

IDEAS MEDIA

## The Lies Are the Story in Today's Politics



People walk by the News Corp. headquarters in midtown Manhattan on September 21, 2023 in New York City. Rupert Murdoch has announced that he is stepping down as chairman of the board of both Fox Corp. and News Corp. and will be handing control over to his son Lachlan Murdoch, who will become sole chairman of News Corp. and will continue as the CEO of Fox Corp. Murdoch, 92, will be appointed chairman emeritus of each company and act as an adviser to his son. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

BY **BRIAN STELTER** NOVEMBER 14, 2023 2:24 PM EST

IDEAS

Stelter, former anchor of CNN's "Reliable Sources," is a special correspondent at Vanity Fair and the author of *Network of Lies: The Epic Saga of Fox News, Donald Trump, and the Battle for American Democracy*

**W**hen you write a book about Donald Trump and Fox News, you think a lot about lies.

Big lies about an election. Little lies about every topic under the sun. All manner of dishonesty and distortion. It can be uncomfortable. After all, journalists—like people in practically every other profession—are trained to focus on what's true, not what's invented or imagined or twisted beyond recognition.

But there is a lot to learn from the deception and disinformation that chokes American politics. Whether it is Trump running for re-election on a bogus "stolen election" premise, or it's Rep. George Santos admitting that he made up much of his life story due to "insecurity" and "stupidity," the falsehoods *are* the news.

I admit: It can be exhausting. For citizens of good faith who want to be informed, who just want to know what's real, all the lying can feel suffocating. But I have found that studying the liars has dramatically improved my understanding of the political universe.

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First, the lies aren't really about the lies. As Anne Applebaum, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, has observed, "sometimes the point isn't to make people believe a lie—it's to make people fear the liar." It's to assert power over reality.

Second, the point is, in the immortal words of former Trump adviser Steve Bannon, to "flood the zone with shit"—to overwhelm the press and the public with so much misinformation and disinformation that democracy can't function. Trump, despite his frontrunner status, is barely fact-checked anymore. He says so much, so wrongly, that fact-checkers are at a supreme disadvantage—just the way his team likes it.

Third, lying is contagious. Neuroscientists have studied how peoples' brains react when they lie over and over again for personal gain. In short: The more

they do it, the easier it gets. The results suggest a “slippery slope” where “small acts of dishonesty escalate into more significant lies,” Dr. Tali Sharot has [said](#).

After several months of work reconstructing the 2020 election period, when many Fox hosts and guests lied about the outcome, I have come to think of many political lies as a self-preservation mechanism. Falsehoods are often about protecting personal brands, political futures, and self-interests. I saw this over and over again while exploring the emails and texts that Dominion Voting Systems obtained in its defamation case against Fox.

Former Fox producer [Abby Grossberg](#), who sued the network earlier this year and won a \$12 million settlement, has seen this self-preservation instinct from multiple directions. In 2020, she was the producer of Maria Bartiromo’s Sunday morning talk show on Fox News, which wholeheartedly embraced Trump’s election lies. Trump hugged back by granting Bartiromo his first interview since losing—and he proceeded to cry “stolen” for the better part of an hour. They both delivered what Trump’s base wanted to hear, and Trump told her after the broadcast that he was happy with how it went. But Bartiromo had some doubts. She texted Grossberg and said, “I hope I didn’t blow it by not asking about Biden,” then wondered if they should have “just stayed the extra 5 minutes and talked about peaceful transition,” instead of ending the Trump interview and turning to a different guest. “To be honest,” Grossberg told her, “our audience doesn’t want to hear about a peaceful transition. They still have hope. And the vouchers”—I think she meant vultures—“would have declared it a concession.” That’s what Grossberg was saying at the time: Keep the audience watching by keeping (false) hope alive. Later, after alleging discrimination and other wrongdoing by Fox, Grossberg said Bartiromo was trying to preserve her own status at Fox by tying herself to Trump’s mast. Bartiromo’s cozy relationship with Trump gave her “power over Fox, and it protected her,” Grossberg [told TIME’s](#) Charlotte Alter. Bartiromo did not want to believe that Trump had lost, because it meant that she too had lost, in a way.

Ego has a lot to do with this. So does the desire to feel a part of a winning team. In a recent paper, political scientists Kevin Arceneaux and Rory Truex [found](#) that Trump’s 2020 election lie is “pervasive and sticky” and that Republican voters tend to “reward politicians who perpetuate the lie, giving Republican candidates an incentive to continue to do so in the next electoral cycle.” Why? Perhaps because, as Arceneaux and Truex wrote, the lie may have “buoyed” some Trump supporters’ “self-esteem.”

The human capacity for self-rationalization and bullheaded denialism can’t be overstated. As the historian Jon Meacham put it on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” earlier this fall, “the American Right has become unmoored from reality because of their devotion to this singular figure.” He didn’t even have to say who.

This is why I think psychologists should sometimes sit on cable news political panels next to campaign strategists—because experts who study human behavior for a living are best equipped to explain why public figures lie and why their fans reward, rather than punish, them for it.

During my [Network of Lies](#) research, one quote that stuck with me was an observation by Al Schmidt, the Republican city commissioner of Philadelphia, who fended off election deniers in 2020. “One thing I can’t comprehend,” he said, “is how hungry people are to consume lies and to consume information that is not true.” The forces of political polarization and negative partisanship created demand to be lied to, and the forces of capitalism generated plenty of supply.

Some of those suppliers might be in denial about what exactly they’re doing. As Fox Corp patriarch Rupert Murdoch himself said, while being deposed by Dominion, “it is not good for any country if masses of people believe in falsehoods.” He also agreed that Fox has a responsibility to tell the truth even when viewers don’t want to hear it. Imagine if Fox actually lived up to that responsibility.

Regardless, knowing why people think what they think; seeing why they choose comfortable lies over inconvenient truths; brings a blurry environment into sharp focus. Dismantling the disinformation campaigns and B.S. narratives that warp our politics doesn’t have to be dispiriting. It can be empowering.

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