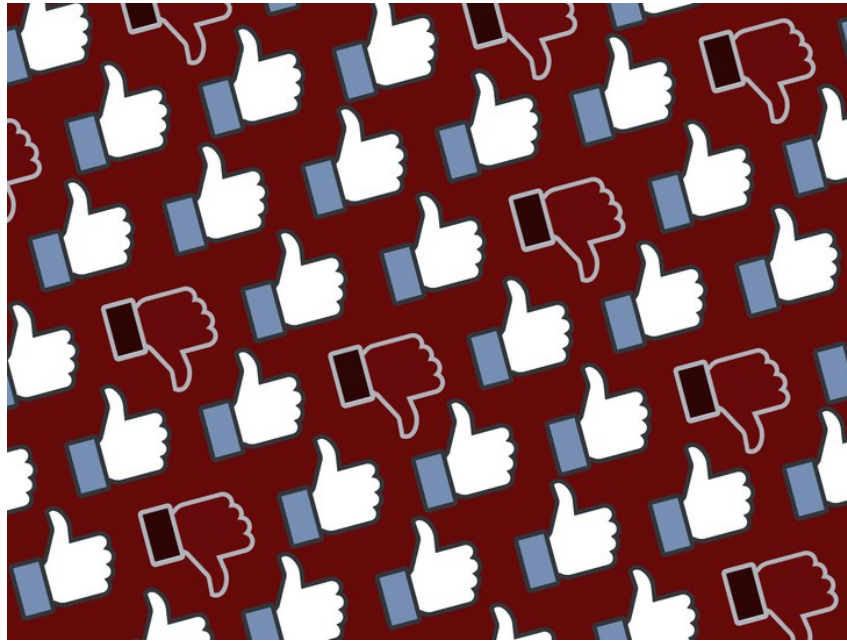


FAKE THINK TANKS FUEL FAKE NEWS—AND THE PRESIDENT'S TWEETS



WIRED

FAKE NEWS ISN'T just Macedonian teenagers or internet trolls. A longstanding network of bogus “think tanks” raise disinformation to a pseudoscience, and their studies’ pull quotes and flashy stats become the “evidence” driving viral, fact-free stories. Not to mention President Trump’s tweets.

These organizations have always existed: They’re old-school propagandists with new-school, tech-savvy reach. They’ve been ginning up so-called research for everyone from shady corporations to anti-LGBTQ groups to white supremacists for decades—they’re practiced, and their faux-academic veneer is thick and glossy. Which makes them harder to brush off than your garden-variety liar. “Fake think tanks use a mix of selected truths, half-truths, and downright fabricated stuff in order to manipulate people,” says Massimo Pigliucci, a philosopher at the City College of New York and author of *Nonsense on Stilts: How To Tell Science from Bunk*. “We don’t live in the age of post-truth. We live in the age of internet-enabled bullshit.”

So phony think tanks are hard to spot, let alone discredit and combat. Their mix of pseudoscientific camouflage, long-held political connections, and social media gets them influence—and a whole lot of clicks.

A Who’s Who of Propagandists

Propagandists undercut scholarship in service of an agenda. Anywhere science has become politicized is fertile ground for their trade. So you get anti-vaxxers on the left and climate-change deniers on the right. And because politicized science is often tied to business interests (looking at you, ExxonMobil), explicitly corporate-colluding organizations exist, too. The Employment Policies Institute is just an anti-minimum wage increase PR firm run by actual PR firm Berman and Co, which is run by notorious former corporate lobbyist Richard “Dr. Evil” Berman.

And because business interests and power-brokering cross borders, fake news think tanks don’t end with domestic groups: “You have this additional strain of foreign influences spreading disinformation,” says Lisa Graves, executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy. “Like bots from abroad retweeting factoids intermixed with fake news.” You’ve probably read some of Russia’s handiwork.

They also tend toward hate: There’s the white supremacist National Policy Institute and Jared Taylor’s New Century Foundation; the anti-LGBTQ work of the Family Research Council and American College of Pediatricians; and a whole slew of anti-immigrant groups. Three of the biggest—Federation for American Immigration Reform, the Center for Immigration Studies, and NumbersUSA—are intertwined, sharing a founder and funder in white nationalist John Tanton.

The Southern Poverty Law Center designates all the organizations in the previous paragraph as bona fide hate groups. And yet most—FRC, CIS and FAIR in particular—enjoy relationships with some powerful politicians. Trump himself has met with leaders of the anti-immigration groups, hired people from FAIR and the Family Research Council, and cited the anti-immigration groups’ erroneous figures.

How They Get Away With It

Which doesn’t necessarily mean Trump is willfully amplifying disinformation. “For the lay person who reads about these topics for 10 minutes a week, I don’t think there is an easy way to see who’s full of it,” says Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

That’s because phony think tanks are professional mimics, from the innocuous-sounding names—the Employment Policies Institute practically steals its name from the Economic Policy Institute—to their online presences. “It used to be you could trust a dot-edu or a dot-org,” says Heidi Beirich, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project. “Now some of the main hate sites are dot-orgs.”

Then there’s their “research methods,” which have a long history: “It’s the tobacco playbook,” says Graves. “When the tobacco industry was facing the health community’s concerns about the manifest consequences of smoking, they set to work debunking the science, and endowing people with expertise they don’t actually have.”

Once you have some talking heads (or online personalities, like NPI's Richard Spencer), you've got to give them something to say. Most of these organizations aren't doing their own studies, but repurposing others' work. For some, it's cherry-picking the most convenient data points. "The anti-vaxxer movement bases its claims largely on a single, discredited and retracted paper," Pigliucci says, "And simply ignores dozens upon dozens of scientific papers that don't fit their preferred narrative."

Others comb through many papers to construct a new narrative. The Family Research Council does quite a bit of that, as does the homophobic American College of Pediatricians (which doesn't call itself a think tank). "We internally assemble and analyze peer-reviewed literature," says Lisa Hawkins, the ACPeds' executive administrator. "This is less susceptible to bias since we do not create the research design or conduct the actual research."

Total baloney: "If everyone is on the same page, all the peer review internally won't matter," says Nowrasteh. In other words, since everyone in the group all starts from the same viewpoint—gay people are bad and dangerous—that's what they see as they "assemble" (read: cobble together and mis-contextualize) peer-reviewed literature. Which is how FRC and ACPeds came to assert homosexuality is connected to pedophilia, even though none of their source material agreed.

The masters of mis-contextualized stats? Those anti-immigration groups. "I've never had to republish my numbers because they were wrong," says Steven Camarota, director of research at CIS, the think-tank arm of the Tanton trifecta. "But you could interpret them in different ways, and the problems may or may not be due to immigration." Seems legit. And that's how they've seeded almost every immigration myth we debunked here.

But here's the thing. Legally speaking, these think tanks are as legitimate as Heritage or Brookings: think tanks don't have a regulatory agency. Many—NPI, EPI, ACPeds, CIS, the New Century Foundation, FRC—are even tax exempt, registered as 501(c)3 non-profits like most legitimate think tanks. "So they've been able to convince someone at the IRS that what they do is educational," says Donald Abelson, a political scientist at the University of Western Ontario who studies think tanks. "And the only time the IRS gets involved is if they violate 501(c)3 regulations by showing overt partisanship."

Even mainstream think tanks only *just* following this rule, finding loopholes in the tax code for partisan breakaway organizations like the Center for American Progress Action Fund or Heritage Action for America. "The term 'think tank' has become so diluted over the years," says Abelson. "It has created additional space on the American political landscape for these types of organizations to emerge and gain notoriety."

How They Gain Power

Most of these organizations are just hate groups with a dozen employees sitting in a tax loophole. But that doesn't mean their reach is limited—it's quite the opposite. "Their

disinformation has been weaponized through search algorithms,” says Beirich. “Think-tank white supremacist organizations have generated enough material that a search topic like ‘black on white crime’ is dominated by their propaganda. That’s what happened to Dylann Roof, and how Trump ended up tweeting those false statistics.”

Their content plays well on social media. “Misinformation and fake news triggers hot cognition — it bypasses your focus on accuracy and goes directly to your feelings,” says Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at UC Riverside who studies engagement with media and politics online. “If the misinformation confirms their prior policy position, they are far more likely to say its accurate.”

Which these organizations know, and exploit. “There is one basic reason why CIS is influential,” Camarota says. “It’s that there’s nobody else criticizing immigration in a thoughtful way. It’s like we’re the best hockey player in Ecuador.” When you carve out a niche supplying confirmatory information you know people are looking for, it doesn’t matter if you’re right or not. And that extends beyond arguments happening on your uncle’s Facebook feed, because appealing stats and buzzwords are politically expedient, too. “I get contacted by Congressional staffers all the time,” Camarota says. “We have a good relationship with Senator Jeff Sessions, so I’m hoping that we will play a very substantial role in informing and influencing policy.”

According to Abelson, think tanks aligning themselves with an ascendant political figure is their boat to the mainstream. That’s what Heritage did with Ronald Reagan, and what these groups are doing with Donald Trump—so far, successfully. “Look, people connected to these groups are going to be in the White House. Kris Kobach is deciding on immigration policy and he’s spent the last ten years deep in the heart of FAIR,” Beirich says. “That’s the ultimate reach.” And with no regulatory agency, and a consistent campaign to delegitimize mainstream media, few mechanisms exist to keep these groups in check.

