

The Misinformation Dilemma

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New York Times columnist Paul Krugman marvels at the right-wing extremism prevalent in the Republican presidential race not just from the “outsider” candidates but from the “establishment” favorites as well, doubling down on President George W. Bush’s economic prescriptions and foreign policies despite their record of disaster.



The media’s obsession with Donald Trump’s off-the-cuff candidacy “has in one way worked to the G.O.P. establishment’s advantage: it has distracted pundits and the press from the hard right turn even conventional Republican candidates have taken, a turn whose radicalism would have seemed implausible not long ago,” Krugman [wrote](#) on Monday.

From escalating U.S. military involvement in the Middle East to slashing taxes – again – for the rich, the supposedly “mainstream” Republicans, such as Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, are acting as if the catastrophes under Bush-43 never happened.

It would be fair to say that the Democrats are suffering from a similar disconnect from the lessons of the last quarter century, with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bristling with hawkish rhetoric toward Syria and Russia while sending [fawning salutations](#) to Israel despite its contribution to the Mideast crisis by repressing the Palestinian people.

Even Clinton’s chief rival, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, can’t formulate a rational policy toward the Middle East, although – to his credit – he did oppose Bush’s bogus case for invading Iraq and favors prioritizing cooperation with Russia in defeating the Islamic State over demanding another “regime change” in Syria.

But Sanders simply wants to postpone the U.S. removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and he encourages Saudi Arabia to throw its military weight around more across the region, not noticing that the [Saudis are backing](#) many of the Sunni jihadists who have helped turn the Middle East into a killing field. Nor does Sanders explain why one would expect the Saudis to turn away from their obsession with fighting Shiites as they are currently doing in pulverizing Yemen because a Shiite rebel group, the Houthis, gained power in that impoverished nation.

In a rational world, Saudi Arabia would be viewed as a major part of the problem, not part of any

solution.

On domestic policy, Sanders – like Trump – does seem to have touched a populist political nerve in their recognition that neo-liberalism (as preached since Bill Clinton’s presidency) has failed to protect America’s middle class. Though Sanders’s and Trump’s brands of populism offer sharply divergent remedies, they both speak to Main Street’s fear that it is being left behind by the high-tech globalized world that has diverted vast wealth to Wall Street and Silicon Valley.

The more traditional candidates – whether Hillary Clinton or the establishment Republicans – don’t address the heart of this problem. Instead, they choose to play it safe on the edges while embracing the “free market” orthodoxies that created the crisis.

A Propagandized People

But is it really possible to expect that the American people (as propagandized and misinformed as they are) could effect significant change through the electoral process, which is itself deeply compromised by vast sums of dark money from American oligarchs, while other super-rich Americans own the major media companies.

So, while there may be some logical responses to this combination of crises, the media/political system prevents them from being considered in any coherent way.

For instance, a rational approach to the Middle East would shift American alliances away from the reactionary Persian Gulf monarchies and Turkey and toward a more balanced approach that would invite greater involvement of Shiite-ruled Iran, which the Sunni-led monarchies view as their chief regional rival. There is little reason for the United States to take one side of a sectarian split within Islam that dates back to the Seventh Century.

By shedding its current pro-Saudi bias, the United States could finally get serious about resolving the Syrian crisis by shutting down the money and weapons going from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to the extremists not just in the Islamic State but also in Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its various jihadist allies.

Since summer 2014, President Barack Obama and his “coalition” have been fighting a half-hearted war that has failed to face down the U.S. “allies” aiding the Sunni jihadists in Syria. Only when shamed by Russia in fall 2015 did the U.S. coalition join in bombing trucks carrying the Islamic State’s oil from Syria through Turkey’s open borders for resale in the black market. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Blind Eye Toward Turkey’s Crimes.](#)”]

As for Syria’s political future, a reasonable approach would be to leave the selection of national leaders up to the Syrian people through internationally organized democratic elections. The voters would be the ones to decide Assad’s fate, not outsiders.

Yet, Official Washington finds itself in the crazy position of extending the bloody Syrian war – and the resulting chaos across the region and into Europe – because Obama and other Important People said “Assad must go!” and don’t want to lose face by dropping that demand. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Neocons Object to Syrian Democracy.](#)”]

A realistic approach to the Middle East also requires finally standing up to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, rather than letting him dance U.S. political leaders around the world stage like puppets on a marionette’s string. A balanced approach to the Middle East would allow for

collaborating with Russia and Iran to apply pressure on the parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to make the necessary concessions for a peace deal, imperfect though it would surely be.

The need to work with Russian President Vladimir Putin would also require rethinking the aggressive U.S. strategy regarding NATO and Ukraine. Instead of insisting that everything is “Putin’s fault,” the U.S. government could acknowledge its hand in exacerbating the political crisis in Ukraine in 2013-14 and admit that the U.S.-backed putsch on Feb. 22, 2014, was not the simple story of “our good guys vs. their bad guys” that was sold to the American public.

As part of all this reassessment, there needs to be a coming-clean with the American people regarding what U.S. intelligence knows about a variety of key events, including but not limited to the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack outside Damascus, Syria; the Feb. 20, 2014 sniper attack in Kiev, Ukraine, which set the stage for the coup; and the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine.

The fact that such events have been exploited for propaganda reasons – to blame U.S. “adversaries” – while the detailed knowledge of the U.S. intelligence agencies is hidden from the American people has deprived the public of an ability to make rational assessments about the larger policies. U.S. positions are driven by false or faulty perceptions, not reality.

The Disappearing Middle Class

Along with bringing rationality and reason back to U.S. foreign policy, a similar process of truth-telling could take place domestically. The core problem of America’s disappearing middle class is not just technology and globalization; it is that the super-profits from those developments have gone overwhelmingly to the extremely rich, rather than equitably shared with the population.

Thus, we see the rapid shrinking of the Great American Middle Class, a development that is destructive and dangerous because a prosperous middle class serves as ballast for an economy, preventing it from suddenly capsizing.

Plus, if most people can’t afford to buy the products that technology produces, then eventually the investment in that technology becomes unprofitable, a lesson well known since the days of Henry Ford who wanted his workers to earn enough to afford to buy his cars.

There is the trick question about what is the value of all the properties and hotels in “Monopoly” once one player has won by bankrupting all the other players. The answer is zero because no one has any money to visit the properties or stay at the hotels. They thus have no monetary value. A similar reality holds true in the real-world economy. Over-concentration of wealth is a threat.

The answer to this conundrum is also clear: since it is impossible to stop technological advancement and risky to start trade wars, the alternative is to tax the super-profits of the rich and recycle the money in the form of jobs to build infrastructure, educate the young, protect the environment, research ways to improve health, etc.

There is nothing wrong with having machines do more of the drudgery and give humans more time to enjoy life. The problem comes when the benefits accrue to a tiny minority and the rest of us are forced to work harder or face declining living standards.

But what prevents us from making the sensible move – i.e., dramatically increase taxes on the rich and put that money to use putting people to work on worthy projects – is Ronald Reagan’s

propaganda message that “government is the problem.” The Right has built onto that theme the idea that government promoting the common good is against the U.S. Constitution.

Thus, you have extremists such as Texas Sen. Ted Cruz posing as “constitutionalists” as they ignore the fact that the chief authors of the Constitution – the Federalists – inserted a clear mandate for the U.S. government to “provide for the ... general Welfare.” That authority was cited in both the Preamble and Article I, Section 8, which enumerates the government’s powers. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Right’s [Made-up Constitution](#).”]

In other words, the “originalist” meaning of the U.S. Constitution was in favor of a robust and activist federal government. But few Americans know and understand that history. They have been sold on a false rendition that serves the interests of the rich who understandably don’t want the government to use its taxing powers on behalf of the broader population.

The Heart of the Matter

Which get us to the heart of the matter: Why is the American political debate so ill-informed and misinformed? Why was there virtually no accountability in the mainstream U.S. news media when nearly every important foreign-policy journalist and pundit bought into the WMD lies that justified the Iraq War? Why are the same kinds of “group thinks” continuing to prevail, with U.S. government propaganda accepted rather than questioned?

The answer to that conundrum is that Official Washington is dominated – on foreign policy – by neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks and – on domestic policy – by neo-liberals and government-hating conservatives. The old days – when there were foreign policy “realists” who acted more from a perspective of American interests and politicians who remembered the Great Depression and the New Deal – are gone.

The neoconservatives, who emerged as pro-Vietnam War Democrats in the 1970s and switched over to Reagan Republicans in the 1980s, have proved to be a formidable and effective force for a propaganda-driven foreign policy that sees American interests as indistinguishable from Israel’s and treats the American people like cattle to be herded.

That is why real information is as dangerous to neocons as water was to the Wicked Witch of the West. It is also why they have concentrated so much on getting control of the flow of news to the American people. If all the public gets is propaganda – and if honest journalists and scholars are marginalized and silenced – then the people will either support the latest neocon/liberal-hawk cause or end up in confused disarray, not sure what to believe.

The truth is that the neocons and their liberal-hawk allies now control virtually the entire mainstream news media, from The New York Times and The Washington Post to NPR and the major networks to Fox News and most of right-wing talk radio. Even esteemed journalist Seymour Hersh now must go overseas to the London Review of Books to get his important reporting published when it challenges the “group think” on Syria and other topics.

‘Free Market’ Capitalism

A similar situation exists regarding “free market” capitalism that is embraced by both neo-liberals and right-wing economists. For decades, in the major U.S. news media, it has been hard to hear a discouraging word about “free trade” deals even though labor leaders and some populist politicians warned presciently that these deals would cost millions of middle-class factory jobs.

Today, there is more skepticism about “free trade” as the social and economic impact has become undeniable but, again, there was no accountability for the misleading advocates of these agreements nor a serious effort to rewrite the deals. Renegotiation of the trade deals has been one of Donald Trump’s major proposals and applause lines.

But most Republican candidates favor more of the same: more unrestrained capitalism and less taxation on the wealthy. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton positions herself as a centrist, promising no “middle class” tax increases on people making \$250,000 or less, a redefinition of the “middle class” to include families making about five times the median income.

Despite their other shortcomings, Trump and Sanders are the only candidates seriously addressing some of these key economic issues. For his part, Sanders advocates much higher taxes – especially on the wealthy and the stock speculators – to fund a broad range of social programs, such as Medicare for all, and to finance massive infrastructure rebuilding.

Yet, the central challenge for a possible political transformation in America rests on reliable information getting to the people, especially given all the sources of misinformation and the many barriers to the truth. That battle – restoring the life-blood of democracy, an informed electorate – remains the challenge of our time.

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2050.html>