
Fwd: The Power of "Again"

From Tom Schneider <schneiderthomasw@hotmail.com>

Date Tue 12/17/2024 5:29 PM

Sent from my iPhone

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From: The Weekly Sift <comment-reply@wordpress.com>

Date: December 9, 2024 at 9:26:15 AM CST

To: schneiderthomasw@hotmail.com

Subject: The Power of "Again"

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The Weekly Sift

The Power of "Again"



By [weeklysift](#) on December 9, 2024

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But the responses those false stories raise linger as if they were true.

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Something I've been struggling with since the election is: Why didn't Kamala Harris' message get through?

The majority of Harris-campaign criticism I've read is of the form "She

...the majority of her campaign speeches... she should have talked about X instead of Y." Kitchen-table issues instead of trans rights, centrist issues instead of far-left issues, and so forth. And typically, if you look at the actual content of her speeches and ads, the answer is: "She did, but nobody paid attention."

Which raises the question: Why not?

One answer (which commenters have repeatedly criticized me for not highlighting) is that she's a Black woman, so it's easy for our sexist and racist culture to discount whatever she says. And that's true up to a point, but I doubt it hits the heart of the matter, because I was already noticing the same problem with the Biden campaign: He never got credit for the jobs created by his infrastructure bill, for example, or for lowering the cost of prescription drugs. You can say, "He should have talked about that." But when he did, no one listened.

I also think the racism/sexism interpretation suggests a too-easy solution: We can just nominate a White guy like Gavin Newsom next time, and we'll be fine. But I doubt that's true.

A related problem is why Trump could tell obvious lies, get debunked, and keep telling those lies with positive effects. Even people who knew the truth continued believe the point the lie was making. I think we need to understand how that works.

The critical relative. I want to propose a theory based on scaling up something you may have observed in your personal life.

Imagine you have a relative who for many years has criticized you in some unfair way: You're stupid, you're ugly, you're selfish, or something like that. Picture a parent, a sibling, or an annoying older cousin who's been putting you down since you were both kids.

So you go to a family gathering, and as you walk in you hear that relative

saying things that sound just like the unfair criticism. *Somebody* is being stupid, ugly, selfish -- and you're sure it's you.

But as you walk up ready to give that relative a piece of your mind, something in the conversation makes you realize *they're not talking about you at all*. So if you enter the conversation and cut loose, you'll just make a fool of yourself.

Now think about how you feel: You have no cause for offense. Nobody has insulted you. But do your emotions stand down?

Probably not. Even though the goad that raised those emotions was a complete misperception, nonetheless they have been raised. Most likely, you'll be spoiling for a fight the rest of the day.

I think that's what happened in the campaign.

Preexisting narratives. The most powerful propaganda message is "This thing you already know about is happening *again*."

What's insidious about this message is that it's almost impossible to debunk. Ostensibly it's a news story: Something supposedly has just happened. So an objective news source might try to debunk it by demonstrating that the "something" in question *didn't* happen.

But that doesn't work because it doesn't address what's really being communicated. The "things you already know about" that the news story brought to mind are not explicitly in the story, so they're not touched by the debunking.

I think this requires an example: the Haitian immigrants who were supposedly "eating the dogs ... eating the cats" in Springfield, Ohio. It just flat out wasn't true, and every piece of "evidence" supporting the

story was either made up or repurposed from some other event. (The photo that supposedly showed a Haitian carrying off a dead goose

wasn't of a Haitian, it wasn't from Springfield, and the guy was clearing roadkill, not returning from a successful goose-hunt.)

So as a news story, eating-dogs-and-cats was completely debunkable. But the debunking didn't stick: Trump and Vance [continued to refer to it long after it had been proven false](#).

But *why* didn't the debunking stick? In this case, the "thing you already know" -- at least in TrumpWorld -- is that *illegal immigrants are threatening your way of life*. Haitians eating people's pets isn't the beginning of this issue, it's just more of it. If you've been paying attention to Fox News or Truth Social or right-wing podcasts, you've heard *hundreds* of examples of how illegal immigrants are threatening your way of life. This one isn't strictly true? So what?

To truly debunk the story in the minds of its target audience, you would have to identify what they think they already know and the incidents they think establish their knowledge -- and debunk *all* of them. Obviously, that can't be done, both because the assignment itself is impossible, and because even if you succeeded, nobody would have the attention span to process everything you'd need to tell them.

Second example: The "trans" Olympic boxer who was beating up women in the Olympics. Again, [completely false](#). The boxer was from Algeria, a Muslim-majority country where trans isn't recognized as a thing. Imane Khelif's birth certificate identifies her as a woman, and she's never been anything else. An Algerian with a male birth certificate who was claiming to be female would most likely be in prison, not on the Olympic team.

All those facts were easily available to anybody who wanted to check.

But so what? You are already supposed to know that *men claim to be women so they can cheat in sporting events, and men posing as women put real women in physical danger*. Again, the people who believe these things also believe that they've seen dozens and dozens of examples --

the great majority of which are probably also either [objectively false or wildly exaggerated](#). But what can you, the objective mainstream journalist, do about that? You weren't there when this base of misleading examples was laid down, and you're not going to reverse it with one news story.

So even after the claim was known to be false, [Trump went on making it](#), presumably because he believed it was working for him.

The impact of "it's happening again" is to bring back to mind people's general impression that this kind of thing happens all the time. And that impression continues to feel fresh even after the particular story turns out to be false.

Or remember when [President Biden said Trump voters are "garbage"](#)? He was clearly trying to say that the Trump campaign's racist rhetoric was garbage, but -- surprise! -- things Biden tries to say often come out wrong. But never mind that -- instantly this became a scandal *for Harris*, who hadn't said anything remotely similar.

Think about why: Trump voters already think they know that *elite Democrats look down on them*. And here it was, happening *again*. It brought back Hillary's deplorable remark (which also [wasn't as bad as you probably remember](#)) and countless other moments when Fox News has told them that Democrats were insulting them.

Ambient informaton. The it's-happening-again phenomenon is related to the problem of [ambient information](#) that I talked about [three weeks ago](#).

The communications researcher Pablo Boczkowski has [noted](#) that people increasingly take in news by incidental encounter—they are

"brushed by the news" rather than by seeking it out. Trump has

“rubbed by the news”—rather than by seeking it out. Trump has maximized his influence over networks that people rub against, and has filled them with information that, true or not, seems all of a coherent piece.

The upshot is that when many people hear some meme like “eating the dogs”, they don’t make a serious attempt to figure out whether or not it refers to something that actually happened. Instead, they’re thinking about whether it “sounds right”. How well does it fit into a pattern with all the other news they’ve rubbed up against?

You can say that people just *shouldn’t* think this way, but in the meantime we have to deal with a world where many *do*.

And that seems to require a completely different form of campaigning and a different form of journalism.

In traditional political and journalistic thinking, ethical campaigning and objective journalism go hand-in-hand: Your candidate is right on the issues, you collect the facts and examples that show your candidate is right, the media gives that information preference over conflicting information based on lies, and the public eventually gets the message.

But if things ever really worked that way, they don’t any more, at least not for a number of voters large enough to decide close elections.

And if Democrats can’t figure out how to address this problem, I don’t think nominating a White man or targeting Latinos with more effective ads is going to do the trick.

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'We're watching mass delusion happen': Trump's return to White House brings cascade of lies

In first week in office, president has made false claims on topics from immigration and economy to Panama canal



David Smith in Washington



Donald Trump speaks after his inauguration in Washington DC on 20 January 2025. Photograph: REX/Shutterstock

Donald Trump had been US president again for less than 15 minutes when he made his first factually dubious claim.

"The vicious, violent and unfair weaponisation of the justice department and our government will end," he said **early in his inaugural address**. There is no evidence that former president Joe Biden ordered the justice department to prosecute Trump and no violence took place.

The return of Trump to the White House for his second presidential term is also the return of what one critic called "**America's liar-in-chief**". His first week in office brought a cascade of false and misleading claims about immigration, the economy, electric vehicles, the Panama Canal, his election defeat in 2020 and the January 6 insurrection that followed.

Some see the brazen embrace of mendacity as both habitual and strategic.

"It's a continuation of Donald Trump's brand," said **Tara Setmayer**, a former Republican communications director on Capitol Hill. "He knows that sunlight is the best disinfectant so he's going to continue to lie to mask what he's doing. If you can undermine institutions and credible sources of information, you can get away with lying and deceiving people. We're watching that mass delusion happen right before our eyes in the Trump administration 2.0."

During his first term as president, Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims over four years, according to **a count by the Washington Post**. He maintained a similar pace during last year's presidential election campaign. On Monday, as he was sworn in for a second time at the US Capitol in Washington, he made clear it will be business as usual.

Trump said **in his inaugural address** the US government "fails to protect our magnificent, law-abiding American citizens but provides sanctuary and protection for dangerous criminals, many from prisons and mental institutions that have illegally entered our country from all over the world".

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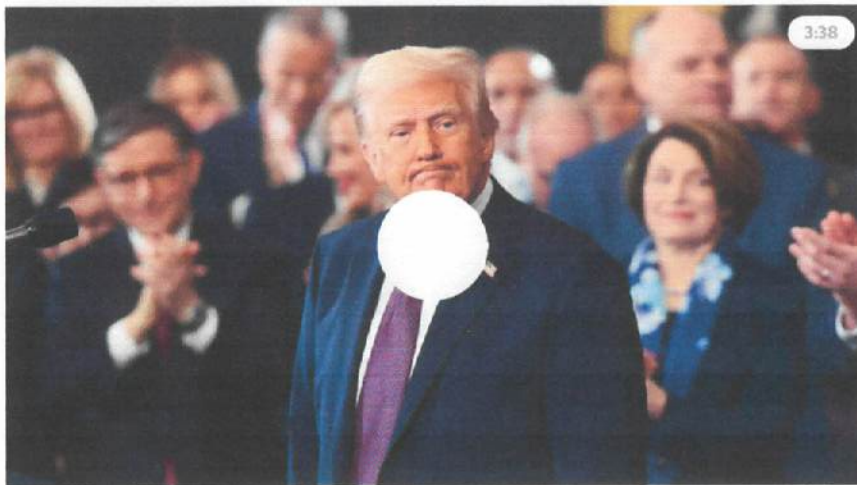


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Factchecking Trump's inauguration speech - video

The 47th president also promised to direct his cabinet to defeat “record inflation” and rapidly bring down costs and prices. Inflation peaked at 9.1% under Biden in June 2022 but has been much higher in other historical periods, such as a more than 14% rate in 1980.

In discussing his desire for the US to **take back the Panama Canal**, Trump said: “American ships are being severely overcharged and not treated fairly in any way, shape or form, and that includes the United States navy. And, above all, China is operating the Panama Canal.” Officials in Panama have denied Trump’s claims that China is operating the canal and that the US is being overcharged.

Shortly after the inauguration ceremony, the onslaught against reality continued. In remarks to an overflow audience at the Capitol’s Emancipation Hall, Trump claimed: “2020, by the way, that election was totally rigged.” Authorities who reviewed the election - including Trump’s own attorney general - concluded **the election was fair**.

Trump alleged that then House speaker **Nancy Pelosi** “turned down the offer of 10,000 soldiers” on 6 January 2021, when a violent mob stormed the US Capitol. Yet he issued no such order or formal request for National Guard troops before or during the rioting.

The president asserted that Biden had pardoned “what is it, 33 murderers, absolute murderers, the worst murderers. You know, when you get the death sentence in the United States, you have to be bad.” Biden **announced last month** that he was commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 people on federal death row; a commutation is not a pardon and does not exonerate the person.

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Trump continued to fire off misleading assertions, wild exaggerations and blatant lies all week in a series of freewheeling exchanges with reporters. In a Fox News interview in the Oval Office he sought to explain his blanket pardon of January 6 rioters by dismissing violent attacks on police as “**very**

minor incidents”.

Trump also used the interview to repeat a false claim that California governor Gavin Newsom and other officials refused to provide water from the northern part of the state to fight fires. He falsely claimed that Newsom prioritised the preservation of endangered fish over public safety.

Even the White House website has been compromised. Among the claims on **Trump's official biography** are that he won “a landslide victory” last year and he “defines the American success story”. But the site leaves out what might be Trump’s “big lie” that he won the 2020 presidential election, stating he “won a second time despite several assassination attempts and the unprecedented weaponization of law fare against him”.

But while fact-checkers continued to hold Trump to account, Republicans seemed less willing than ever to correct the record while rightwing influencers were eager to amplify his falsehoods in what is now a fragmented media ecosystem. The leaders of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and X attended his inauguration; Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg recently announced that the platform will **abandon third party fact-checking**.

Kurt Bardella, a Democratic strategist and media relations consultant, said: “If there’s any lasting impact from Donald Trump’s time on the political stage it’s that we live in a world now where you can just make up your own facts and truth is how ever you decide to to bend it.

“There are content creators and content machines that exist solely for the purpose of laundering anything that Donald Trump says and making it true to a certain degree. It’s a play off the [Richard] Nixon quote: if the president does it, it is legal; well, if the president says it, it’s true. That’s the world that we live in now.”

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