owens and Jordan Peterson as sources. The list includes six figures who lean politically Left, two who lean Right, and four who are best described as Independent. (See Table in Appendix 1.)

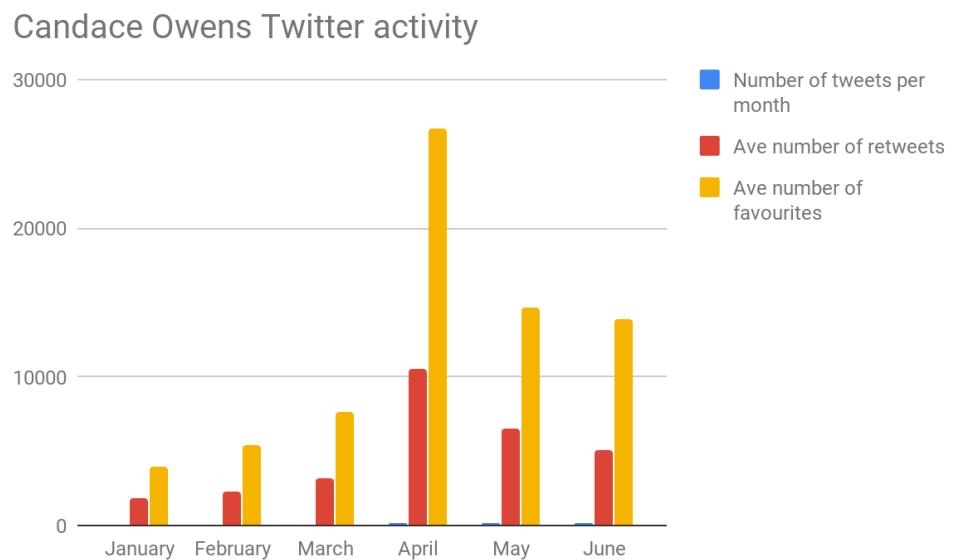
It is a list that suggests Ye was actively trying to educate himself on political issues, and willing to challenge his own cognitive biases in pursuit of his free-thinking experiment. But because of the nature of information and the ways we consume it, Ye did not provide a boost to any of the moderate or nuanced views he was consuming.

The results of his experiment was not more freedom of thought, just more publicity for the most snackable voices on the list: those with shallow but extreme arguments, lacking in nuance, and high in emotion that are most exciting to digest.

Evidence of the amplification provided by Ye can be found on Ms Owens’ Twitter feed. In the first quarter of 2018, Candace Owens averaged three tweets a day that netted an average

of 2,425 retweets. Following West's tweet on April 21, her average retweets rose by 333% from her Q1 average to 10,506.

In May, emboldened by West's support, her post frequency rose 108% to 6.8 tweets per day, although retweets and favourites respectively fell by 38% and 45% month-on-month.



*Figure four: Candace Owens, tweets, retweets and favourites, Jan-June 2018*

Ideas and rhetoric that may well have remained on the fringes have moved into the mainstream, where it has been allowed to compete – unchallenged – alongside moderate commentators.

## Google Trends: News (Worldwide) between January and October 2018

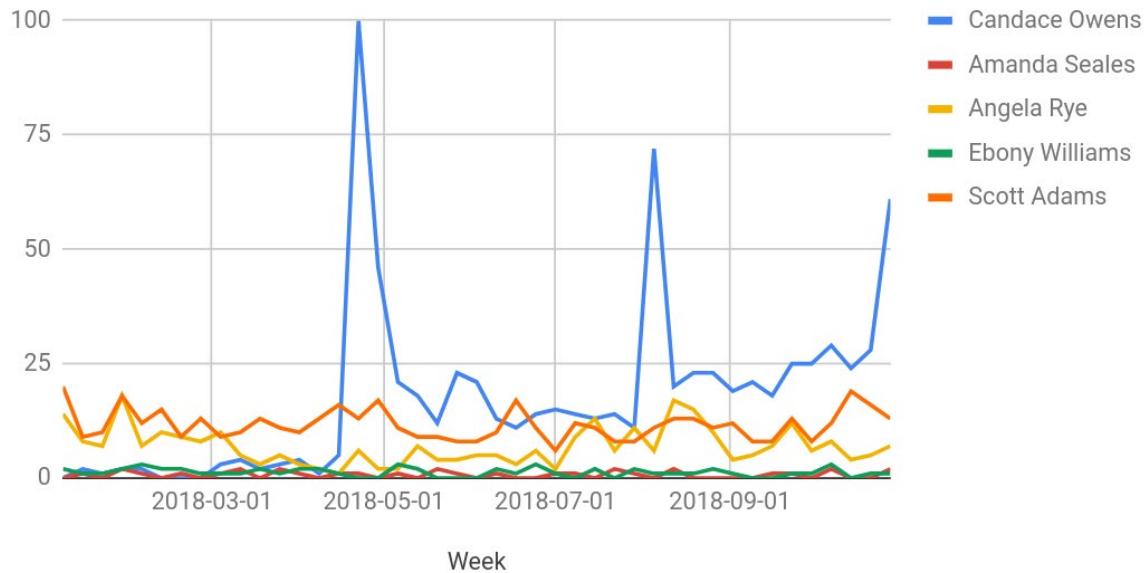


Figure five: Google News search trends for Candace Owens et al between Jan-October 2018

The chart above shows little traffic impact for most of the people Ye said he was listening to, apart from Ms Owens.

Spikes in search traffic for Candace Owens in the chart above correlate first to Ye's endorsement on Twitter, then to a Twitter endorsement from US President Donald Trump in June. The third spike correlates to an August 7th protest against Turning Point USA outside a Philadelphia restaurant where Ms Owens was eating breakfast, and the controversy stoked when a Fox News anchor suggested the protest may have been staged, and an MSNBC appearance where Ms Owens lost her temper.

The final spike correlates to Ye's public distancing from Ms Owens after she incorrectly claimed he had designed the logo for her "Blexit" (Black exit to Conservatism) campaign. "I introduced Candace to the person who made the logo and they didn't want their name on it so she used mine," Ye said on Twitter. "I have nothing to do with it."

Minutes later he added: "My eyes are now wide open and now realise I've been used to spread messages I don't believe in. I am distancing myself from politics and completely focussing on being creative!!!" He subsequently expanded the number of people he is following on Twitter to 139.

In the words of Van Lathan, the only TMZ reporter to confront West for his slavery and crime comments: "You're entitled to believe whatever you want, but there is fact and [real-life] consequence behind everything you just said. While you are making music and being an artist and living the life that you've earned by being a genius, the rest of us in society have to deal with these threats to our lives."

## 6. Other people's answers (and the questions they raise)

What can be improved about the new ways we share information that might have made a substantive difference to Ye's 2018 – or his audience's?

Proposed solutions to the digital information crisis tend to fall into the categories of:

- government policy (pass laws to police platforms and users),
- tech solutions (develop algorithms capable of suppressing low quality information on platforms),
- corporate interventions (demonetizing content creators in lower quality categories),
- Non-profit organisations (fact-checkers, such as FullFact and PolitiFact),
- educational efforts (empower users to identify persuasive messaging and examine motives), and
- journalistic efforts (attempts to restore trust, rethink the ways we present news and our role in a digital information age).

### 6.1 Policy interventions

Recognising the threat of information abuse for political gain, many governments are attempting to formulate policies that would limit the power of platforms or provide some control over users. The trouble with rushing to policy in an evolving field is the unexpected fallout.

Malaysia passed a law<sup>29</sup> that defined fake news as “news, information, data and reports which is or are wholly or partly false”. The law applied to all forms of media, including social media, and to those who produced and shared misinformation both in and out of the country. The penalty for this loosely defined crime was up to six years in prison and a maximum fine of 500,000 ringgit (approximately £90,000). The first case tried under this law was brought by police against a tourist who criticised their politics.

The potential impact on journalism of this type of law should not be taken lightly. “Not reporting something is as dangerous as reporting something that is false,” Yin Yin Lu, a

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Priday (5 April 2018 ), *Fake news laws are threatening free speech on a global scale*, Wired. Retrieved from: <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/malaysia-fake-news-law-uk-india-free-speech>

researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, told *Wired*. "This kind of legislation would disincentive journalists from publishing the truth, if it was a story about a scandal for example."

It is also provided the framework for prosecuting journalists for unfavourable political coverage under the pretence of fake news. Malaysia repealed the law within five months of passing it.

Egypt passed a law saying that anyone with more than 5,000 followers on social media would be subjected to the same regulations as mainstream media outlets.<sup>30</sup> The move is likely to encourage more Egyptians to move to encrypted platforms, removing the opportunity to identify misinformation threats.

India, the UK, Ireland, France and Germany are variously setting up bodies and/or laws to police fake news, and the European Commission – which has set up its own Russian myth-busting website, EU vs Disinfo<sup>31</sup> – assembled a high-level group of experts to advise on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online.

The EU faces its next test around information legislation in the form of an upcoming vote on amendments to the copyright law. The amendments will make it necessary for Google, Facebook and other content aggregators to pay news outlets to use metadata describing the content of their articles without paying. Another amendment states that it will still be fine for publishing companies to pick up snippets and use them in their reporting with no compensation for the original source.

The most likely outcome if these amendments pass? Less news consumption, lower revenue. To ask the right questions, politicians need to learn the ins and outs of new technologies or recruit more tech-literate candidates.

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<sup>30</sup> Wesley Dockery (19 June 2018), *Critics say el-Sissi's media law shuts down speech in Egypt*, DW News. Retrieved from: <http://www.dw.com/en/critics-say-el-sissi-s-media-law-shuts-down-speech-in-egypt/a-44297630>

<sup>31</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

On the flipside, legislation is the most likely route to ensuring more transparency from platforms on how they collect and store data, and how algorithms ranks and distribute information. It is also the most likely route to providing some form of accountability and recourse when algorithms are shown to be unlawfully suppressing information for political or economic gain.

The Ye test: Is there any possible legislative solution that would not have grossly undermined the rights of Ye and Ms Owens to freedom of expression?

## 6.2 Tech interventions

With over 3.5 billion searches on Google per day, 500 million tweets, and 1.45 billion daily active users on Facebook<sup>32</sup>, any proposed solution will need to be able to work at scale.

In the first three months of 2018, Facebook removed 2.5 million posts identified as hate speech, of which 38% were flagged by their technology for human review. The site also removed 837 million pieces of spam – almost 100% of which were found and flagged by AI before a human noticed them.

"We were late on fake news and election interference," Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg told attendees at the Code Conference at the end of May this year<sup>33</sup>. "I don't think we were focused enough on the bad."

"We said we're sorry, but sorry isn't the point. The point is the action we're taking. On all of these fronts, we're thinking about responsibility in very different ways."

Google was among the first to test automated solutions for information quality with Content ID, an automated approach to identifying and blocking copyrighted content from

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<sup>32</sup> Statistics from Internet Live Stats and [Facebook Newsroom](#), August 2016

<sup>33</sup> Nicole Lee (29 May 2018), *Facebook admits it was late on fake news*, EndGadget, Retrieved from: <https://www.engadget.com/2018/05/29/facebook-apology-tour-codecon/>

upload. They have also been working with publishers for the past 10 years to improve revenue opportunities by exploring subscription models.

This year, they launched the Google News Initiative (GNI)<sup>34</sup>, which will include improving its search engine to recognise and respond to breaking news searches, and starting the Disinfo Lab in collaboration with First Draft to combat mis- and disinformation during elections and breaking news moments.

Most recently, the GNI has partnered with the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) to train journalists through its “Access to Tools” programme to leverage technology to tell better stories.

There is hope for a solution through technology, but tech companies have also shown a history of overselling their abilities, refusing to operate transparently to retain a competitive edge, and failing to be held accountable by their users or governments.

A sustainable solution will require a commitment to cooperate with competitors, and a structure for sharing some data securely without compromising businesses. A tech “Hippocratic oath” would involve committing to humans before profit, information quality before volume, transparency, accountability.

It will also require the acknowledgement that technology cannot yet solve for human nature. In the words of researcher and author of *Algorithms of Oppression*<sup>35</sup>, Safiya Umoja Noble: “There is a missing social and human context in some types of algorithmically driven decision making, and this matters for everyone engaging with these types of technologies in everyday life.”

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<sup>34</sup> Philipp Schindler (20 March 2018), *The Google News Initiative: Building a stronger future for news*, Google Blogs. Retrieved from: <https://www.blog.google/topics/google-news-initiative/announcing-google-news-initiative/>

<sup>35</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), *Algorithms of Oppression, How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, NYU Press, p.26

Away from big tech, there are smaller startups hoping to solve the information quality crisis too. Factmata is a London-based start-up with seed funding to the tune of \$1 million<sup>36</sup> from US investors including billionaire Mark Cuban, Zynga founder Mark Pincus, and Brightmail founder Sunil Paul.

Founder Dhruv Gulati aims to build an online community of fact-checkers and news rankers named Briefr. Data generated by this platform will be used to train FactMata's 'Credibility Engine', which they describe as "an advanced AI based on natural language processing and deep learning, capable of detecting hyper-partisan content, hate speech, clickbait, fake news".

It's an idea worth trying. But I see two potential problems: without paying contributors, will Briefr be able to achieve the volume of posts required to effectively train its AI? And are the types of people who enjoy cataloguing misinformation on a social media platform going to bring a wide enough variety of content to the table? In the short-term, a highly-educated and fairly homogenous group would yield faster consensus. But could it also limit the AI's relevance to the real world?

The Ye test: Would a commitment to quality over volume of interactions have changed Ye's consumption patterns on YouTube? Can technology be used to make moderate and nuanced information more appealing to human minds that are prone to the ego-defence mechanism of splitting (black-or-white, no-grey thinking)?

### 6.3 Corporate interventions

Another proposal from those in a position of power to combat misinformation online has come from the holders of the purse strings: advertisers and sellers.

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<sup>36</sup> Shona Ghosh (Sep. 5, 2017), *A 25-year-old CEO emailed Mark Cuban to pitch his anti-fake-news startup for investment — and it worked*, Business Insider. Retrieved from: <http://uk.businessinsider.com/factmata-raised-seed-funding-mark-cuban-2017-9>

The initiative began last June when Vodafone<sup>37</sup> said its agency WPP would create a whitelist of acceptable media providers to ensure their ads were not placed against fake news or hate speech by the Google or Facebook automated advertising algorithms.

"Vodafone has a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion; we also greatly value the integrity of the democratic processes and institutions that are often the targets of purveyors of fake news," Vodafone group chief exec Vittorio Colao said at the time. "We will not tolerate our brand being associated with this kind of abusive and damaging content."<sup>38</sup>

GroupM, the WPP-owned media buying agency, forecast Google and Facebook would receive 84% of global spending on digital advertising in 2017, and that this would increase by 4% to about \$23bn in 2018.<sup>39</sup> They are recruiting other major advertisers to join this initiative, including the world's two biggest advertisers, Unilever and P&G, who respectively spent \$9.5bn and \$10.5bn on advertising in 2017.

The coalition aims to create a whitelist of sources they deem high quality, and to blacklist those who spread misinformation. The policy should effectively throttle the cottage industry that has sprung up around misinformation and low quality information.

But it also threatens to keep ad spend in the hands of traditional media outlets, challenging the emergence of new voices and start-ups.

The Ye test: Should political messengers like PragerU be allowed to make money from their messaging to further advance their pursuit of power? Are there methods that would allow advertisers to put their spend behind high-quality information without the creation of an

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<sup>37</sup> Victoria Woollaston (6 June 2017), *Vodafone starts blocking ads on sites that promote hate speech and fake news*, Wired. Retrieved from: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/vodafone-hate-speech-block-ads>

<sup>38</sup> Press release (6 June 2017): [Vodafone blocks advertising on hate speech and fake news outlets worldwide](http://www.vodafone.com/content/index/media/vodafone-group-releases/2017/advertising-block.html), Vodafone. Retrieved from: <http://www.vodafone.com/content/index/media/vodafone-group-releases/2017/advertising-block.html>

<sup>39</sup> Staff (3 December 2017), *Google and Facebook dominance forecast to rise*, Financial Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/cf362186-d840-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482> Results are excluding China.

exclusionary list? Are these methods still sustainable if wealthy, high-influence social media users like Ye are able to amplify political messaging?

## 6.4 Non-profit interventions

The most nuanced solution to misinformation is to manually identify claims of fact and assess their validity. It is also the most labour-intensive. There are 149 recognised fact-checking organisations set up to do this in 53 countries<sup>40</sup>.

Several of these organisations are investigating automated fact-checking<sup>41</sup> as a way to further the reach of their work: Duke Reporters Lab's Tech & Check Alerts assesses claims made on CNN, then emails the top 15 claims to PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, the Washington Post, and the Associated Press for verification.

Fact Stream is a mobile app that uses existing fact-checks and alerts from PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, and the Washington Post to identify and assess claims during live events, like the State of the Union address. And, in the UK, FullFact's automated platform constantly monitors an array of media outlets, as well as Prime Minister's Questions, for claims the group has already checked.

But fact-checking alone will not solve the issue of misinformation or low quality information. It is done after the information horse has bolted, and some studies<sup>42</sup> show it can serve to reinforce misinformation rather than dispel it.

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<sup>40</sup> Daniel Funke (February 2018), *Report: There are 149 fact-checking projects in 53 countries. That's a new high.* Poynter. Retrieved from: <https://www.poynter.org/news/report-there-are-149-fact-checking-projects-53-countries-thats-new-high>

<sup>41</sup> Lucas Graves (February 2018), *Understanding the Promise and Limits of Automated Fact-Checking*, The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<sup>42</sup> Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler (February 2012), *Misinformation and Fact-checking: Research Findings from Social Science*, Media Policy Initiative at New America Foundation. Retrieved from: [https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/Misinformation\\_and\\_Fact-checking.pdf](https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/Misinformation_and_Fact-checking.pdf)

Another non-profit initiative hoping to dampen misinformation before it gets out of the gate is the Credibility Coalition (CredCo). The group grew out MisinfoCon, a hackathon held at MIT by Hacks/Hackers in 2017. During the conference, there were a number of projects focused on marking up content for its reliability.

Meedan and Hacks/Hackers went on to co-found CredCo, including researchers and programmers from MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Berkeley, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Global Voices.

Meedan says the goal is to provide a “range of indicators that can be used by a person – or a system – to gauge if an article can inform or educate that person (or whoever the audience is likely to be).”

The group’s first study<sup>43</sup> asked a group of annotators to analyse articles about climate science and public health for 16 such indicators.

Eight of these were signals from the content: how representative was the headline, did the author use clickbait techniques, did they consult and quote experts, did they cite respected organisations and studies, did they moderate confidence to reflect uncertainty, did they use logical fallacies, did they adopt an emotional tone, and did they confuse causation and correlation?

The second eight indicators looked at the context the story appeared in: Was the piece original or did it appear verbatim on other sites, was the central claim of the article fact-checked by an approved organisation, where the first three sources quoted fairly and accurately, were the experts well regarded in their field, how many ads surround the article, how many calls to share on social were there, what was the quality of the advertising on the page, and how “aggressively” were the ads and social calls placed on the page?

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<sup>43</sup> Amy Zhang et al (2018), *A Structured Response to Misinformation: Defining and Annotating Credibility Indicators in News Articles*, WWW '18 Companion Proceedings of the The Web Conference 2018, p603-612

The study found that the quantity of ads, content recommendation boxes and sponsored content do not have a significant correlation with credibility. But human assessments of ad placement as “aggressive” did suggest a difference between credible and non-credible content.

The Ye test: How do we formulate the language of fact checks to reach an individual like Ye without further alienating him from moderate voices? Should fact checks deploy persuasive language techniques to overcome cognitive biases, or will this undermine credibility in the long-term? How do you get someone like Ye to actually use the fact-checking resources available? Are there new ways to integrate non-profit efforts into social media and traditional media?

## 6.5 Education interventions

We can train children to code from a young age so that they understand how the tools they use daily work. We can ensure they understand the basics of data collection and algorithmic ranking.

We can teach them the 15 logical fallacies, and how to spot suspicious information online by rolling out First Draft’s information literacy training<sup>44</sup> to every school.

We can deliver courses on the ethics and responsibilities of social media use. All of these must become core to our curriculums.

But more challenging lessons to impart effectively will be around cognitive bias and rewiring our basic human tendencies to seek out information that confirms our beliefs. And how to maintain hope and calm heads in the face of a tool that currently magnifies the worst traits of humanity.

The Ye test: How do we reach and educate those who believe they have no need to be?

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<sup>44</sup> <https://firstdraftnews.org/en/education/learn/>

## 6.6 Journalistic interventions

For journalism to become an effective tool in the fight against misinformation, we must first restore trust.

Roughly 30 pages ago, I told you I started this year believing algorithms could be used to root out “fake news”. But Ye was not dealing with “fake news” – he wasn’t even dealing with the news. And, unfortunately, he is not alone: 7% of adults online in both the US and UK are categorised as news avoiders<sup>45</sup>.

As a trade, we need to remember we exist to serve a public, and not for the vain pursuit of bylines, follows and prizes. If we are to restore trust, we need to focus on a culture of service and not celebrity.

The algorithms that will define future information quality are being developed now, and are using the work of journalists to set the baseline for excellence. Never before in the history of the trade has it been more important for journalists to pursue excellence.

Label opinion and paid content clearly, submit your work to edits and fact-checking, look for the new angle and resist churnalism, and follow the story doggedly. Pursue high standards of verification, or as New York University’s Jay Rosen puts it: “bullet-proof your stories”. Don’t be afraid to show your work where possible.

Engage your public: work with citizen journalists, seek input and expose readers to the standards we uphold. Listen to your public, and go out of your way to seek and listen to criticism of your work.

Be transparent: show your readers you are accessible and accountable. And when you mess up – as we all do on deadline – be honest about it.

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin Toff and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (1 June 2018), “I Just Google It”: Folk Theories of Distributed Discovery by, *Journal of Communication*, Volume 68, Issue 3, Pages 636–657, Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy009>

Media owners and editors need to continue to lobby platforms for a meaningful seat at the table and more algorithm transparency, so that they can both contribute editorial insights and learn from their data.

They need to make information verification a central job role in newsrooms, and the first response to breaking news.

Think local, and distribute resources accordingly. Use wires when they can do a better job, subscribe to digital tools that already exist to organise networks of both citizen and regular journalists, and cooperate with other outlets to fund the work of non-profit investigative projects. Then use those savings to refocus your journalists on telling original, local stories – especially outside of urban centres.

Finally, media owners need to think about a pivot of purpose in the way we operate newsrooms. The founder of the BBC, John Reith, once instructed his staff that their role was to inform, educate, and entertain. In the new digital information matrix, our newsrooms would be better placed to condense, confirm and contextualise. Focus the tasks of your newsroom on condensing the flood of digital information, confirming the authenticity of both your content and trending content elsewhere, and providing historical and political context for developing stories.

The Ye test: Do we need to rethink the way we do entertainment journalism, given that entertainment journalist must now hold a new kind of power to account: the celebrity influencer? Are there new strategies or technologies that can be adopted to appeal to news avoiders?



## 7. Conclusion

French philosopher Michel Foucault proposed the concept of “governmentality”<sup>46</sup>: understanding society as ordered in terms of the priorities of the government. We need to devise a “platform mentality”: the way we look at and experience the internet (and thus, world) will be shaped by the priorities of platforms, our emerging political powers.

There is no silver bullet for improving information quality because it is tied to human nature: we have lied and deceived for power, gain or simple comfort for centuries. The design of information technology must take this into account.

Journalism has been through painful transitions in the past, and will survive the transition into the Digital Age. But the industry must be willing to take a service approach, and must consider new approaches to fulfilling the service of holding power to account, and maintaining an informed and educated public.

In the end, it will always be down to the individual to choose the what and how of sharing and consuming information in the Digital Age. And, like any other choice, those choices will carry consequences for both you and your community. Instead of seeking out the information and communities that makes you feel better about being 0.1% different, remind yourself that we are 99.9% similar.

Above all else: be informed, not fearful.

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<sup>46</sup> Foucault, M.(1982) 'Technologies of the Self', in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, pp. 16–49. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

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## Appendix 1 - Ye's bookmarked commentators

	Media outlet	Self-described politics	Education level	Professional experience
<b>Amanda Seales</b>	YouTube, HBO, podcast	Liberal democrat	M.A. in African American Studies from University of Columbia with a concentration in hip hop	Amanda Seales, formerly known by her stage name Amanda Diva, is an American comedian, actress, DJ, recording artist and radio personality. Aside from her solo career, she was also a touring member of the musical group Floetry. Was an MTV VJ. Currently hosts Small Doses podcast "truths couched in comedy".
<b>Angela Rye</b>	CNN, NPR	Liberal democrat	B.A. from University of Washington and J.D from Seattle University	A liberal political commentator on CNN and an NPR political analyst. Co-founded IMPACT, an organization that seeks to encourage young professionals in three core areas: economic empowerment, civic engagement, and political involvement.
<b>Candace Owens</b>	Fox News, YouTube	Conservative, but often described as right wing	B.A. in Journalism from the University of Rhode Island	Worked at Vogue, worked as an assistant in private equity, left to start Degree180. Tried to launch Social Autopsy doxing website. Launched Red Pill Black YouTube Channel. Works for Turning Point USA as "urban engagement". Commentator for Fox News.

<b>Carmen Perez</b>	Instagram, cable news guest	Civil rights activist, left-leaning	General liberal arts at Oxnard College, Psychology at University of California – Santa Cruz	Carmen Beatrice Perez is recognized as an expert in juvenile and criminal justice reform, system accountability, and an activist who has worked on issues of civil rights, including mass incarceration, women's rights and gender equity, violence prevention, racial healing and community policing
<b>Christopher Hitchens</b>	Vanity Fair, The Atlantic, The Guardian	Varied, including at different times: Trotskyist, Labour Party, Libertarian, Republican	Politics, Philosophy, Economics at Balliol College, Oxford	Now-deceased British journalist and essayist who supported free expression and scientific discovery, and described himself as an "antitheist".
<b>Ebony Williams</b>	Fox News, CBS News, WABC Radio	Registered Independent	B.A. in Communications and African-American studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, law degree from Loyola University New Orleans College of Law	Eboni Williams is an American attorney and television host. She co-hosted a talk show on WABC Radio in New York City and was a co-host of Fox News Channel's 2017 show Fox News Specialists.
<b>Jordan Peterson</b>	YouTube	"Classic British Liberal"	BA Political Science and BA Psycholog from University of Alberta, PhD in clinical psychology from McGill University	Dr. Jordan B Peterson is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, a clinical psychologist, author, and public speaker.
<b>Kamala Harris</b>	CSpan	Democrat	B.A. Political Science and Economics from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Juris Doctor (J.D.) from the University of California's Hastings College.	Kamala Devi Harris is an American lawyer and politician serving as the junior United States Senator from California since 2017. A member of the Democratic Party, she previously was the 32nd

				Attorney General of California from 2011 to 2017.
<b>Linda Sarsour</b>	Instagram, cable news guest	Civil rights activist, left-leaning	Took courses at Kingsborough Community College and Brooklyn College with the goal of becoming an English teacher	Linda Sarsour is an American political activist and former executive director of the Arab American Association of New York. She gained national attention for her advocacy on behalf of American Muslims and as a co-chair of the 2017 Women's March
<b>Scott Adams</b>	Twitter	"Liberterian minus the crazy stuff"	BA Economics from Hartwick College, MBA from the University of California at Berkeley	Creator of the Dilbert comic strip and the author of several books.
<b>Tamika Mallory</b>	Instagram, cable news guest	Civil rights activist, left-leaning	Unknown	Tamika D. Mallory is an activist and the national co-chair for the Women's March. She is an advocate of gun control, feminism and the Black Lives Matter movement.
<b>Tomi Lahren</b>	Fox News	Constitutional Conservative	Lahren graduated from University of Nevada, Las Vegas, with a B.A. in broadcast journalism and political science in 2014.	Former host on The Blaze suspended for expressing views on abortion. Currently creating segments Final Thoughts for Fox News Insider