



Trump supporters rallying in Baltimore in September. While there was lots of fake news on social media, the outcome was stunning in the real world. While there was nothing presidential about Trump's campaign, he won the presidency. Flickr photo.

The Trump Tsunami

Jeremy Kinsman

The factors that converged to produce Donald Trump's previously unthinkable election victory weren't so much a perfect storm as a tsunami of discontent among certain voters, dissatisfaction with the Democratic alternative and the ultimate manifestation of a truth our culture has failed to reckon with for a decade: that the internet has been not the great democratizer it was supposed to be but rather just the opposite.

Donald Trump's election as American president was a political tsunami of unprecedented force. His unpredictability and volatility could exacerbate the apparent anger of much of the electorate,

or appease it. But a vastly changed media and information ecosystem that enabled him to win the world's most powerful office with disinformation and fake news has exposed vulnerabilities for democracy, in the U.S.

and abroad. As historian Neal Gabler warned on Bill Moyers' website: "A democracy relies on truth. Fake news is an assault on democracy."

Others caution against over-reaction, amid a tendency to "normalize" the event and indeed the incoming president himself. As Barack Obama's national security adviser Susan Rice put it to CNN's Fareed Zakaria, "Campaigns are campaigns. Governing is governing. They are very different things."

Suggesting that Trump will pragmatically adjust to centrist and conciliatory realities when he actually has to govern a vast nation of 321 million people and assume the role of global leader, optimists cite his ostensibly non-ideological history and pattern

of shifting positions. They whimsically recall the old Groucho Marx line: “Here are my principles, if you don’t like them, well, I have others.”

They assume that candidate Trump will be changed by the “transformative” effect of the Oval Office that supposedly encourages American presidents to reach out to all Americans and unify the country.

A month into the transition courteously facilitated by President Obama, building a cabinet mainly of mega-wealthy entrepreneurs and individualistic military men, Trump only partly defers to the “old normal.”

His combative and touchy ego continues to dictate behavior. Without evidence, he blamed his popular vote loss by over 2 million on the votes of “millions of illegal aliens.” When asked if such unwarranted statements correspond to “presidential behavior,” Kellyanne Conway retorted “He is the president. So now, ‘presidential’ is what he does.” We are in uncharted behavioral territory.

Returning to California after the election, my first encounter was with that hackneyed local source, the cab driver coming in from the airport. An older white guy, he was deliriously happy about Trump’s win. He offered reassurance that the immigration stuff wasn’t about “you Canadians” but only concerned “the monkeys pouring over the Rio Grande,” said with a hint of fondness—understandably, in a town that would swiftly become an inert giant weed without Mexican-Americans who get more or less everything done. He also said it would be great to have “an American boy in the White House again.”

His rhapsodic sense of triumph seemed rooted in the certainty that Trump would get the economy going again and restore the American dream for guys like him. I doubt he knew that Obama had brought incomes up and unemployment way down (from 10 to 4.6 per cent) after the disastrous Great Recession he inherited in 2008-09. The politically

meaningful reality was that people like my driver hadn’t felt the benefits.

He saw Trump as a billionaire who knows how to “get big things done” and—best of all—as a fellow outsider. It’s that faith that partly fuels the angry Trump “movement” that attracted so many working people who felt marginalized. Trump didn’t discover their sense of injury. Books like *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, *The Unwinding*, and *Hillbilly Elegy* had been digging for years into the fraught psycho-economic landscape of blue collar America.

But Trump came across as a first responder. Moreover, he found and exploited new channels through which to connect to the groundswell of largely uninformed anger, amping it up in much darker ways than Bernie Sanders’ did in his call for a new and fairer economic deal.

Many have assumed Trump won because he drew normally Democratic blue-collar white voters dismayed by their party’s distance from working class roots to cross-over. Data show that more important to his margin of victory were first-time voters who felt understood for the first time. For analyst Nate Silver, “education was almost everything.” White working class voters without college education who were Trump’s numerically most significant supporters demonstrated high susceptibility to fake news and charges. They were drawn to a candidate who was unafraid to say “some of the things we were thinking”—a good slice of which were divisive, untrue, and came across as dog whistle aimed at white ethno-nationalists.

Journalism may now be over-compensating in resorting to cultural anthropology to explain how such “ordinary people” felt marginalized and culturally oppressed by “elites.” A more significant resentment, especially since the financial collapse of 2008-09, is a belief that the rich, the privileged, the well-educated and foreigners have ripped off solid working people; that trade agreements have stolen their jobs for foreign fac-

tories, while migrants displace them at home and “minorities” get all the attention.

Jobs have indeed been lost—about 5 million since 1980—but the main cause is transformative technology, changing what America does and how and where it does it. Immigration, which has scored as a top concern among fewer than 10 per cent of voters, in this campaign became a wild-fire scapegoat, mostly in places where there are barely any immigrants.

As with the Brexit referendum result, the roots of grievance are more likely identity-based. Change has eroded ways of life and social status. Public institutions which people used to trust have lost their confidence.

However, Trump could not have shaped that susceptibility and mood of inchoate bitterness into victory without two essentials:

- A transformed media landscape he understood could be surfed by a truth-distorting populist; and
- An opponent in Hillary Clinton who—contrary to expectations—was a gift to him, in background and campaign performance, notably in making personal suitability the emphasis rather than policy.
- Internet transformations to the media ecosystem are far-reaching. That they threaten healthy democracy is a harsh cold bath for democracy activists who had a decade ago lauded the internet’s capacity to promote openness and inclusivity.
- It didn’t work out that way. As Farhad Manjoo wrote in the *New York Times*, the internet instead “loosened our hold on the truth.” Five years ago, our biggest worry was that it radicalized young Muslims. The *Times*, concluded that:
 - Twitter has become “a hate speech superhighway”
 - Along with Facebook and Google, it enables “voices that were lurking in the shadows” to

move to “the center of public discourse.”

- Together they have “radically reinforced the biases that drive Americans into dangerously opposite camps.”

The Times’ belief it still had sufficient authority as a “journal of record” to tabulate falsehoods and help keep the contest within the bounds of factual discipline ran into two problems: newspaper readership has plummeted, and so has faith in mainstream media, including increasingly bland TV network news. Gallup reported in 2015 that only 40 per cent of Americans believed that MSM report the news “fully and fairly.” Perhaps that is why the endorsement of Clinton by 360 of 371 US daily papers was much less influential than it would have been 10 or 20 years ago.

Donald Trump got it. He said anything, often in the early morning hours and on Twitter. Mainstream pundits chuckled at his apparently restless insecurity. But the cable news shows made those tweets about “Crooked Hillary,” or illegal migrant criminals, the top item in their morning line-ups of “news.” Tweets were radiated by chatbots, trolls, and false news sites on the web. An Oxford University research project showed that automated chatbots from the Trump campaign’s surrogates overwhelmed Clinton’s messages 5 to 1 in the campaign’s final five days, with false news, such as that Hillary Clinton was about to go to jail, and vast amplification of a distorted version of the politically volatile letters to Congress from FBI Director Comey.

The issue of fake news and fake sites popped up as a topic but the Clinton campaign blamed much of it on Vladimir Putin, accused of trying to rig the outcome in favour of “his puppet” Donald Trump.

Officially-sponsored RT and *Sputniknews.com* did push false stories against Clinton. But they were more often sourced by free-lance programmers in Russia, Georgia, and Macedonia, kids who created fake sites with inflammatory stories—e.g., that Hill-

ary and campaign chair John Podesta operated a pedophile ring in a D.C. pizzeria, or that she had “sold weapons to ISIS.” These were then radiated by millions of hits by gullible Americans on Facebook, thereby earning the fake newscasters advertising revenue from Google.

Negative news circulated much more effectively and widely than positive reports of any kind. False news reached far more people than conscientious reporting from mainstream journalists whom Trump described as “scum,” and the “lowest form of life,” an animosity ingested by his credulous followers (13 million on Twitter), thereby disabling the capacity of truthful reporting to get through.

Where does all this go now? Where’s the blame? Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, initially denied there was a problem. But Google’s technology elites promise they will clean up social media’s habitat. Twitter has purged some visible propagandists (who have migrated to another more permissive channel, Gab). But libertarians, technology Darwinians, and the money gods of Silicon Valley will resist more strenuous editorial censorship, screening, and fact-checking. Internet utopia is over. The Oxford Dictionary declared “post-truth” its word of the year for 2016.

The erosion of the primacy of fact-based evidence in debating public choices in our democracies is probably the biggest issue to come out of this election tsunami.

As to the world, Trump’s worldviews are not known apart from his belief the U.S. has been taken advantage of and that American interests will now come first. “America First”, as he put it on his “Thank You” tour in Cincinnati in early December.

For Canada, the bilateral relationship is more than economically vital; it is existential. That is why candidate Justin Trudeau made it his number one foreign policy priority. Canadians learned from Richard Nixon’s harsh unilateral assaults on all trading part-

ners that our longstanding intimacy with the U.S. is not a cast-iron exemption. We have to earn it every day.

It doesn’t mean pretending we share values where we don’t. Canada’s inclusive political culture and climate today stand in vivid contrast to what the U.S. has just chosen in this election. But since we are going to have some problems with the U.S. administration on economic and border issues, we have to think like neighbours who want to find solutions.

Problems must not define the relationship. We must make sure we operate together on agreed facts, with a mutual appreciation of how we depend on each other.

A new feature is that tens of millions more Americans now look to Canada with a certain envy. This can be a political asset with legislators, provided we don’t boast about being “more civilized.”

California, from where I write, is one of several parts of America that relate to Canadian norms more than to some “red-state” regions of the U.S., in the way we live more inclusively together, in our softer city environments, in our better PISA scores for education, in public policy in many areas and at many levels. To insure the border doesn’t become a disintegrating wall, we need to encourage all the connections we can, across educational institutions, civil society, science, and local and regional government.

Above all, as Canadians, we need renewed self-confidence to be ourselves, including in our defence of liberal internationalism and in pursuit of strong relationships with Mexico and our many key overseas partners.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump is our new interlocutor. We need to deal with it, and get on with it as best we can. **P**

Contributing Writer Jeremy Kinsman was a longtime Canadian ambassador, notably to Russia, Britain, and the European Union. He is now attached to the University of California, Berkeley, and Ryerson University in Toronto. kinsmanj@shaw.ca