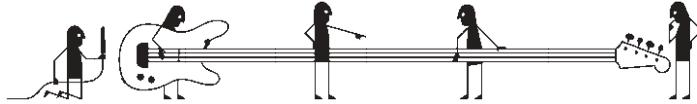

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE FAKE-NEWS FALLACY

Old fights about radio have lessons for new fights about the Internet.

BY ADRIAN CHEN

On the evening of October 30, 1938, a seventy-six-year-old millworker in Grover's Mill, New Jersey, named Bill Dock heard something terrifying on the radio. Aliens had landed just down the road, a newscaster announced, and were rampaging through the countryside. Dock grabbed his double-barrelled shotgun and went out into the night, prepared to face down the invaders. But, after investigating, as a newspaper later reported, he "didn't see anybody he thought needed shooting." In fact, he'd been duped by Orson Welles's radio adaptation of "The War of the Worlds." Structured as a breaking-news report that detailed the invasion in real time, the broadcast adhered faithfully to the conventions of news radio, complete with elaborate sound effects and impersonations of government officials, with only a few brief warnings through the program that it was fiction.

The next day, newspapers were full of stories like Dock's. "Thirty men and women rushed into the West 123rd Street police station," ready to evacuate, according to the *Times*. Two people suffered heart attacks from shock, the *Washington Post* reported. One caller from Pittsburgh claimed that he had barely prevented his wife from taking her own life by swallowing poison. The panic was the biggest story for weeks; a photograph of Bill Dock and his shotgun, taken the next day, by a *Daily News* reporter, went "the 1930s equivalent of viral," A. Brad Schwartz writes in his recent history, "Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* and the Art of Fake News."

This early fake-news panic lives on in legend, but Schwartz is the latest of a number of researchers to argue that it

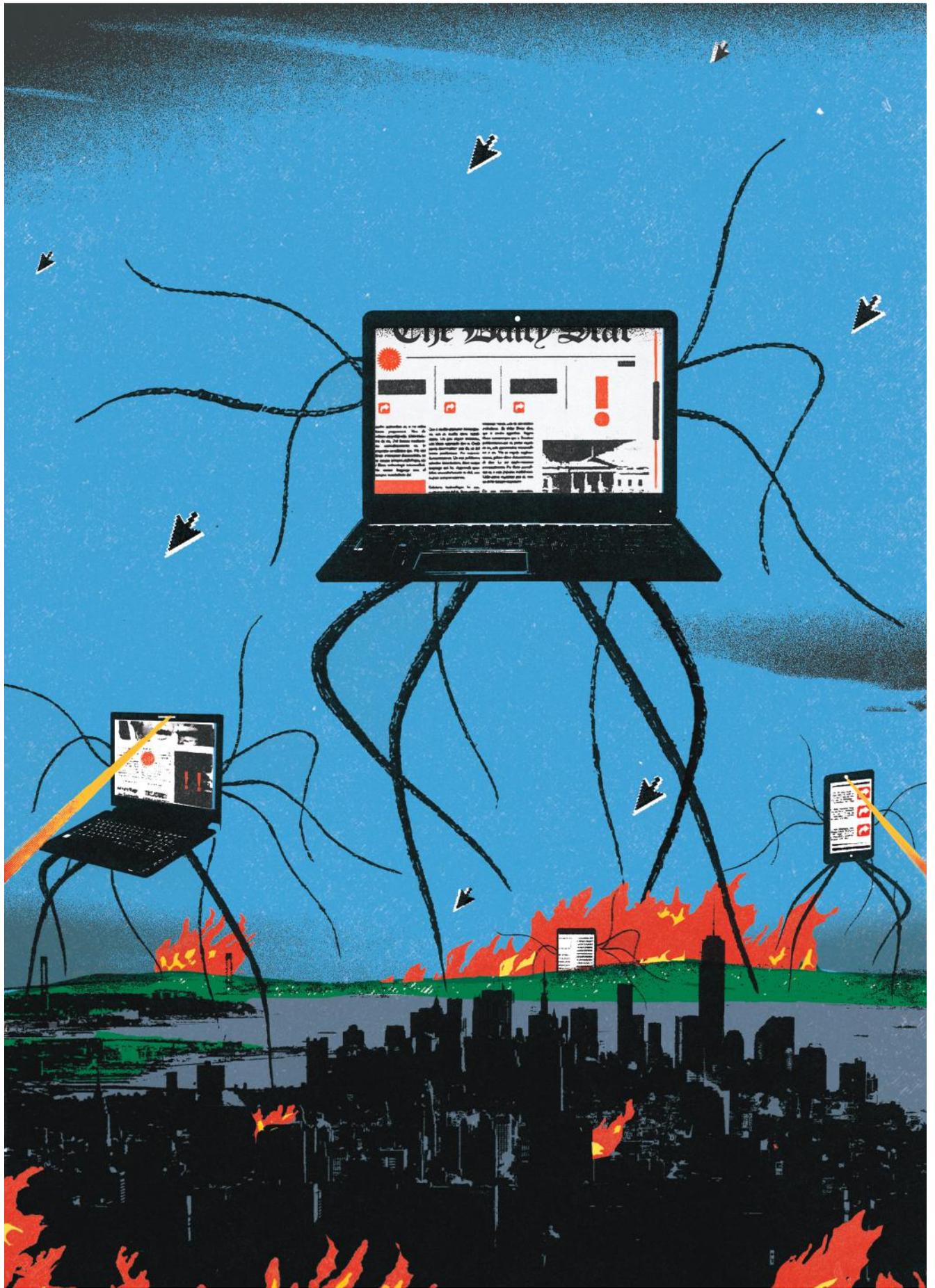
wasn't all it was cracked up to be. As Schwartz tells it, there was no mass hysteria, only small pockets of concern that quickly burned out. He casts doubt on whether Dock had even heard the broadcast. Schwartz argues that newspapers exaggerated the panic to better control the upstart medium of radio, which was becoming the dominant source of breaking news in the thirties. Newspapers wanted to show that radio was irresponsible and needed guidance from its older, more respectable siblings in the print media, such "guidance" mostly taking the form of lucrative licensing deals and increased ownership of local radio stations. Columnists and editorialists weighed in. Soon, the Columbia education professor and broadcaster Lyman Bryson declared that unrestrained radio was "one of the most dangerous elements in modern culture."

The argument turned on the role of the Federal Communications Commission, the regulators charged with insuring that the radio system served the "public interest, convenience and necessity." Unlike today's F.C.C., which is known mainly as a referee for media mergers, the F.C.C. of the thirties was deeply concerned with the particulars of what broadcasters put in listeners' ears—it had recently issued a reprimand after a racy Mae West sketch that so alarmed NBC it banned West from its stations. To some, the lesson of the panic was that the F.C.C. needed to take an even more active role to protect people from malicious tricksters like Welles. "Programs of that kind are an excellent indication of the inadequacy of our present control over a marvellous facility," the Iowa senator Clyde Herring, a Democrat, declared. He announced a bill that would require broad-

casters to submit shows to the F.C.C. for review before airing. Yet Schwartz says that the people calling for a government crackdown were far outnumbered by those who warned against one. "Far from blaming Mr. Orson Welles, he ought to be given a Congressional medal and a national prize," the renowned columnist Dorothy Thompson wrote.

Thompson was concerned with a threat far greater than rogue thespians. Everywhere you looked in the thirties, authoritarian leaders were being swept to power with the help of radio. The Nazi Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda deployed a force called the Funkwarte, or Radio Guard, that went block by block to insure that citizens tuned in to Hitler's major broadcast speeches, as Tim Wu details in his new book, "The Attention Merchants." Meanwhile, homegrown radio demagogues like Father Charles Coughlin and the charismatic Huey Long made some people wonder about a radio-aided Fascist takeover in America. For Thompson, Welles had made an "admirable demonstration" about the power of radio. It showed the danger of handing control of the airwaves over to the state. "No political body must ever, under any circumstances, obtain a monopoly of radio," she wrote. "The greatest organizers of mass hysterias and the mass delusions today are states using the radio to excite terrors, incite hatreds, inflame masses."

Donald Trump's victory has been a demonstration, for many people, of how the Internet can be used to achieve those very ends. Trump used Twitter less as a communication device than as a weapon of information warfare, rallying



Radio, in its early days, was seen as a means for spreading hysteria and hatred, just as the Internet is today.

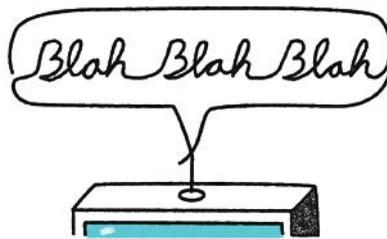
his supporters and attacking opponents with hundred-and-forty-character barages. “I wouldn’t be here without Twitter,” he declared on Fox News in March. Yet the Internet didn’t just give him a megaphone. It also helped him peddle his lies through a profusion of unreliable media sources that undermined the old providers of established fact. Throughout the campaign, fake-news stories, conspiracy theories, and other forms of propaganda were reported to be flooding social networks. The stories were overwhelmingly pro-Trump, and the spread of whoppers like “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President”—hardly more believable than a Martian invasion—seemed to suggest that huge numbers of Trump supporters were being duped by online lies. This was not the first campaign to be marred by misinformation, of course. But the sheer outlandishness of the claims being made, and believed, suggested to many that the Internet had brought about a fundamental devaluing of the truth. Many pundits argued that the “hyper-democratizing” force of the Internet had helped usher in a “post-truth” world, where people based their opinions not on facts or reason but on passion and prejudice.

Yet, even among this information anarchy, there remains an authority of sorts. Facebook and Google now define the experience of the Internet for most people, and in many ways they play the role of regulators. In the weeks after the election, they faced enormous criticism for their failure to halt the spread of fake news and misinformation on their services. The problem was not simply that people had been able to spread lies but that the digital platforms were set up in ways that made them especially potent. The “share” button sends lies flying around the Web faster than fact checkers can debunk them. The supposedly neutral platforms use personalized algorithms to feed us information based on precise data models of our preferences, trapping us in “filter bubbles” that cripple critical thinking and increase polarization. The threat of fake news was compounded by this sense that the role of the press had been ceded to an arcane algorithmic system created by private companies that care only about the bottom line.

Not so very long ago, it was thought that the tension between commercial

pressure and the public interest would be one of the many things made obsolete by the Internet. In the mid-aughts, during the height of the Web 2.0 boom, the pundit Henry Jenkins declared that the Internet was creating a “participatory culture” where the top-down hegemony of greedy media corporations would be replaced by a horizontal network of amateur “prosumers” engaged in a wonderfully democratic exchange of information in cyberspace—an epistemic agora that would allow the whole globe to come together on a level playing field. Google, Facebook, Twitter, and the rest attained their paradoxical gatekeeper status by positioning themselves as neutral platforms that unlocked the Internet’s democratic potential by empowering users. It was on a private platform, Twitter, where pro-democracy protesters organized, and on another private platform, Google, where the knowledge of a million public libraries could be accessed for free. These companies would develop into what the tech guru Jeff Jarvis termed “radically public companies,” which operate more like public utilities than like businesses.

But there has been a growing sense among mostly liberal-minded observers that the platforms’ championing of openness is at odds with the public interest. The image of Arab Spring activists using Twitter to challenge repressive dictators has been replaced, in the public imagination, by that of ISIS propagandists luring vulnerable Western teen-agers to



Syria via YouTube videos and Facebook chats. The openness that was said to bring about a democratic revolution instead seems to have torn a hole in the social fabric. Today, online misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda are seen as the front line of a reactionary populist upsurge threatening liberal democracy. Once held back by democratic institutions, the bad stuff is now sluicing through a digital breach with the help of irresponsible tech companies.

Stanching the torrent of fake news has become a trial by which the digital giants can prove their commitment to democracy. The effort has reignited a debate over the role of mass communication that goes back to the early days of radio.

The debate around radio at the time of “The War of the Worlds” was informed by a similar fall from utopian hopes to dystopian fears. Although radio can seem like an unremarkable medium—audio wallpaper pasted over the most boring parts of your day—the historian David Goodman’s book “Radio’s Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s” makes it clear that the birth of the technology brought about a communications revolution comparable to that of the Internet. For the first time, radio allowed a mass audience to experience the same thing simultaneously from the comfort of their homes. Early radio pioneers imagined that this unprecedented blurring of public and private space might become a sort of ethereal forum that would uplift the nation, from the urban slum dweller to the remote Montana rancher. John Dewey called radio “the most powerful instrument of social education the world has ever seen.” Populist reformers demanded that radio be treated as a common carrier and give airtime to anyone who paid a fee. Were this to have come about, it would have been very much like the early online-bulletin-board systems where strangers could come together and leave a message for any passing online wanderer. Instead, in the regulatory struggles of the twenties and thirties, the commercial networks won out.

Corporate networks were supported by advertising, and what many progressives had envisaged as the ideal democratic forum began to seem more like Times Square, cluttered with ads for soap and coffee. Rather than elevating public opinion, advertisers pioneered techniques of manipulating it. Who else might be able to exploit such techniques? Many saw a link between the domestic on-air advertising boom and the rise of Fascist dictators like Hitler abroad. Tim Wu cites the leftist critic Max Lerner, who lamented that “the most damning blow the dictatorships have struck at democracy has been the compliment they have paid us in taking over and perfecting our

prized techniques of persuasion and our underlying contempt for the credulity of the masses.”

Amid such concerns, broadcasters were under intense pressure to show that they were not turning listeners into a zombified mass ripe for the Fascist picking. What they developed in response is, in Goodman’s phrase, a “civic paradigm”: radio would create active, rational, tolerant listeners—in other words, the ideal citizens of a democratic society. Classical-music-appreciation shows were developed with an eye toward uplift. Inspired by progressive educators, radio networks hosted “forum” programs, in which citizens from all walks of life were invited to discuss the matters of the day, with the aim of inspiring tolerance and political engagement. One such program, “America’s Town Meeting of the Air,” featured in its first episode a Communist, a Fascist, a Socialist, and a democrat.

Listening to the radio, then, would be a “civic practice” that could create a more democratic society by exposing people to diversity. But only if they listened correctly. There was great concern about distracted and gullible listeners being susceptible to propagandists. A group of progressive journalists and thinkers known as “propaganda critics” set about educating radio listeners. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, co-founded by the social psychologist Clyde R. Miller, with funding from the department-store magnate Edward Filene, was at the forefront of the movement. In newsletters, books, and lectures, the institute’s members urged listeners to attend to their own biases while analyzing broadcast voices for signs of manipulation. Listening to the radio critically became the duty of every responsible citizen. Goodman, who is generally sympathetic to the proponents of the civic paradigm, is alert to the off notes here of snobbery and disdain: much of the progressive concern about listeners’ abilities stemmed from the belief that Americans were, basically, dim-witted—an idea that gained currency after intelligence tests on soldiers during the First World War supposedly revealed discouraging news about the capacities of the average American. In the wake of “The War of the Worlds” panic, commentators didn’t hesitate to rail against “idiotic” and “stupid” listeners. Welles and his crew,

Dorothy Thompson declared, “have shown up the incredible stupidity, lack of nerve and ignorance of thousands.”

Today, when we speak about people’s relationship to the Internet, we tend to adopt the nonjudgmental language of computer science. Fake news was described as a “virus” spreading among users who have been “exposed” to online misinformation. The proposed solutions to the fake-news problem typically resemble antivirus programs: their aim is to identify and quarantine all the dangerous nonfacts throughout the Web before they can infect their prospective hosts. One venture capitalist, writing on the tech blog Venture Beat, imagined deploying artificial intelligence as a “media cop,” protecting users from malicious content. “Imagine a world where every article could be assessed based on its level of sound discourse,” he wrote. The vision here was of the news consumers of the future turning the discourse setting on their browser up to eleven and soaking in pure fact. It’s possible, though, that this approach comes with its own form of myopia. Neil Postman, writing a couple of decades ago, warned of a growing tendency to view people as computers, and a corresponding devaluation of the “singular human capacity to see things whole in all their psychic, emotional and moral dimensions.” A person does not process information the way a computer does, flipping a switch of “true” or “false.” One rarely cited Pew statistic shows that only four per cent of American Internet users trust social media “a lot,” which suggests a greater resilience against online misinformation than overheated editorials might lead us to expect. Most people seem to understand that their social-media streams represent a heady mixture of gossip, political activism, news, and entertainment. You might see this as a problem, but turning to Big Data-driven algorithms to fix it will only further entrench our reliance on code to tell us what is important about the world—which is what led to the problem in the first place. Plus, it doesn’t sound very fun.

The various efforts to fact-check and label and blacklist and sort all the world’s information bring to mind a quote, which appears in David Goodman’s book, from John Grierson, a documentary filmmaker: “Men don’t live by bread alone, nor by



“Object of Desire”
Ana Juan, September 1, 2008

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fact alone.” In the nineteen-forties, Grierson was on an F.C.C. panel that had been convened to determine how best to encourage a democratic radio, and he was frustrated by a draft report that reflected his fellow-panelists’ obsession with filling the airwaves with rationality and fact. Grierson said, “Much of this entertainment is the folk stuff . . . of our technological time; the patterns of observation, of humor, of fancy, which make a technological society a human society.”

In recent times, Donald Trump supporters are the ones who have most effectively applied Grierson’s insight to the digital age. Young Trump enthusiasts turned Internet trolling into a potent political tool, deploying the “folk stuff” of the Web—memes, slang, the nihilistic humor of a certain subculture of Web-native gamer—to give a subversive, cyberpunk sheen to a movement that might otherwise look like a stale reactionary blend of white nationalism and anti-feminism. As crusaders against fake news push technology companies to “defend the truth,” they face a backlash from a conservative movement, retooled for the

digital age, which sees claims for objectivity as a smoke screen for bias.

One sign of this development came last summer, in the scandal over Facebook’s “Trending” sidebar, in which curators chose stories to feature on the user’s home page. When the tech Web site Gizmodo reported the claim of an anonymous employee that the curators were systematically suppressing conservative news stories, the right-wing blogosphere exploded. Breitbart, the far-right torchbearer, uncovered the social-media accounts of some of the employees—liberal recent college graduates—that seemed to confirm the suspicion of pervasive anti-right bias. Eventually, Facebook fired the team and retooled the feature, calling in high-profile conservatives for a meeting with Mark Zuckerberg. Although Facebook denied that there was any systematic suppression of conservative views, the outcry was enough to reverse a tiny first step it had taken toward introducing human judgment into the algorithmic machine.

For conservatives, the rise of online gatekeepers may be a blessing in disguise.

Throwing the charge of “liberal media bias” against powerful institutions has always provided an energizing force for the conservative movement, as the historian Nicole Hemmer shows in her new book, “Messengers of the Right.” Instead of focussing on ideas, Hemmer focusses on the galvanizing struggle over the means of distributing those ideas. The first modern conservatives were members of the America First movement, who found their isolationist views marginalized in the lead-up to the Second World War and vowed to fight back by forming the first conservative media outlets. A “vague claim of exclusion” sharpened into a “powerful and effective ideological arrow in the conservative quiver,” Hemmer argues, through battles that conservative radio broadcasters had with the F.C.C. in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Their main obstacle was the F.C.C.’s Fairness Doctrine, which sought to protect public discourse by requiring controversial opinions to be balanced by opposing viewpoints. Since attacks on the mid-century liberal consensus were inherently controversial, conservatives found themselves constantly in regulators’ sights. In 1961, a watershed moment occurred with the leak of a memo from labor leaders to the Kennedy Administration which suggested using the Fairness Doctrine to suppress right-wing viewpoints. To many conservatives, the memo proved the existence of the vast conspiracy they had long suspected. A fund-raising letter for a prominent conservative radio show railed against the doctrine, calling it “the most dastardly collateral attack on freedom of speech in the history of the country.” Thus was born the character of the persecuted truth-teller standing up to a tyrannical government—a trope on which a billion-dollar conservative-media juggernaut has been built.

Today, Facebook and Google have taken the place of the F.C.C. in the conservative imagination. Conservative bloggers highlight the support that Jack Dorsey, the C.E.O. of Twitter, has expressed for Black Lives Matter, and the frequent visits that Google’s Eric Schmidt made to the Obama White House. When Facebook announced that it was partnering with a group of fact checkers from the nonprofit Poynter Institute to flag false news stories, conservatives saw another effort to censor them under the

guise of objectivity. Brent Bozell, who runs the conservative media-watchdog group Media Research Center, cited the fact that Poynter received funding from the liberal financier George Soros. "Just like George Soros and company underwrote the Fairness Doctrine several years ago," he said, "this is about going after conservative talk on the Internet and banning it by somehow projecting it as being false."

One lesson you get from Hemmer's research is that the conservative skepticism of gatekeepers is not without a historical basis. The Fairness Doctrine really was used by liberal groups to silence conservatives, typically by flooding stations with complaints and requests for airtime to respond. This created a chilling effect, with stations often choosing to avoid controversial material. The technical fixes implemented by Google and Facebook in the rush to fight fake news seem equally open to abuse, dependent, as they are, on user-generated reports.

Yet today, with a powerful, well-funded propaganda machine dedicated to publicizing any hint of liberal bias, conservatives aren't the ones who have the most to fear. As Facebook has become an increasingly important venue for activists documenting police abuse, many of them have complained that overzealous censors routinely block their posts. A recent report by the investigative nonprofit ProPublica shows how anti-racist activism can often fall afoul of Facebook rules against offensive material, while a post by the Louisiana representative Clay Higgins calling for the slaughter of "radicalized" Muslims was deemed acceptable. In 2016, a group of civil-rights activists wrote Facebook to demand that steps be taken to insure that the platform could be used by marginalized people and social movements organizing for change. There was no high-profile meeting with Zuckerberg, only a form letter outlining Facebook's moderation practices. The wishful story about how the Internet was creating a hyper-democratic "participatory culture" obscures the ways in which it is biased in favor of power.

The online tumult of the 2016 election fed into a growing suspicion of Silicon Valley's dominance over the public sphere. Across the political spectrum, people have become less trusting of the

Big Tech companies that govern most online political expression. Calls for civic responsibility on the part of Silicon Valley companies have replaced the hope that technological innovation alone might bring about a democratic revolution. Despite the focus on algorithms, A.I., filter bubbles, and Big Data, these questions are political as much as technical. Regulation has become an increasingly popular notion; the Democratic senator Cory Booker has called for greater antitrust scrutiny of Google and Facebook, while Stephen Bannon reportedly wants to regulate Google and Facebook like public utilities. In the nineteen-thirties, such threats encouraged commercial broadcasters to adopt the civic paradigm. In that prewar era, advocates of democratic radio were united by a progressive vision of pluralism and rationality; today, the question of how to fashion a democratic social media is one more front in our highly divisive culture wars.

Still, Silicon Valley isn't taking any chances. In the wake of the recent, deadly white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a slew of tech companies banned the neo-Nazi blog the Daily Stormer, essentially blacklisting it from the Web. Responding so directly to appeals to decency and justice that followed the tragedy, these companies positioned themselves less as neutral platforms than as custodians of the public interest.

Zuckerberg recently posted a fifty-seven-hundred-word manifesto announcing a new mission for Facebook that goes beyond the neutral-seeming mandate to "make the world more open and connected." Henceforth, Facebook would seek to "develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us." The manifesto was so heavy on themes of civic responsibility that many took it as a blueprint for a future political campaign. Speculation has only grown since Zuckerberg embarked on a fifty-state tour this summer to meet American Facebook users, posting photos of himself with livestock and unhealthy local delicacies. Those who think that Zuckerberg is preparing for a Presidential bid, however, should consider the emerging vectors of power in the digital era: for the man who runs Facebook, the White House might well look like a step down. ♦



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