

Collateral damage or a direct hit? Democratic ideals in the age of Trump

How robust are American democratic institutions under Trump's presidency? Jennifer Earl argues that, even if his actions and lies do not amount to a coordinated effort to undermine democracy, the effect will be to systematically weaken the institutions of US democracy in the long term.



Picture: [The White House/Public Domain](#)

According to the *Washington Post*, as of 1 May, 2018, [Donald Trump has lied or made misleading claims 3,001 times since taking office](#). The US electorate and public officials are split between those who are shocked and/or appalled by his own and his administration's break with truth and facts, those who say they are but who nonetheless vote to support the President's agenda (for example, Senator Jeff Flake), and supporters of the President who see these and similar reports as 'fake news' or otherwise unproblematic (such as White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders and Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway). No matter the different views, there have thus far been few real consequences for Trump for his casual relationship with the truth.

At the same time, false cries of fake news by Trump and his supporters mix with actual fake news, created and circulated by actors ranging from homegrown [conspiracy theorists](#) to [Russian actors and bots](#) to (quite ironically) [data-analytics firms like Cambridge Analytica](#), making it ever more difficult for average people to know who or what to believe. And the vitriol directed toward journalists, who were once commonly seen as '[fourth estate](#)' but are now framed as an [enemies of the state and American people](#), has added to a growing [distrust for information that doesn't conform to one's pre-existing views](#). Even [routine political rituals that challenge the image of the president](#) have [come under attack](#). [Science has also been under attack](#), as has [data collection](#).

Since the 2016 election, elected officials in the US have also sought to create an ever more compliant population by attempting to [reduce the right to protest](#), which also reduces the ability to challenge official accounts, narratives and explanations. [Voter suppression](#) and [gerrymandering](#), which began before the 2016 election and have continued since, can also be seen in this light – it is easier to deny opposition when protesting becomes criminalised and voting becomes both more difficult and less likely to matter.

One way to view these developments is as a set of distinct and unrelated trends that cause collateral damage to democratic institutions. According to this view, the US has a president that [uses shame to attack enemies but seems to feel none](#) about making misleading and false statements, the news media's ability to actually inform a populous is being seriously challenged, and political participation is being made harder for the least advantaged and most aggrieved amongst us, but any long-term effects of these shifts on democratic institutions are collateral and perhaps even minor. They are collateral in the sense that they are assumed to be uncoordinated and unintentional, meant only to help Trump and/or his party instrumentally in the short-term, and minor in the sense that they may not have lasting damage.

This view misunderstands the larger scene and fails to capture the wider threat to American democracy. While I do not argue that these separate developments are coordinated, I do argue that democratic institutions are in the crosshairs; attacks on the ability to collect and use facts, data and science to apprehend reality and test political claims is a democratic muscle that cannot be weakened without serious consequence. Leaders making false and misleading statements, undermining journalism, science and data, and suppressing opposition are well-worn authoritarian moves. As I have noted [elsewhere](#), the authoritarian impulse is not just to gain instrumental short-term advantages, but to control reality, or at least its perception, and therefore control a population and its government. A long-time observer of Putin wrote that his authoritarian aspirations and behaviour share a key trait with Trump:

'Lying is the message. It's not just that both Putin and Trump lie, it is that they lie in the same way and for the same purpose: blatantly, to assert power over truth itself... when he [Trump] claims that he didn't make statements that he is on record as making, or when he claims that millions of people voting illegally cost him the popular vote, he is not making easily disprovable factual claims: he is claiming control over reality itself,' (emphasis in original; [Gessen 2016](#)).

In this view, Trump doesn't lie because he is ill-informed, or because he makes verbal mistakes, or because he likes chaos; he lies because he can. The ability to manufacture an alternative reality, [as Conway described, 'alternative facts'](#), is not just a reflection of power, it is a source of power. Every time a leader is able to lie or mislead, decry real news as fake and fake news as real or silence critics, that leader's power grows and our democratic muscles weaken. Challenging actors and institutions that contest either his manufactured reality or his power to manufacture it, like journalism, is not collateral damage. It is necessary if one is to continue to manufacture reality. No matter their intention or calculation, suppressing science and data aren't short-term instrumental moves that simply hide the need for or consequences of government policies; no matter their rationale or motivation, these are moves that challenge the ability of a populous to make informed and effective decisions about political representation, which is to say, they undermine the ability to do democracy. Likewise, suppressing the expression of dissent – whether on the streets or at the ballot box – isn't just a way of winning seats; it works in the same way that undermining journalism works, by weakening those who can challenge a hegemonic, manufactured reality and thereby strengthening the ability of powerholders to manufacture reality.

My argument is simple: it doesn't matter if these seemingly distinct trends are not orchestrated to reinforce one another if they do in fact reinforce one another. It doesn't matter if these moves are designed for short-term instrumental gain if they actually have long-term impacts on democratic institutions. Together, these trends represent a very strong play to control the perception of reality and to minimise challenges to this great power: it's a perfect storm breaching the levees of American democratic institutions. The storm may pass. America may weather it. But we must fight to preserve the importance of truth, facts, science, journalism and dissent – the ability to contest realities manufactured by government leaders and/or by their wealthy donors – if we are to preserve meaningful democratic life.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

About the author

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