

Saving Americans From the News

AMERICANS' TOXIC RELATIONSHIP WITH
THE NEWS AND HOW JOURNALISM CAN HELP

SPRING 2021



NON
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ION

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Jenny Chang, Nicole Swedberg, Grace Donahue, Hayley Buchholz, Danny Rivera, Henry Sauter, Jason Cohen, Martin Gurri, Jim Russell, Roland Mikhail, Lauren Bale, Richard Dale, Anthony Bartlett, Luke Burgis and the thousands of Americans who bared their anger, doubt, frustration, and confusion to us.

Finally, a special thanks to Morgan Hall, whose idea for this research study and irrepressible passion for the issue powered this journey.

Before you proceed

In studying Americans' relationship with the news, we must contend with the political beliefs and experiences of Americans.

In this report, you may see perspectives that hurt or anger you. Our intention as authors is not to present any point of view as right or wrong. We recognize everyone is on high alert for hidden political agendas, but you will not find one here. **What we are advocating for is an evolution in the way journalism discusses ideas.**

We invite you to read this piece in the same manner we wrote it: take your time, have an open mind/heart, keep doubt alive, and wrestle with things that bother you.

We look forward to your questions, challenges, and thoughtful critiques.

Letter from the Authors

This report sprang from desperation. 2020 hit hard and like many Americans we were feeling exhausted, defeated, and overwhelmed by the news media. Many of us felt terribly alone, and not just because we were trapped in our homes under quarantine. The world seemed to be unraveling, and having an open, humble, honest conversation about it all nearly impossible.

Turning on the news, logging on to the internet, or even opening publications we once found challenging, inspiring, and helpful was like stepping into a horrific hall of funhouse mirrors.

There's no question the issues we face as a nation are deep and at times very dark, but the state of the news had become an affliction unto itself. Rather than helping us make sense of the world, it was making everything more chaotic and confusing.

Over the years there have been huge efforts to strengthen the state of journalism, including work to understand and innovate on journalistic principles, practices, and business models. We owe a great debt to that work.

But as the trust in traditional media hits an all-time low¹ – and 1 in 10 Americans trust a random stranger more than mainstream news media organizations² – it's clear, for everyone's sake, we need more people running at the problem.

We tried to tackle this issue from a slightly different angle than those who cut their teeth in the profession. Rather than defaulting to the well-founded notions of what journalism should be, we began with a simple question: "What is hurting Americans' ability to make sense of the world and what can we do about it?"

We spent 2020 deep in conversation with Americans, journalists, and media luminaries and we tested our findings through a nationwide quantitative study.

Then came 2021. The events of January 6th make it easy to feel cynical. But, our conversations with Americans revealed that cynicism is too easy a response. We spoke to throngs of curious, empathetic, self-challenging Americans fighting to make sense of the world and it gave us a tremendous hope.

Our collective issues with the media won't be reconciled by one report, publication, or person. It will take a swell of people to forge ahead on these new paths. And reclaiming our ability to hear and see each other falls to each of us as individuals.

What we know for certain is there are millions of Americans begging us to try. What you'll read in the the following pages is their story.

With love and hope,

The Nonfiction Team

(1) 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer

(2) Nonfiction Research Journalism Study 2020 n= 1168 respondents

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PART 01

How Journalism Got Here

In part one, we take a quick look back at the little-known history of American journalism and the forces that have helped drive cycles of partisan press in our country.

The voices people turn to in order to make sense of the world today range from the AP wire to CNN and Fox News to Joe Rogan and strangers on Twitter. ***In a sense, we have all become journalists for each other.***

While this democratization of sense-making has had chaotic consequences, it ushers in an opportunity to rethink our collective standards for what defines “credible” sense-making.

The question we have to ask to get there: What are Americans' biggest frustrations with journalism and the news today?

PART 02

Why Americans Hate the News

In part two, we reveal that Americans' relationship with the news today operates more like addiction than consumption. As a major publication founder told us: *“90% of what is produced is garbage.”*

What Americans hate most about the news is narrative warfare – bias coming from all angles.

- 50% of Americans of all political persuasions are frustrated with bias in the news media coming from BOTH the left and the right.

This narrative warfare is pressuring Americans to pick sides they don't fully believe in.

- 27% of Americans have secretly doubted a political stance they've taken publicly
- 29% of Millennials have posted on social media just so people wouldn't think they were on the “wrong side” of an issue

Our image of each other as bloodthirsty partisans is, at least in part, based on a mirage. It's leaving millions of quiet Americans starving for something more.

A Summary of What You'll Read

PART 03

Americans Want Out of Narrative Warfare

In part three, we see that **80% of Americans want out of the narrative warfare**. But, to help Americans escape narrative warfare we must contend with the reality that a return to “just the facts” journalism will not save us. This is because campaigns of narrative warfare are not over “facts” at all, but rather the meaning of information; and narrative warfare rages on not because of a lack of truth, but for a lack of trust.

So how the hell should Americans decide who to trust? Any real effort to earn trust must address three common elements of narrative warfare:

1. **Contextless arguments:** 46% of Americans are frustrated with the difficulty finding journalism that tells the good and bad of both sides of an issue.
2. **Demonization of the other:** 73% of Americans say they want a type of journalism that shows empathy for the personal experiences and feelings of those the author disagrees with.
3. **Pressure towards extreme certainty:** 27% of Americans have felt pressure to take a stronger stance on a political/social issue than they really felt at the time.

PART 04

A New Test to Judge Our Sources & Ourselves

In part four, we set out to design a simple test, based on what we heard in the research, that would help inoculate Americans against narrative warfare.

We call this the Fair Play Test. Please read on to learn about these principles in more detail.

1. **Show Empathy for Those You Disagree With:** Did you take the pain of everyone involved seriously?
2. **Steelman Arguments:** Did you present the strongest version of an argument – in a way someone who holds that belief would be satisfied with – before countering that argument?
3. **Normalize Doubt:** Did you make it feel safe for people to express doubt, ask questions, or change their mind?

Our hope is that this test serves as a set of shared standards to hold old media, new media, friends on Facebook, our favorite podcast hosts, and ourselves more accountable in how we exchange ideas. We conclude this report by discussing four domains of society in which we hope to apply this test. We lovingly refer to them as **publications, podcasts, public schools, and parties**.

“Getting this wrong and letting it be wrong without trying to fix it is doom for humanity.”

Major Publication Founder, To Us

PART 01

How Journalism Got Here

01

CHAPTER 01

The Little-Known History of American Journalism in 4 Minutes

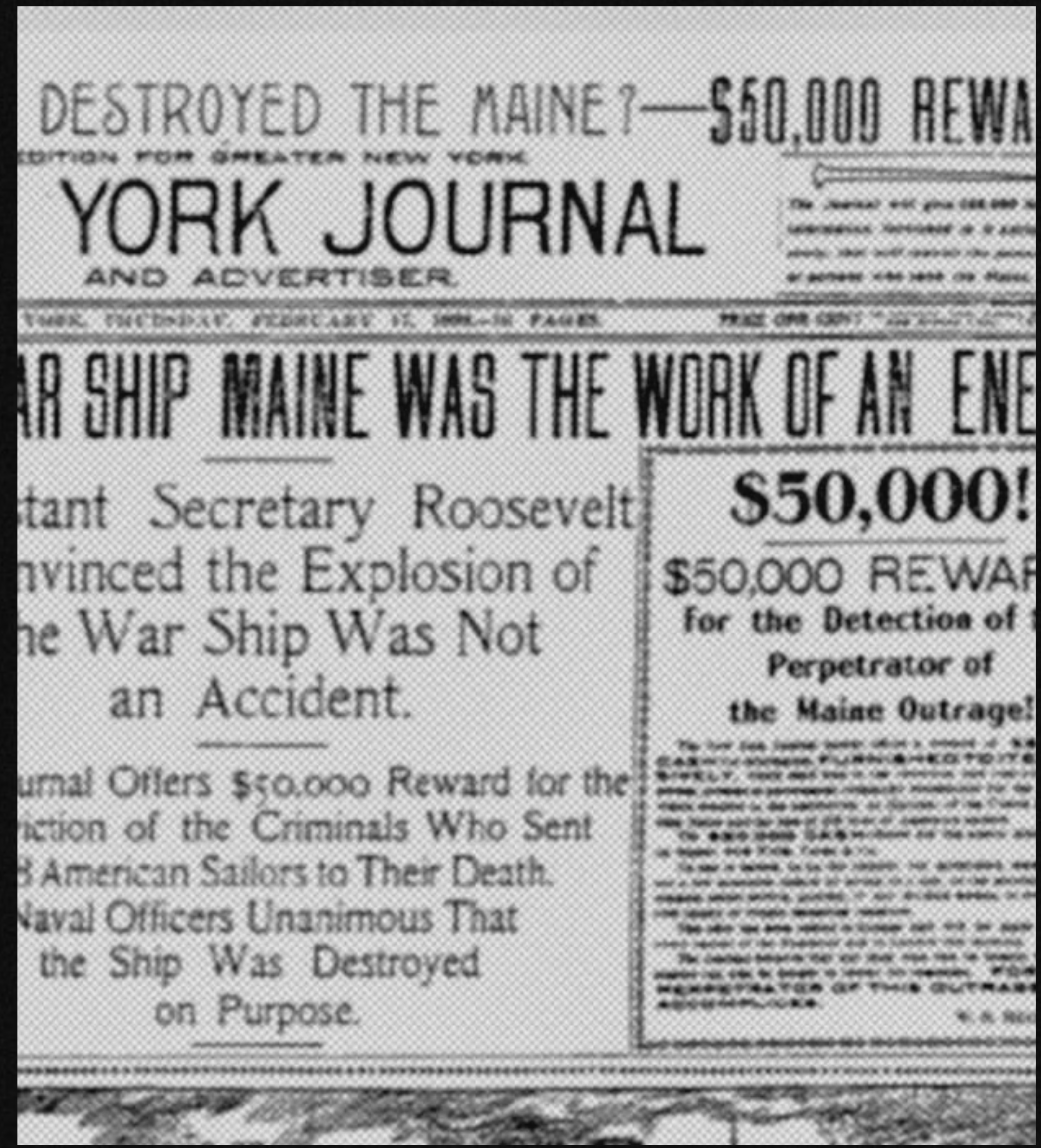
Before we began speaking to Americans about journalism, we explored some little-known history of journalism in America.

Journalism began as partisan opinion targeted to a niche audience.

Many Americans assume “objectivity” is the natural mode of the press, but for much of American history the press was proudly partisan. And notoriously nasty. *The Philadelphia Aurora*, an infamous anti-federalist publication from the 1790s, once called the president “old, querulous, bald blind, crippled, toothless Adams.”

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s newspapers were not something all people could afford, but those who could bought papers that echoed their political persuasion.

It wasn’t until the 1920s that “objectivity” began to catch on as a professional standard.



Source: “To Fix Fake News, Look To Yellow Journalism”, JStor Daily, 2016; “The Age-Old Problem of ‘Fake News’”, Smithsonian Mag, 2018; “Journalistic Objectivity Evolved the Way It Did for a Reason”, Time, 2018

Mass media created a business case for “objectivity.”

A wave of newspaper mergers and closures that began in the early 1900s and would continue through the rest of the century meant each city had fewer papers, and surviving papers had to appeal to a broader swath of the public.

The birth of television amplified this dynamic and helped build an environment that incentivized a type of journalism that would appeal to the **broadest possible audience** – strong partisanship would alienate a mass audience.

Objectivity suddenly made a lot of business sense, but it also became encoded into law with the 1949 passage of the Fairness Doctrine, requiring holders of a broadcast license to present controversial issues in a manner that was honest, equitable, and fair.

Which is why it shocked the nation when Walter Cronkite declared the Vietnam War unwinnable. For a journalist in 1968, taking a political stance was wildly controversial.



Cable news and the internet incentivized a return to partisan press.

The FCC revoked the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, but cable news, not constrained by the doctrine, had already begun to reshape the face of journalism.

Cable news created the opportunity to target people based on their political persuasions, but the internet exploded us into a new era of partisan press. With the internet, publications are able to find and grow audiences of niche persuasions.

It not only made niche partisan outlets possible again, but profitable.

However, not everything is driven by a sheer partisan agenda. Television and the internet put news in direct competition with entertainment, and partisanship became just as much entertainment as it was an explicit agenda.



The sense-makers have been democratized and we have all become journalists for each other.

The voices people turn to in order to make sense of the world today *range from the AP wire to CNN and Fox News to Joe Rogan and strangers on Twitter and your aunt on Facebook.*

Journalism has undergone a genre-bending transformation. For everyday Americans, news, journalism, podcasts, YouTubers, commentators, and Twitter accounts are all just inputs for how they make sense of the world. But at the same time, everyone is playing by their own set of rules and incentives. Arguably platforms like Facebook are now the biggest source of information in the world. It is, to put it politely, a clusterfuck.

Yet in this moment is an opportunity. An era of traditional gatekeeping is over, but in the chaos ***there's a chance to erect a new set of standards for credible sense-making that Americans will collectively define.***



THE QUESTION TO USHER IN NEW COLLECTIVE STANDARDS
FOR CREDIBLE SENSE-MAKING:

What are Americans' biggest frustrations with
journalism and the news today?

PART 02

Why Americans Hate the News

02

In Part two, we will explore how Americans' relationship with the news has grown exceedingly toxic; their behavior looks less like news consumption and more like addiction.

They are practically screaming in frustration, feeling caught in a crossfire of bias from the Right and the Left. This narrative warfare is tearing at the fabric of their relationships and sabotaging their ability to make sense of the world.

Narrative warfare pressures Americans to pick sides they don't fully believe in. What we see when we peel back the caricature of Americans as bloodthirsty partisans are people secretly harboring doubts, even about the opinions they espouse in public.

This is a nation hurting.

CHAPTER 02

Americans Have a Toxic Relationship with the News



It is well documented that Americans feel worn out by the news, but the roots of this toxic relationship run deep.

CONSUMING THE NEWS ONCE FELT LIKE AN ACT OF CIVIC GOOD.
Today, it may be our nation's least satisfying addiction.

31%

Compulsively check news throughout the day, jonesing for something exciting going on

21%

Use the news to procrastinate or distract themselves

18%

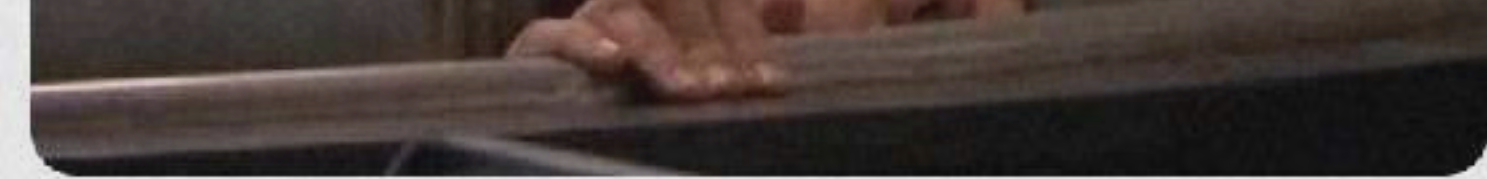
Read negative articles about public or political figures they don't like to feel a rush of pleasure

“How sad is it that there are all these people freezing to death in their homes in Texas and I’m *gleefully* reading all these quotes on Twitter about Ted Cruz being a fucking idiot.”

INTERVIEWEE, TO US

25%

OF MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z
DOOM SCROLL, OBSESSIVELY
READING ABOUT BAD THINGS
EVEN AS IT DESTROYS THEIR
MENTAL HEALTH.



12:33 AM · 8/27/20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

35 Retweets and comments 452 Likes



maybe: diane7
@dianelyssa

i see you. stop doomscrolling and go
do your skincare routine. right now. 😊



12:33 AM · 8/27/20 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

35 Retweets and comments 452 Likes



maybe: diane7
@dianelyssa

i see you. stop doomscrolling and go

31% of Americans have grown so fed up with the news, they've *quit it* for a period of time.



What drove them to quit?

"I WAS TURNING INTO SOMEONE I DID NOT WANT TO BE. MORE ANGRY, RACIST, IGNORANT AND CLOSED MINDED."

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

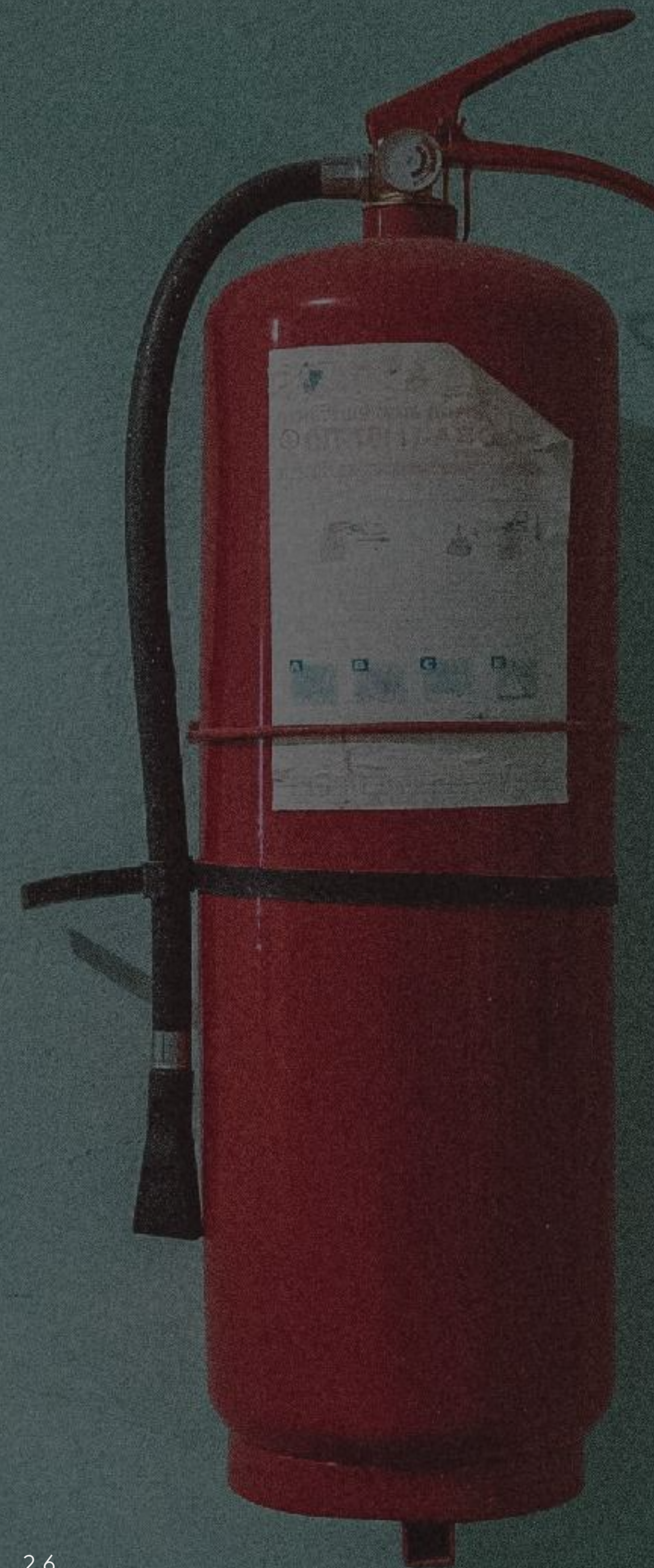
"I WAS OVERWHELMED BY THE SHEER DRIVEL THAT SOME NEWS OUTLETS PRODUCE. I NEEDED A BREAK."

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

**“IF THE FINANCIAL
POSSIBILITIES OUTWEIGHED
THE LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS,
THE MEDIA WOULD SHOW
A PUPPY SET ON FIRE.**

SERIOUSLY.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



SOMETIMES EVEN QUITTING THE NEWS ISN'T ENOUGH:

“My spouse is obsessive compulsive about watching the news on TV, then complaining about the stories and contributors.

I'd like to take a break from *him*.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

After observing the toxic relationship between Americans and news, we asked Americans a question they've been waiting to hear:

What would you like to say to the people in power at news media companies?

“Burn your entire existence to
the ground and start over.
You need to get back to basics.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

**“I would tell them to
go fuck themselves.”**

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

**“Beware of the monster
you've created. It needs
to be fed, and will turn
on you in a heartbeat.”**

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



Here's a letter to the New York Post
Ain't worth the paper it's printed on
Founded in 1801 by Alexander Hamilton
That is 190 years of continuous fucked up news

PUBLIC ENEMY, LETTER TO THE NEW YORK POST

“The industry has been so ripped apart. Success and failure are driven by all the wrong incentives. *90% of what is produced is garbage.*”

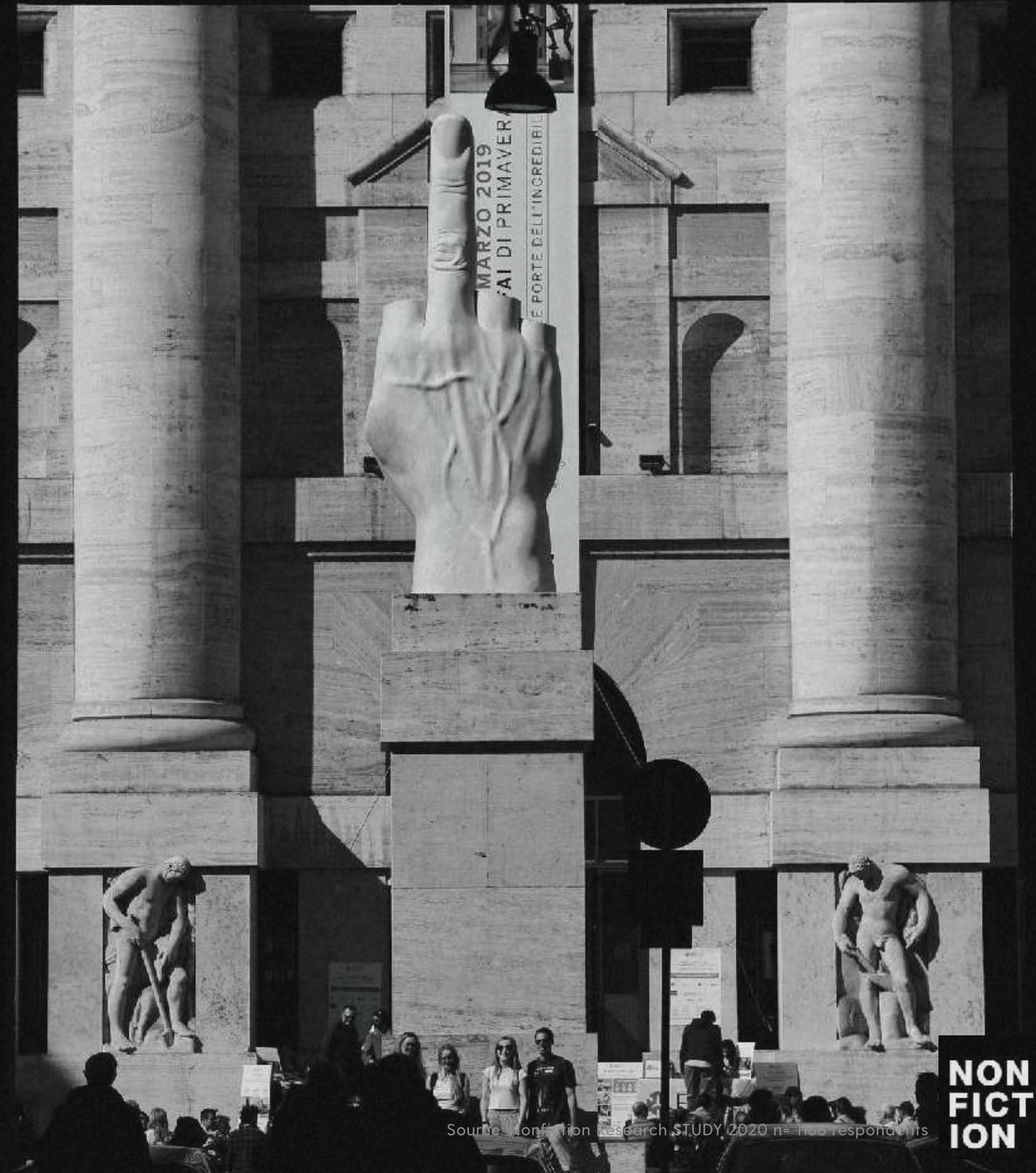
Major Publication Founder, To Us

CHAPTER 02

Conclusion

In this chapter we've seen Americans are screaming in frustration with the news. Their behavior feels less like consumption and more like addiction.

But, what really is at the core of their toxic relationship with the news? What do Americans hate most?



CHAPTER 03

What Americans Hate Most is the Narrative Warfare

AMERICANS ARE EXPERIENCING WHAT
COUNTER-TERRORISM EXPERTS HAVE TERMED

NARRATIVE WARFARE

“Most news is propaganda, narrative warfare for some agency and they aren’t good sources for sensemaking.”

DANIEL SCHMACHTENBERGER,
EVOLUTIONARY PHILOSOPHER, YOUTUBE

“[Narrative warfare] is not information warfare; this is warfare over the meaning of the information.

Information consists of facts — raw data. Narratives do not tell the facts. Narratives tell the meaning of the facts.”

Ajit Maan Ph.D., Counter- Terrorism Expert

FROM “NARRATIVE WARFARE”, 2018

18%

are frustrated by bias
coming from just the Left

50%

are frustrated by bias
coming from *both*
the Left and the Right

14%

are frustrated by bias
coming from just the Right

“I especially *hate* that NPR, PBS and the NYT haughtily position themselves as ‘the media high-ground’ when in fact their news is probably the *most slanted and self-righteous*, along with Fox News.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

“Everyone is just so dishonest with their representation on both sides.

I don’t even care to listen to any of it anymore.”

AN INTERVIEWEE, TO US

“I feel like [the media] is lying to us and people know it but they don't care because ‘cheeto man bad.’

Watching the news is a complete waste of time because it's just propaganda from both sides.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



This narrative warfare is even tearing at the fabric of our closest relationships.

Americans are increasingly turning these weapons on each other.



Twenty Percent

of Americans admit they have
sent a news article to someone
of different political beliefs
just to agitate them.

**“Trump made it way
easier to antagonize my father.**

**I used to have to get creative
and sit during the national anthem,
but now I can just
open CNN and fire off a news article.”**

30%

**confess the news
media has strained or
ruined a relationship.**



1 in 2

**of those Americans
blames a specific media
organization.**

“My very liberal daughter heard me listen to a news broadcast and *got angry* that I would listen to it.

She had no idea what my opinion was. I was wrong for just watching and listening.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

My best friend in the world watches CNN, MSNBC and gets her news from Facebook and Snapchat.

We can no longer have a political discussion or social discussion because she only believes one way. Now she says I am a Trumper (which I am not, never voted for him) and I am a racist and anti-female because I don't agree with some of the statements.

I am so sad as I miss her.

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

CHAPTER 03

Conclusion

In this chapter we see a nation that feels trapped in a crossfire of narrative warfare between the Left and the Right. The news is tearing at the fabric of their relationships and creating a lot of pain in their personal lives.

The question we have to ask:

ARE PEOPLE REALLY AS DIVIDED AS THEY SEEM?



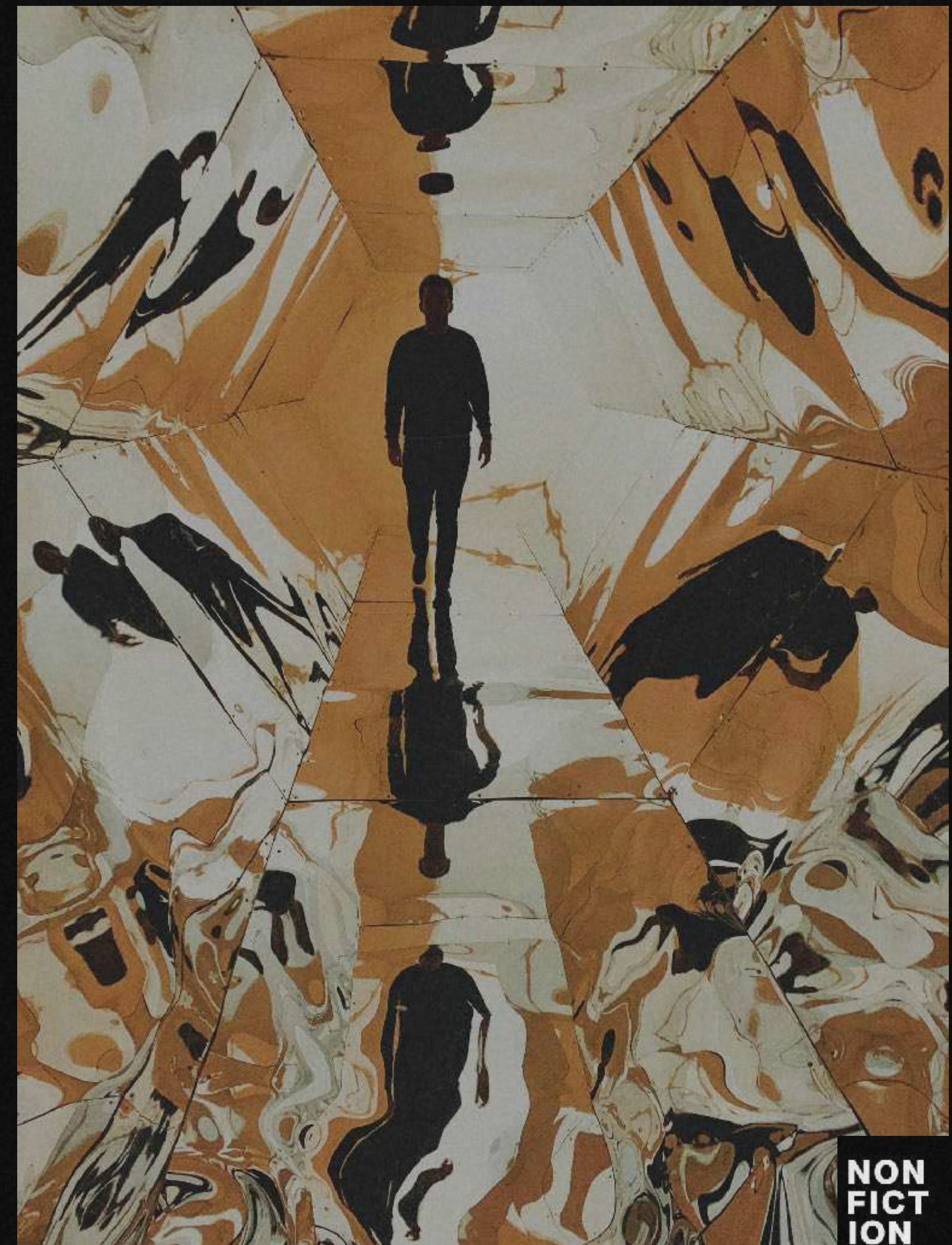
CHAPTER 04

**Narrative Warfare
Pressures Us to Pick Sides
We Don't Fully Believe In**

The polarization of the news has painted a portrait of America as a nation of irrevocably divided, bloodthirsty partisans. It's a narrative we see play out on television, news feeds, and social media day after day.

This duality puts a tremendous amount of pressure on Americans to pick a side and telegraph those sides publicly, when many secretly harbor doubt about what they believe. The pressure can feel so intense that some are even taking stances in public and on social media that are stronger or more extreme — or even different altogether — than the views they hold in private.

The news and social media are a *horrific hall of fun house mirrors* distorting our perceptions of each other and sabotaging our ability to make sense of the world.



27% of Americans have secretly doubted a political or social stance they've taken publicly.

**“I USED TO BE
CONSERVATIVE, BUT AFTER
THE POLICE SHOOTINGS IN
FERGUSON, I STARTED TO
CHANGE MY MIND
PERSONALLY, BUT WAS
SCARED TO EXPRESS THAT
OPINION PUBLICLY.”**

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



“I post things on my Instagram about Defunding the Police, but there are still questions I have that make me unsure about that position and no one can give me a good answer.”

INTERVIEWEE, TO US

**“I WAS RELIGIOUS AND TOOK
A RIGHT LEANING POLITICAL
VIEW BUT WAS NEVER SURE
I AGREED WITH THAT.
I DIDN'T BELIEVE IN TAKING
PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AWAY.”**

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US

**“I used to participate
in cancel culture and
it made me feel very
nasty and cult-ish.”**

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



29%

of Millennials admit they have posted on social media just so people wouldn't think they were on the **“wrong side” of a political or social issue.**



“With BLM, I was going to post a black square but then I saw something that if you post it, you’re a racist.

My group chat was scrambling to figure out if posting a black square meant you were racist or not.

I’M JUST TRYING TO NOT BE SEEN AS RACIST.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



“FOR INSTANCE, WITH THE #SAVEOURCHILDREN MOVEMENT...IF I DIDN'T PARTICIPATE, I WOULD BE RIDICULED AS A PEDO LOVER.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT, TO US



“The French thinker René Girard (1923 – 2015) discovered that at times of great uncertainty and crisis, the human propensity to imitate others accelerates — they engage in a form of contagious and subconscious imitation called ‘mimesis’. People would rather be wrong than alone.

He found that throughout history, those who were left with no side have been singled out as scapegoats and paid the price for the culture’s collective mania.”

Luke Burgis,
Author of *Wanting:*
The Power of
Mimetic Desire in
Everyday Life,
To Us

To put it simply, the emotional pressure to pick a side can feel exactly like what Guy Reffitt told his son before storming the Capitol on January 6th, 2021...

FOX4 NEWS

JACKSON REFFITT
SUSPECT'S SON

10:33
68°

FOX4

NON
FICT
ION

TV

“CHOOSE A SIDE OR DIE.”

FOX4 NEWS

FATHER TOLD SON "CHOOSE A SIDE OR DIE"

10:33
68°

FOX4

NON
FICT
ION

CHAPTER 04

Conclusion

In this chapter, we saw a crack in the portrait of Americans as bloodthirsty partisans.

Many Americans feel tremendous pressure to pick a side while secretly harboring doubt about what they believe.

This tension leaves millions of Americans silent and alone in their struggle to understand the world.



PART 03

Americans Want Out of Narrative Warfare

03

CHAPTER 05

“Just the Facts” Will Not Save Americans



eighty percent

of Americans want access to journalism that
“goes beyond the biased perspectives of the
Left and the Right.”

To help Americans escape narrative warfare,
we need to contend with 2 common misunderstandings.

1. CAMPAIGNS OF NARRATIVE
WARFARE AREN'T OVER
“FACTS”; THEY ARE OVER THE
“MEANING OF INFORMATION.”

2. NARRATIVE WARFARE
WAGES ON NOT BECAUSE
THE “LACK OF TRUTH”, BUT
THE “LACK OF TRUST.”

01

**CAMPAIGNS OF NARRATIVE WARFARE
AREN'T OVER 'FACTS'; THEY'RE OVER
*THE MEANING OF INFORMATION***

“We are mislabeling and therefore misunderstanding the phenomena.

We are not dealing with simply wrong information. We are dealing with weaponized information in story form. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be dangerous.”

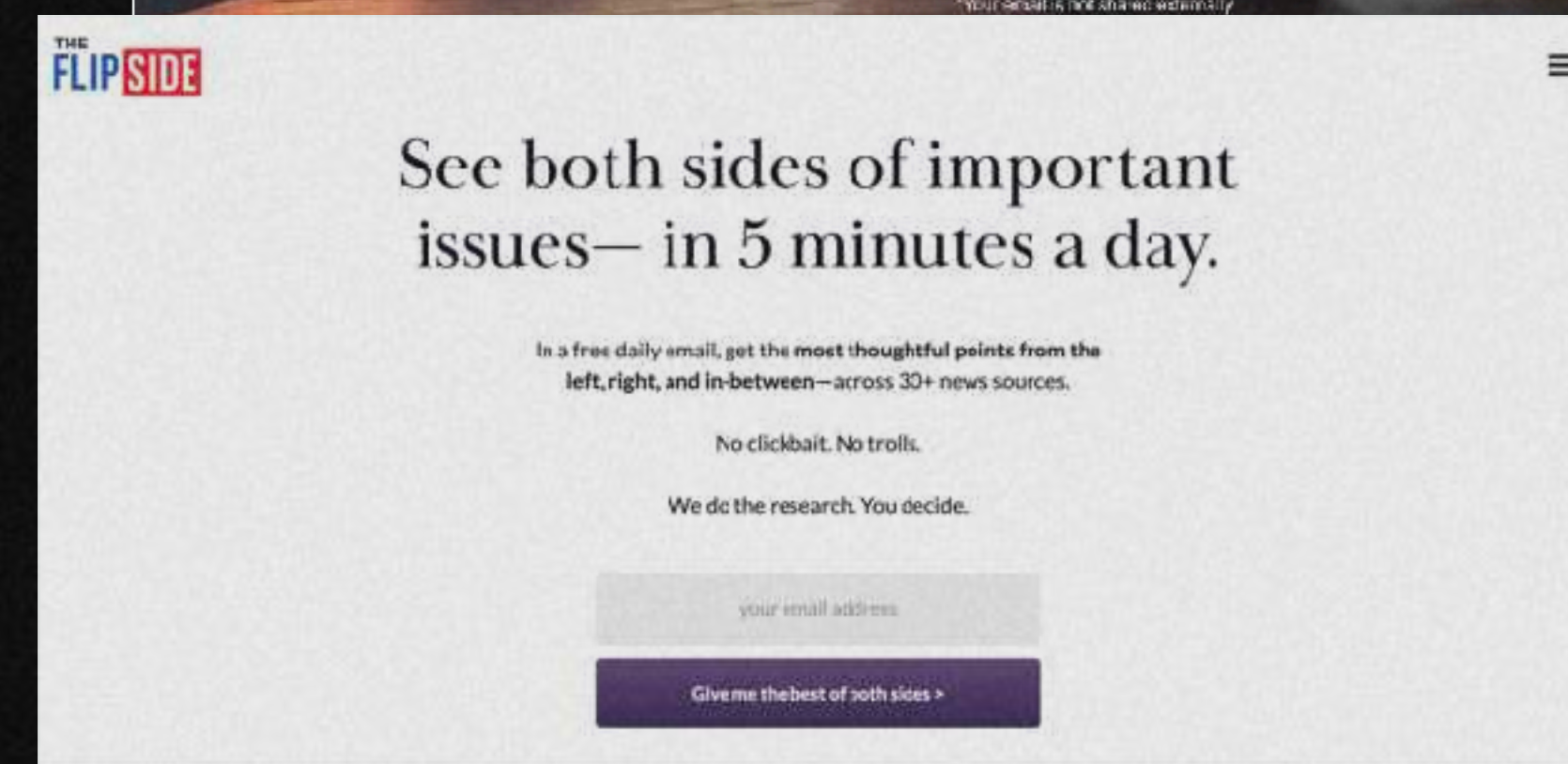
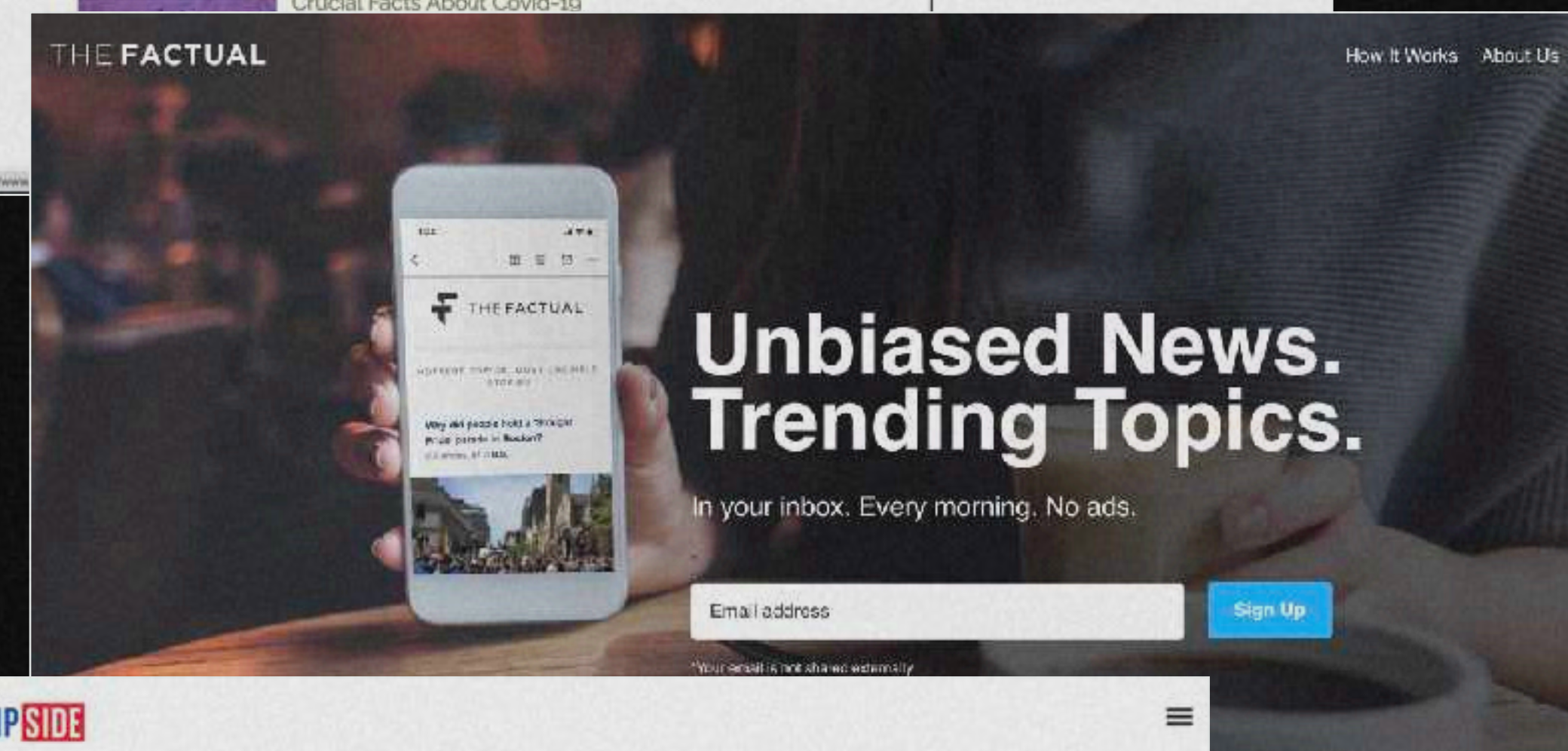
Ajit Maan Ph.D, Counter- Terrorism Expert

FROM “DISINFORMATION IS NOT THE PROBLEM AND INFORMATION IS NOT THE SOLUTION,” 2021

"Just the Facts" Journalism Isn't Enough

The first thing we typically hear from news-weary Americans is that, sick of their toxic relationship with the news, they now want "just the facts." And several news companies have popped up to provide either "just the facts" news or "facts from both sides" news.

However, there are severe limitations to this approach.



The Tensions in “Just the Facts” or “Facts from Both Sides” Journalism.

1. There are more than two sides to a story – binaries like “right vs. left,” “good vs. evil,” and “wrong vs. right” are convenient, but dangerously inadequate.
2. People say they want unbiased news, but 42% of Americans do not trust any media outlet to tell a story without a political agenda.
3. A journalism that reports “just the facts” or “facts from both sides” without trying to synthesize meaning and help Americans make sense of the world is derelict in its duty.



02

**NARRATIVE WARFARE RAGES ON, NOT
FOR A LACK OF TRUTH, BUT BECAUSE
OF A *LACK OF TRUST***

An Interview with Former National Security Analyst Martin Gurri

“A post-truth world does not mean people are just swallowing lies.

It’s a world in which there are no trusted authorities to settle factual disputes, narrative disputes or questions about what should we be talking about.”

An Interview with Former National Security Analyst Martin Gurri

“The key malefic question of our moment is: How do we get back authority?”

I believe it's not going to be some cosmic policy that gets passed by Congress and suddenly we're all happy again. It's going to be attempts in discrete areas to earn the trust of certain people from the bottom-up.”

Now the question is:

How the hell should
Americans decide who to trust?

ANY REAL SOLUTION TO EARN TRUST MUST ADDRESS
3 Major Hallmarks of Most Narrative Warfare

1. CONTEXTLESS ARGUMENTS

46%

of Americans are frustrated with the difficulty finding journalism that tells the good and bad of both sides of an issue.

2. DEMONIZATION OF THE OTHER

72%

of Americans say they want a type of journalism that shows empathy for the personal experiences and feelings of those the author disagrees with.

3. PRESSURE TOWARD EXTREME CERTAINTY

27%

of Americans have felt pressure to take a stronger stance on a political/social issue than they really felt at the time.

CHAPTER 05

Conclusion

In this chapter, we saw a return to “just the facts” journalism will not save Americans from narrative warfare because campaigns of narrative warfare are not over “facts”; but the meaning of information and narrative warfare rages on not because of a lack of truth; it is a lack of trust.

A more inclusive, democratic measure of trust must address the three hallmarks of narrative warfare.

So, what can we do about it?

PART 04

A New Test to Judge Our Sources & Ourselves

04

Based on what we heard in our research we set out to design a test that would help inoculate Americans against narrative warfare.

Our hope is that this test serves as the set of real world standards to hold old media, new media, friends on Facebook, our favorite podcast hosts, and ourselves more accountable in how we exchange ideas.

And that it helps us determine who, in this chaotic mess of voices, we should be listening to.

CHAPTER 06

The Fair Play Test



The Fair Play Test

1. Show Empathy for Those You Disagree With
2. Steelman Arguments
3. Normalize Doubt

1. Show Empathy for Those You Disagree With

Ask yourself: Did you take the pain of everyone involved seriously?

Empathy is the practice of identifying, understanding and acknowledging the pain, feelings and inner complexity of another human. It is a word that is severely overused and severely under-practiced.

It's easy to have empathy for people who believe what you do or benefit from the arguments you make. What's hard is to understand the emotions and personal experiences of those you disagree with. In today's world even "empathy" gets politicized – associated with "snowflakes" or the "tyranny of feelings." Our research shows people want conversation that doesn't treat logic and empathy as mutually exclusive and expresses it even when that might be controversial. Our goal is simple: to take the pain on all sides seriously and make an effort not to invalidate those feelings.

What this isn't:

Empathy is misunderstood. In the words of FBI Hostage Negotiator Chris Voss, empathy is not "about agreeing with the other person's values or beliefs or giving out hugs. That's sympathy." The notion of empathy asks you to acknowledge another person's feelings and understand, from their perspective, what is driving them. This isn't just some feel-good skill; neuroscience shows us there's a biological underpinning for why it's essential to any useful communication.

2. Steelman Arguments

Ask yourself: Did you present the strongest version of an argument — in a way someone who holds that belief would be satisfied — before countering it?

Americans are frustrated with the way arguments are misrepresented. To attack a deliberately misrepresented version of an argument is known as *strawmanning*. So what happens when you do the opposite?

Steelmanning: Find or build *strongest* possible version of an argument before challenging it. Even when confronted with a claim based on low-quality information, investigate what a stronger version of that claim might look like. This isn't about giving "false equivalency" to misinformed perspectives; it's about seeking what might be true in someone else's argument. You should be able to summarize their position back to them in a way that they feel is satisfying.

What this isn't:

Although this tool is commonly advocated for throughout the intellectual dark web, this is not a dog whistle for that brand of thought or the idea that logic trumps emotions. In fact, we believe steelmanning serves just as much to validate someone's emotions and lived experiences.

3. Normalize Doubt

Ask yourself: Did you make it feel safe for people to express doubt, ask questions, or change their mind?

In our research we heard echoes of extreme loneliness. Surrounded by images of each other as bloodthirsty partisans, many have felt compelled to pick sides they don't fully believe in or retreated into silence. Americans are afraid to ask questions and have the kind of honest conversations that allow people to work out what they believe and change their minds.

From these findings we believe credibility needs to involve normalizing doubt. This means making it safe to ask questions, change your mind, admit when you don't know, and dwell in the discomfort of uncertainty. Often one of the best techniques for doing this is admitting your own doubt.

What this isn't:

This principle does not downplay the importance of domain expertise nor is it advocating for ignorance. It's an acknowledgement that the challenges of our time are complex, no one person or entity will ever have all the answers, and parading around with arrogance or "pick a side" energy does serious harm to people's ability have a conversation and work out what they believe.

The Fair Play Test

1. Show Empathy For Those You Disagree With

Did you take the pain of everyone involved seriously?

2. Steelman Arguments

Did you present the strongest version of an argument – in a way someone who holds that belief would be satisfied with – before countering that argument?

3. Normalize Doubt

Did you make it feel safe for people to express doubt, ask questions, or change their mind?

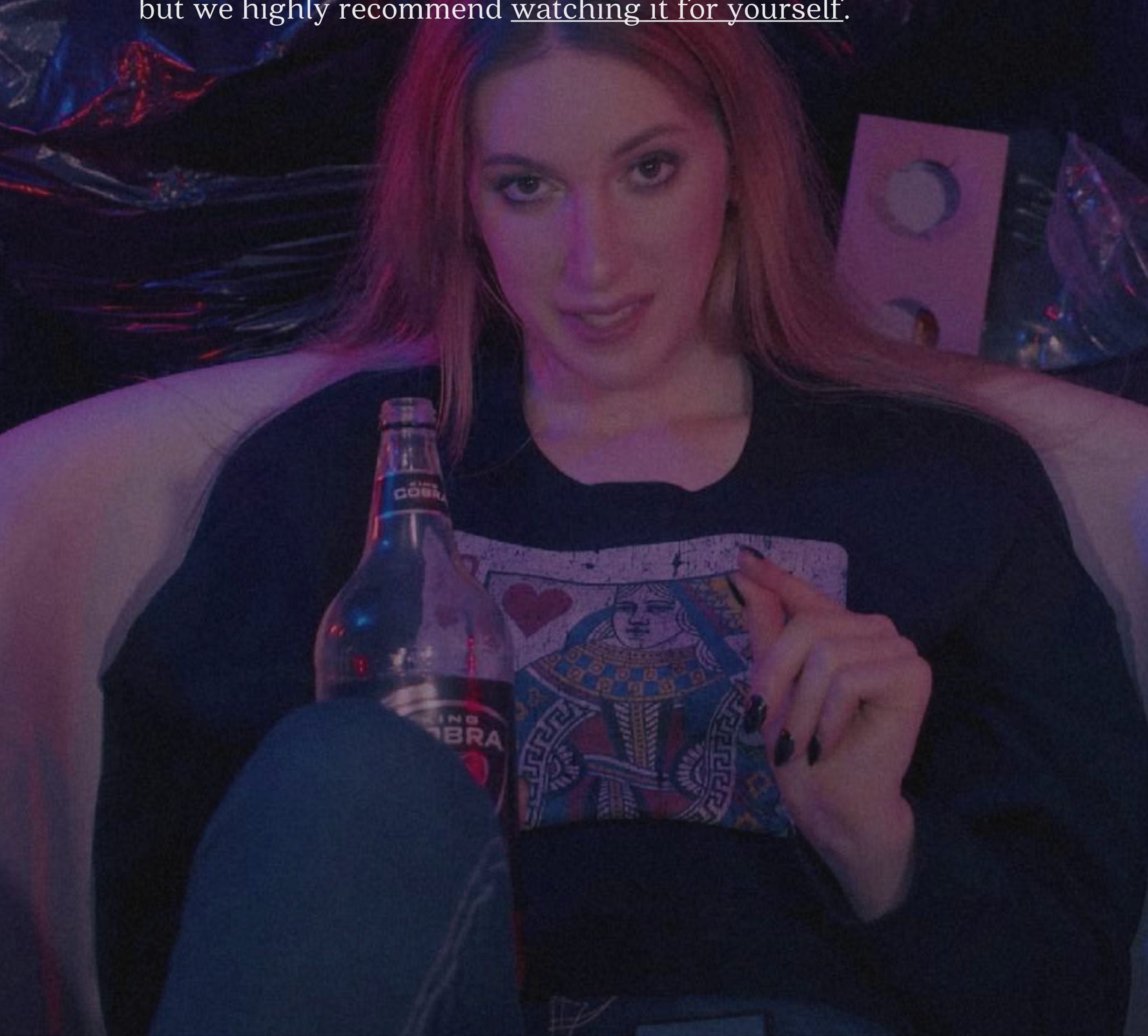
Example: ContraPoints

ContraPoints, the YouTube channel of Natalie Wynn with 1.19M subscribers and 13k monthly paying Patreon followers, is a strong example of someone whose approach plays by our test. Wynn creates extravagant, long-form video essays that explore social and political topics.

Comments on her videos reveal how powerful her work has been in inspiring people to engage with polarizing issues more deeply and even change their opinions.



We break down one of her most popular videos entitled “Canceling” which, on the surface, explores Contrapoints on Cancellation — but really is a deeper exploration of cancel culture. What you’ll see below are quotes that show how her approach aligns with our test, but we highly recommend [watching it for yourself](#).



1. Steelman Arguments

“The Me Too movement promised to use social media shaming as a way to topple sexually abusive men in power who couldn't be held accountable in any other way. The promise of canceling was that it was going to give power back to people who had none, and bring justice to prominent abusers. It's, in a way, the 21st century version of the guillotine—the bringer of justice, the people's avenger. But, also like the guillotine, it can become a sadistic entertainment spectacle. And I wanna make the case that we do have, well, a teensy bit of a Reign of Terror situation on our hands, gorg.”

2. Show Empathy

*“This was actually really fucking upsetting to me because **this person was clearly in a lot of pain**. They were having a panic attack because they were having a trauma trigger reaction to this conversation. And I kept telling them to leave the stream and take care of themselves but they wouldn't do it. So I had to block them and then later get in touch and make sure they were okay.”*

3. Normalize Doubt

*“I definitely do have anxiety about this. Like, I think I'm doing the right thing by not condemning Buck as truscum and evil but, I mean, **I could be wrong**.”*

...

*“This was a very one-year-on-hormones moment for me and **I've already moved on in my thinking**.”*

CHAPTER 07

Publications, Podcasts, Parties, and Public Schools

WE IMAGINE FOUR MAJOR DOMAINS

In Which To Use the Fair Play Test

1. Publications

As both a collective standard for Americans to hold their publications to and a blueprint to inspire new experiments in journalism.

2. Podcasts

As a credibility test for a new wave of journalists and creators who aren't backed by a big company, but are nonetheless powerful operators shaping our beliefs.

3. Public Schools

As a way to educate the next generation of children and inoculate them against the negative effects of narrative warfare.

4. Parties

As a compassionate standard for ourselves and our loved ones as we engage in conversations with each other at parties, family reunions, and online.

1. Publications

Our research found evidence of a sizable audience with an especially ideal temperament for journalism publications that operate on the principles of the Fair Play Test.

We believe there is huge opportunity for existing and new journalism publications to create journalism that plays by the principles of this test.

There is an Audience for Publications That Apply this Test.

We found 36M Americans who meet a high-bar litmus test as an ideal audience willing to pay for a new type of journalism. We call these 36M The Quiet Questioners and they meet three criteria:

1. **Self-Challenging.** They actively seek out arguments that challenge their own beliefs and opinions.
2. **Empathetic.** They want to understand and respect the experiences of people they disagree with.
3. **Willing to Change Their Minds.** They have changed their minds on an issue they were passionate about after learning new information.

2. Podcasts

There is a new wave of figures that function as journalists for millions of Americans. They don't have editorial teams and aren't backed by big companies. They are podcasters, YouTube creators, and TikTok stars. But as examples like Joe Rogan and his colossal impact prove, they have major influence over the American mind.

The Fair Play Test provides a more flexible way to judge these creators across a variety of different platforms and styles.

This Test Can Apply to One of the Biggest Influences on the American Mind.

Before inking a \$100 million deal with Spotify, The Joe Rogan Experience was clocking in at close to 190 Million downloads a month — soon after acquisition it rocketed to the most listened-to podcast on Spotify globally in 2020.

For comparison, that blows 60 Minutes' 9 million views per episode out of the water. Joe Rogan is arguably more influential than a whole host of hosts across major news networks.

3. Public Schools

Proposals have been swirling for years about making media literacy a bigger part of primary education. The authors of this report 100% support that effort, but we believe it's not enough to teach kids how to tell fake news from quality sources; we need to teach them to engage and exchange ideas in ways that help them navigate a confusing information ecosystem. Which is why we're advocating that this test be taught in schools nationwide.

This Test Would Deepen Current Approaches to Media Literacy.

There have been many fantastic organizations, like Media Literacy Now, that have popped up over the past few years to advocate for media literacy in schools. Most of these focus on discerning #fakenews from credible sources—which is ever more important—but as we learned from Ajit Maan, not enough. We need to teach children to wrestle with the arguments and stories they encounter.

4. Parties

These rules aren't just for publications, journalists, and podcasters — they are for each and every one of us to use in our day-to-day lives. We live in a world where we are becoming journalists for each other, and that's great! But, that also means we need to take on some extra responsibility in how we communicate.

Use this test to gauge the credibility of what Aunt Marge is spouting off at the BBQ, and perhaps use it compassionately to hold her and yourself more accountable in discussions with people in real life or online.

**This Test Can Make
Conversations
with Each Other
Less Toxic.**

28%

**of Americans say their
friends and family are more
trustworthy than most
mainstream news organizations.**

CHAPTER 08

Conclusion

We are at a critical point in American history — many today feel our democracy is on the edge of destruction. And most of America has lost faith in one of the seminal institutions of democracy: the press.

It's easy to feel disheartened. But, when we look out and see an audience of curious, empathetic Americans fighting to make sense of the world it gives us hope. Our collective issues with the media won't be reconciled by one report or publication. It will take a swell of people to forge these new paths. And reclaiming our ability to hear and see each other is going to fall on each of us as individuals.

But if there is one thing we can be certain of:

Americans are begging us to try.

Financial Disclosures & Methodology

Financial Disclosure:

Funding for this research was provided by Morgan Hall, a private citizen. Morgan was not permitted to approve findings throughout the research and did not have edit privileges over the report. Morgan does not stand to gain financially (or otherwise) from the publication of this report or her relationship with Nonfiction Research.

Methodology

Quantitative Methodology

Nonfiction Research's quantitative sample was collected over a one-week period in the summer of 2020 totaling 1,168 completed responses, using a 95% confidence level and a 3% margin of error based on the population of the US.

Our approach also utilizes a technique called "known sampling" in which the identity of respondents is verified for accuracy.



Thanks for reading.

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