5

The Fox Diet

For years we’ve been telling you, journalism is dead.

SEAN HANNITY

On November 28, 2017, the forty-fifth president of the United States asked his 50 million Twitter followers why “our deep State authorities” were not investigating “Crooked Hillary” and whether the lack of investigation was evidence of a rigged and corrupt system. He concluded this remarkable tweet by calling on the two most widely viewed hosts on Fox News: Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity (Figure 5.1).

An American president turning on his own national security establishment for failing to attack his political opponent exhibits a troubling authoritarian bent. The fact that he leaned on Hannity and Carlson should, by the end of 2017, have come as no surprise. By that point Fox News had become the lead player in what had become the president’s personal propaganda network in his battles against the intelligence community, the media, and, increasingly

FIGURE 5.1 Donald Trump tweet, November 28, 2017.

over the course of the year, his make-or-break struggle against the very idea of professionalism in law enforcement and through it the rule of law.

This chapter consists of three detailed case studies of how Fox News actively used its position at the core of the right-wing media ecosystem to support the president in the central political controversy of his presidency: the investigation led by special counsel Robert Mueller into the allegation that Russia had intervened in the U.S. election in support of the candidacy of Donald Trump, and the question of whether it had done so in coordination with the Trump campaign. The first study describes the emergence of the “deep state” as the overarching frame through which the story came to be understood in right-wing media as a partisan effort to unseat Donald Trump directed by holdovers from the Obama administration in the intelligence community and law enforcement. The next two studies involve discrete elements of this overarching frame. One case involves the argument that Democratic activist Seth Rich was murdered to hide the fact that he, not Russia, was responsible for leaking the Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails. The other case involves use of a story surrounding a company called Uranium One to attack the integrity and independence of the key law enforcement officers involved in the special counsel investigation. The timing and pattern we show in these case studies strongly suggest that they were launched for the specific partisan purpose of deflecting the Trump-Russia allegations and undermining the special counsel investigation. And in the two specifically fact-based cases, we show that Fox News actively promoted these stories despite the fact that they were repeatedly fact checked and debunked by a wide variety of professional journalists.

In Chapter 2 we saw that the overall architecture of the American media environment consists of two highly asymmetric networks and that the right was structurally different from the rest. In Chapter 3 we explained the propaganda feedback loop and the reality-check dynamic that could explain the emergence of such an asymmetric system, and the susceptibility of the former to the dissemination and accreditation of disinformation and propaganda. In Chapter 4 we showed how Breitbart and Donald Trump as a candidate interacted to use the propagandist affordances of the right-wing media ecosystem to take over the Republican Party and to mobilize its base in the general election. Here, we document how Fox News reasserted its role at the center of the right-wing media ecosystem by becoming the central node of network propaganda on behalf of an embattled president, on the issue that most threatened his legitimacy and possibly his tenure in office. Journalists and academics observing the American media system recognize their own
biases, and many are therefore reticent to point the finger at Fox. Here, we use our large data sets and analytic tools as a source of objective validation that what we are seeing is really there, in the content and propagation dynamics of the frames and stories we cover. These data warrant the conclusion that Fox shares little but a few visual trappings with the world of professional journalism at the core of the rest of the U.S. media system. It is, across its online and television properties, America’s leading propaganda outlet.

Deep State: Fox News vs. the National Security Establishment

Prior to 2017 usage of the term “deep state” had been almost entirely reserved for references to political dynamics in Turkey, Egypt after the Arab Spring, and occasionally other Middle Eastern countries. It was generally only used in reference to the United States at the periphery, either by the libertarian right or the civil-libertarian left. As recently as February 2017, Chris Wallace on Fox News skeptically explained the term as he introduced Rush Limbaugh, the dean of right-wing talk radio: “You also use a phrase which I have to say that I only heard for the first time in the last couple of weeks, the ‘deep state.’ And that’s the notion that there’s an Obama shadow government embedded in the bureaucracy that is working against this new president.” Limbaugh responded, “Well, I would love to claim credit for that, but actually, I think a reporter by the name of Glenn Greenwald at The Intercept who has got a relationship with—what’s his name? Assange. I think he actually coined the term. And I think it works. I don’t think—who is driving this business that the Russians hacked the election? It’s the Democrat Party. It’s Hillary. It’s Obama.”

Limbaugh was referring to Glenn Greenwald, a longtime defender of civil liberties and critic of the national security establishment, best known for his role in reporting on the disclosures by Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. On January 11, 2017, Greenwald published a piece, entitled “The Deep State Goes to War with President Elect, Using Unverified Claims, as Democrats Cheer.” A week earlier, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence had reported, with little supporting evidence, that the intelligence community had high confidence that Russia had hacked the DNC emails and meddled in the U.S. election. That same week BuzzFeed had published the Steele Dossier, an opposition research dossier that first laid out the allegations of Trump relations with Russia. Greenwald claimed that the CIA had long sought to increase its war-making capacity in Syria and to escalate conflict with Russia. He also claimed that Hillary Clinton had supported these goals
and that Trump had opposed them. The next day Tucker Carlson invited Greenwald to explain his criticism of Democrats and mainstream media to roughly three million viewers on Fox News.

By the time Limbaugh appeared on Fox News in mid-February, the frame had shifted. Despite citing Greenwald for credibility, Limbaugh’s interview captured the essence of an entirely different and new turn that the “deep state” frame was to take in 2017: “It’s the Democrat Party. It’s Hillary. It’s Obama.” Before the 2016 presidential election, the term had been applied from both ends of the political spectrum—libertarians on the right and the civil-libertarian left—to describe a set of entrenched interests that superseded both parties and kept both under control. It was a rarely used term that was the direct descendant of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s parting warning about the power of the “military-industrial complex,” not a partisan cudgel. Use of the term, which appeared rarely prior to 2016 election, took a sharp upturn in early 2017 (Figure 5.2).

If we analyze the words used in association with “deep state” before and after Election Day 2016, the shift is clear. Figure 5.3 compares an image of the words most associated with “deep state” from 2012 until Election Day 2016 (panel a) and an image of words associated with the term from Election Day until March 2018 (panel b). The images rely on the widely used Word2Vec

![Figure 5.2](image-url)
algorithm to show words that appear more commonly together in the text as clustered together, while separating word clusters that are usually distinct from each other. Before the election of Donald Trump, “deep state” was overwhelmingly used to describe Middle Eastern power structures, primarily the battles of Erdogan against the original bearer of the “deep state” name; the Turkish military and intelligence agencies; and around the reassertion of control by Egypt’s military after the failed Arab Spring. After the U.S. presidential election the usage was overwhelmingly domestic,
emphasizing “Trump” in connection with “intelligence,” “leaks,” “undermine,”
“coup,” “Fox,” “Hannity,” and “Newt.” Separate clusters associated “Obama,”
“Hillary,” “Washington,” and the “GOP” on one hand, and “Democrats,”
“Republicans,” and “globalists,” on the other hand.
Buried right underneath the central word “Egypt” in Figure 5.3a are two
names, whose size and location on the map suggest they are similarly central
to this period. The first, “Erdogan,” is less surprising. The second, “Lofgren,”
is tied to the “Mike” that appears more visibly right under “Turkey.” Both
identify the most influential effort to import the term to describe American
politics before the 2016 election. In February 2014 Mike Lofgren, who retired
in 2011 from a nearly 30-year career as a congressional staffer Republican in
the House and Senate, published on the Bill Moyers website an essay entitled
“Anatomy of the Deep State.” 4 In this essay, Lofgren wove together an image
of a power structure anchored by the major security and intelligence agencies,
military contractors, and core players in the financial and technology industry,
all of whom were:

[D]eeply dyed in the hue of the official ideology of the governing class,
an ideology that is neither specifically Democrat nor Republican.
Domestically, whatever they might privately believe about essentially
diversionary social issues such as abortion or gay marriage, they almost
invariably believe in the “Washington Consensus”: financialization,
outsourcing, privatization, deregulation and the commodifying
of labor. Internationally, they espouse 21st-century “American
Exceptionalism”: the right and duty of the United States to meddle in
every region of the world with coercive diplomacy and boots on the
ground and to ignore painfully won international norms of civilized
behavior.

It is to this explicitly anti-establishment frame that retired Republican
Congressman and twice grassroots libertarian candidate in Republican
presidential primaries Ron Paul was clearly referring when he became the first
person to use the term in the post-election period in a November 10 interview
on Fox Business 5 and then again in a November 11, 2016 interview on RT.6
And it is in this same sense that libertarian Doug Casey decried under the
Zero Hedge persona of Tyler Durden the next day, “I’ve said for years that the
Demopublicans and the Republicrats are just two wings of the same party.
One says it’s for social freedom (which is a lie), but is actively antagonistic to
economic freedom. The other says it’s for economic freedom (which is a lie),
but is actively antagonistic to social freedom. Both are controlled by members of the Deep State.7

The “deep state” framing changed in response to a December 9 story by the Washington Post entitled “Secret CIA assessment says Russia was trying to help Trump win White House”8 and to the Obama administration announcement that it had tasked the intelligence community with producing a report on cyberattacks in the 2016 election. The next day, an unsigned piece under the Tyler Durden pseudonym on Zero Hedge decried “A ‘Soft’ Coup Attempt.” Russia Insider published a similarly framed attack, decrying “Silent Coup in Progress: American Intelligence Agencies Are Trying to Stop Trump From Taking Office.”9 The “coup” construct, together with the “deep state” frame reappeared in a piece published on December 12 on antiwar.com, informationclearinghouse.info, and Veterans News Now,10 thought to be a Russian gray site.11 That same day Paul Joseph Watson of Infowars ran a video segment that received half a million views on YouTube that laid out the “deep state” theory of the Trump-Russia allegations.12

A story on Breitbart under the pseudonym Virgil reframed the “deep state” to include all the forces arraigned against Donald Trump: Democrats, the mainstream media, and the Washington swamp.

Do the Democrats want Donald Trump to become the 45th president? Of course not. And how about the Democrats’ handmaiden, the Main Stream Media? Do they want Trump in the White House? Of course not. And how ‘bout all the other affluent residents of the Washington “swamp,” which Trump has pledged to drain—do you think any of them want Trump? Of course not. Together, these anti-Trump constituencies help form what has been called the Deep State…13

The story went on to include a quote from the Daily Beast alleging that agents within the CIA didn’t like Michael Flynn and “hate[d] Trump’s guts.” Virgil theorized that “liberal Democrats have controlled the executive branch for 16 of the last 24 years, and so there had been plenty of time to cultivate liberals—even liberal activists—within the ranks and to bring them to the pinnacles of bureaucratic power.” About the military, the piece acknowledged that “[t]o be sure, the vast bulk of our nation’s warriors are staunch believers in Douglas MacArthur’s trinity of “duty, honor, country…’ Yet still, during the Obama years, such patriots have been layered over by liberal apparatchiks. And the same left-pushing syndrome has been equally true of all federal security agencies.”
All the elements of the reframed “deep state” were laid out in this piece. The “deep state” was no longer a nonpartisan permanent power that protected an oligarchy and was equally immune to both parties’ democratic claims. Now the “deep state” was a partisan effort to portray Donald Trump’s victory as a Russian hack instead of the democratic victory of American populism over the Washington establishment. This framing pitted the Trump forces of good against Democrats, Obama holdovers in the national security establishment (and later law enforcement), the mainstream media, and anti-Trump Republicans.

This new partisan “deep state” frame lay dormant for a month after its initial birth (except for claims on Infowars by Trump associates Roger Stone and Alex Jones that they had each been targeted for assassination by the “deep state”). Greenwald did not advance this partisan frame in his January piece in The Intercept, which was still focused on the persistent power of the CIA, its history of lying, and his argument that the CIA was resisting Trump because Trump threatened its policy preferences. The partisan frame re-emerged in response to the news that Michael Flynn was forced to resign his position as national security adviser on February 13, 2017, ostensibly for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about having had a phone conversation with the Russian ambassador before President Trump took office. The next few days saw an explosion of stories and YouTube videos discussing the Flynn resignation in terms of the “deep state.” The most highly tweeted story on February 14 was a story by Eli Lake on Bloomberg, entitled “The Political Assassination of Michael Flynn,” in which Lake argued that “[s]electively disclosing details of private conversations monitored by the FBI or NSA gives the permanent state the power to destroy reputations from the cloak of anonymity. This is what police states do,” and that “Flynn was working to reform the intelligence-industrial complex, something that threatened the bureaucratic prerogatives of his rivals.”

Infowars had several segments on YouTube with viewership numbers ranging from 50,000 to over 200,000, including the second- and sixth-most tweeted stories in our set from that day. The top 10 tweeted stories were rounded out by Breitbart stories, PJ Media, a Judicial Watch YouTube video, and the appearance of the story entitled “It’s over Folks: The Neocons and the ‘Deep State’ Have Neutered the Trump Presidency” by an author writing under the pseudonym The Saker on Paul Craig Roberts’s site and on Zero Hedge. The Saker’s website tagline is “Stop the War on Russia,” and the piece claimed, “Ever since Trump made it to the White House, he has taken blow after blow from the Neocon-run Ziomedia, from Congress, from...
all the Hollywood doubleplusgoodthinking ‘stars’ and even from European politicians. [...] In order to defeat Trump, the US deep state has had to terribly weaken the US and the AngloZionist Empire.”16 Over the next several days, Breitbart continued to attract attention with its “deep state” coverage, as did Infowars, YouTube videos, and Zero Hedge guest posts.

During February, Fox News began to introduce the “deep state” frame, but still ambivalently. On the morning of Flynn’s resignation, Fox News commentator and former left-wing U.S. Representative Dennis Kucinich used the “deep state” frame on the “Mornings With Maria” show on Fox Business,17 and that evening Sean Hannity invited Bloomberg’s Eli Lake to discuss his claim that Flynn’s removal was a “political assassination” by the permanent state. Later that same week, Rush Limbaugh jumped on the bandwagon and brought it with him to the interview on Fox News on Sunday with Mike Wallace that we described at the opening. Nonetheless, through February, Fox News was still generally skeptical of the frame. Wallace asked Limbaugh whether this all sounded too conspiratorial; an earlier online Fox News story, entitled “Trump knocks down ‘Deep State’ claims,” concluded that “what Trump made clear in his press conference today is that he sees it for what it is: the political and ideological struggle that always buffets behind-the-scenes Washington, not a part of a vast conspiracy.”18

Fox’s stance on the “deep state” changed after President Trump first tweeted on March 4, “Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my ‘wires tapped’ in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!” and then compared it to Watergate in a subsequent tweet that morning. Figure 5.4 documents the explosion of coverage of the deep state frame using media attention measured by open web stories, tweets, and Google searches.

The publication of the Steele dossier by BuzzFeed and the Flynn firing appear as the first spikes in attention. The sharp uptick across all three measures in March coincides with the president’s tweets. That was also when Fox News embraced the term both online and, more importantly, on television. Lou Dobbs’s March 26 interview of Fox analyst Andrew Napolitano on the topic became the most widely viewed video on YouTube that month,19 and Dobbs returned to the topic two days later to accuse the “deep state” and the “national left-wing media” of “a full-on assault on the President of the United States.”20 Not to be undone, Hannity cheerfully added the authoritarian terminology of “purge” on March 10: “Deep-state Obama holdovers embedded like barnacles in the federal bureaucracy are hell-bent on destroying President Trump. It’s time for the Trump administration to purge these saboteurs.”21
The continuous interplay between Dobbs, Hannity, Carlson, and others on Fox Business and Fox News became the dominant pattern on network news, as Figure 5.5 shows. The peaks in 2017 coincide with the appointment of Robert Mueller, the first disclosures of the Trump Tower meeting, the

**Figure 5.4** Level of attention by open web stories, tweets, and Google searches, January 2017–March 2017.

**Figure 5.5** Percentage of 15-second segments mentioning "deep state" on MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, and Fox Business.

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search of Paul Manafort’s home, and the Flynn guilty plea. This pattern strongly implies that repeated invocation of the “deep state” frame is intentionally deployed when the president is most under threat from the investigation. We offer more details for the May and October–November spikes in this chapter, with the Seth Rich and Uranium One case studies. In Chapter 8, we explore in more detail the July–August spike, where we discuss the Guccifer 2.0/Forensicator story as a suspected Russian influence campaign.

The rest of the media ecosystem had an ambivalent relationship with the “deep state” framing. Some, like Greenwald, saw an underlying truth of the matter—that the national security establishment was in fact going after Trump because he opposed their agenda and that having the CIA intervene in politics in this way was a graver threat to democracy than a Trump presidency. Greenwald’s interview with Amy Goodman on “Democracy Now!” became the most watched video on the “deep state” in February 2017. Others reported on this spectacle of the Republican Party, which had long branded itself as stronger on national security, attacking the revered national security establishment as partisan and corrupt. But there was little to fact check about the “deep state” that could anchor a counternarrative. As a result, when we map the networks of authority and social media attention, the mainstream professional media are secondary. Breitbart, Fox, and the president’s Twitter account anchored the “deep state” frame, as Figure 5.6 shows. (We include Twitter and YouTube in Figure 5.6, the map of web linking, because half of the inlinks to Twitter in this set are to tweets by the president, and so it offers some insight into his role in the frame; and because YouTube served as a major distribution platform.)

The web-linking map also shows the large role that Infowars played on YouTube (accounting for four of the top 10 most watched videos), the distinct network around Zero Hedge, and the independent and large role that the Intercept played as a distinct center of gravity away from either the right-wing or mainstream ecosystems.

When we move from attention and authority among publications and media producers to mapping the attention of politically engaged Twitter users, the picture changes dramatically. Everyone but the right-wing media ecosystem fades away. On Twitter, the frame is purely internal to the right-wing ecosystem. The New York Times and the Intercept recede, and the craziest sites—the Gateway Pundit, Infowars, True Pundit, and Truthfeed—congregate around YouTube, while Breitbart, Zero Hedge, and Fox News make up a distinct cluster at the center of the map.
When we zoom in and remove YouTube, the architecture remains unchanged.

It is important not to read Figures 5.6 and 5.7 as marking yet again a marginalization of Fox. Alex Jones’s most widely viewed YouTube video about the “deep state” drew about half a million viewers, one-sixth of the daily viewership of either Hannity or Carlson, and most of them got anywhere from 50,000 to 250,000 views. As we showed in Chapter 2, over the course of 2017, Fox News reclaimed its central role in the right-wing
\textbf{Figure 5.7a} “Deep state” on Twitter. Nodes sized by number of Twitter shares. Architecture by co-tweeting patterns.

\textbf{Figure 5.7b} “Deep state” on Twitter with YouTube removed.
media ecosystem across the broader range of stories that make up the political agenda. Moreover, using overall traffic analysis from web metrics firm SimilarWeb, it is clear that Fox News dominated in terms of actual traffic to the site, both in terms of total number of visits and in terms of unique visitors (see Figure 5.8).

As we look at the reshaping of the new “deep state” frame from its original, nonpartisan concern into a distinct narrative about a partisan attack on Donald Trump, we can certainly find critical moments at which Breitbart played a central reframing role. And we certainly find plenty of the craziest conspiracy theories hovering at the margins. But as we move now to analyze how this broad frame was translated over the course of 2017 into repeated concerted efforts to defend the president from the Russia suspicion, we see Fox News taking center stage in a much clearer and more distinctive way by deflecting attention and blame, interpreting the investigation in deeply partisan terms, and sowing confusion and doubt. And it is here too that the broad and loose gestalt frame takes on distinct falsifiable forms whose pattern fits that of a sustained disinformation campaign by a propaganda outlet, rather than as episodic errors by a journalistic outlet.

**Figure 5.8** Average monthly visits and unique visitors, 2017–2018, SimilarWeb.
Seth Rich: Fox News vs. the Intelligence Community

No single case more clearly exhibits the characteristics of a disinformation campaign aimed to divert attention from the president’s political woes than Fox News’s coverage in May of 2017 of the conspiracy theory that DNC staffer Seth Rich was murdered because he, rather than state-backed Russian hackers, was the source of the DNC emails disclosed in the middle of the 2016 campaign.

The question of who hacked into the Democratic National Committee’s email server and passed the stolen emails on to WikiLeaks was a central locus of the fight over Russian intervention in the 2016 presidential election. Competing narratives emerged to answer the question. The first was that Russian state actors hacked the DNC computer system. A different version painted it as the work of a lone hacker. A third account was that a DNC insider leaked the emails out of disaffection with the internal corruption of the party. If the Russian state was responsible, Trump’s victory would look less like a genuine American populist victory. If, by contrast, the emails were leaked by a disgruntled insider, Trump’s victory would look even more like a popular rejection of “the swamp,” so much so that even honest Democrats could no longer abide. This discrete factual dispute therefore became central for months over the course of 2017.

The DNC blamed the attack on Russian information operations in its original public announcement on June 14, 2016. Throughout the summer and fall of 2016, several technology publications and security firms published reports that supported the Russian theory. At the same time two alternative theories developed in the right-wing media ecosystem, and episodically on the left as well. One theory was that a young DNC staffer, Seth Rich, was the source of the leak. Seth Rich had been murdered in Washington, D.C., on July 10, 2016, and the theory was that the murder was orchestrated by the Clinton campaign, and by some accounts by Clinton herself. The second theory was that a lone hacker who took the name “Guccifer 2.0” was responsible for the attack. We return to that theory and how it played out in Chapter 8, where we discuss it in context of Russian white and gray propaganda.

The first spike in attention to the Seth Rich story occurred in July 2016 (Figure 5.9), right after Rich’s murder. A second spike was in early August, after Julian Assange offered a reward for information about his murder and first implied that Rich had been WikiLeaks’ source of the DNC emails. Both these early peaks are dwarfed by the coverage in May 2017, when Fox News
took over, as well as the July–August 2017 peak associated with the revived “Guccifer 2.0” theory.

Conspiracy theories began to bubble up almost immediately after Seth Rich was shot in the early morning hours of July 10, 2016. By July 12 YourNewsWire.com was already weaving tweets from several sources, including @Ricky_Vaughn99, into a story entitled “DNC Election Fraud Whistleblower Found Murdered.” Over the next few weeks, YourNewsWire.com published several more stories that ultimately made it one of the two sites whose stories on the Seth Rich conspiracy theory were most widely shared on Facebook, alongside Gateway Pundit. YourNewsWire.com played an early central role in propagating the Pizzagate conspiracy, and in Chapter 8 we discuss whether it better fits the “gray propaganda” or “useful idiot” category in relation to Russian propaganda. @Ricky_Vaughn99, described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “one of the most prolific and longstanding Alt-Right personalities,” was suspended from Twitter a few weeks before the election. Over the next few days, the conspiracy theories remained mostly on marginal sites, although it did appear on a few sites with moderate audiences, like 100percentfedup and Dennis Michael Lynch.
The story picked up again in late July, after two Reddit threads tried to revive the theory. The Reddit threads pointed to an NBC Nightly News interview in which Julian Assange denied evidence that the DNC emails had been hacked by Russians. The story received more attention this time from more influential conspiracy sites. This round of attention included a story by Truthfeed, which relied primarily on a tweet by the alt-right handle @JaredWyand, a YouTube video by One America News Network that received over 90,000 views, and a few days later, a story in the Gateway Pundit. The presence in this storyline of well-known alt-right handles like @Ricky_Vaughn99 or @JaredWyand offers some evidence of the influence of the alt-right. But they played a relatively marginal role and relied on more visible influencers to move from their own networks to the broader network. This reliance on more central right-wing actors is part of what leads us to put these actors in the second or third tier of concerns over disinformation.

Coverage expanded to broader media outlets only after Assange, on August 9, tweeted a $20,000 reward for “information leading to the conviction for the murder of DNC staffer Seth Rich,” and implied in an interview on Dutch TV that Rich may have been the source of the DNC email dump and that his death may have been tied with that fact. The story was only covered by broader major media after that interview. As we saw in Chapter 3 with the pedophilia and rape assertions, conspiracy theories that germinate in the nether regions of the internet stay there unless they find an amplification vector. In this case Julian Assange lent the story visibility and credibility. But interest in the story rapidly tapered off, only to reappear on a much grander scale, as Figure 5.9 makes clear, and on a much more important platform in the middle of May 2017.

The pattern of coverage in May of 2017 strongly suggests that the reemergence of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory almost a year after it had receded was part of an intentional effort to shield the president from mounting pressure surrounding his ties to Russia. On May 9, 2017, Donald Trump fired the director of the FBI, James Comey. The next day, Trump hosted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergey Kislyak in the White House. On May 16, the New York Times reported that a memo written contemporaneously by Comey documented that Trump had asked Comey to drop the investigation of Trump’s former National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn. With pressure mounting on May 17, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointed Robert Mueller as special counsel to investigate the allegations of connections between the Trump campaign and Russia. A comparison of May 2017
sentences mentioning Trump and Russia and Seth Rich among all media we code as “right” and “center” in May 2017 exhibits a clear interference pattern (Figure 5.10). (Center-left and left publications followed an almost identical pattern to the center, each publishing more stories than the center.) There are two peaks in coverage on the center related to the Comey dismissal and the Comey memo. The right exploded with Seth Rich coverage on May 16, the day the Times reported the Comey memo.

At 4:30 a.m. on May 16, 2017, the Washington, D.C., local Fox 5 reported that a private investigator hired by Seth Rich’s family, Rod Wheeler, had communicated to Fox 5 that Seth Rich had been in touch with WikiLeaks before his death and that a source inside the D.C. police told him that the police were told to stand down the investigation. At 5:40 a.m., Fox and Friends interviewed the Fox D.C. reporter and developed its own story, which first ran at 6:17 a.m., that repeated the story and vouched for Wheeler’s credibility. That story ran again an hour later. Online, Fox News published Malia Zimmerman’s version of the story, the version that would ultimately be the basis of lawsuits that Wheeler, and later Rich’s family, filed against Fox. That evening Sean Hannity made the connection to the Russia investigation explicit. After telling the basic story, Hannity ran an interview he did with

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**Figure 5.10** Sentences per day mentioning “Seth Rich” or both “Donald Trump” and “Russia,” May 2017. All media sources coded right and center.
Julian Assange in January 2017, in which Assange said that the email dumps were not from a state actor (the screen suggests they were talking about the Podesta email dump, not those from the DNC). Hannity then told his audience “let me connect the dots from here,” and delivered the core point:

If this is true, and Seth Rich gave Wikileaks these DNC emails, which, ultimately led to the firing, remember, of Debbie Wasserman Schulz on the eve of the DNC convention, this blows the whole Russia collusion narrative completely out of the water.38

Hannity then went on to explain to his listeners that there are:

Five forces aligning against President Trump. You’ve got the destroy Trump propaganda media, the destroy Trump Democrats, the Washington Deep State establishment, meaning some members of the intelligence community, you’ve got weak establishment Republicans, and the NeverTrumpers, they now seem to be working together, in an unprecedented attack on the sitting president.39

By that evening, however, Wheeler had already told CNN that he did not have evidence of emails between Rich and WikiLeaks, and that the information he had referenced in the Fox 5 interview was information he had received from a Fox News reporter, whom he did not name in that CNN interview. That CNN story had already made public that his services had been paid for by Ed Butkowsky, a Trump supporter, occasional Fox News commentator, and Breitbart contributor. Twenty-four hours later, Fox 5, the local Fox affiliate, published a clarification that Wheeler had “backtracked” on his statement.40 The retraction by Wheeler did not tamp down the story even though Wheeler’s statement was the entire basis of the initial reports. On May 21, Newt Gingrich, former Republican Speaker of the House and architect of the Republican Party’s turn to a more rigidly partisan strategy in the early 1990s,41 once again repeated the claim on “Fox and Friends,” a statement to which PolitiFact awarded its “pants on fire” rating42 and FactCheck.org covered in an assessment entitled “Gingrich spreads conspiracy theory.”43 On May 23, Fox online retracted the original Zimmerman story.44 Two days later the ABC affiliate in Washington, D.C., owned by conservative Sinclair Broadcasting, gave the story another lease of life.45 The station published a report by “the Profiling Project,” a group funded by Republican lobbyist Jack Burkman with a near-obsessive attachment to the Seth Rich conspiracy story.46 Fox
News D.C. then dutifully reported on the Burkman profiling project with a story entitled "Independent Group releases new report on Seth Rich murder investigation."47 A few days later RT ran a segment of Cross Talk, attempting to rehabilitate the story,48 but by that point most of the coverage had receded. Later that year Wheeler filed a defamation action against Fox News, in which Wheeler alleged that the Seth Rich article was an intentional effort to “put to bed speculation that President Trump colluded with Russia in an attempt to influence the outcome of the Presidential election.”49 The pattern of reporting, the repetition, and the framing, particularly in Hannity’s retelling, is certainly consistent with intentional misdirection.

Mapping the network of stories on Seth Rich offers a clear view of the central role played by Fox News and Fox DC as sources of authority and stories, but also the extent to which conspiracy sites played in propagating the conspiracy theory on Facebook. Both maps below use the linking patterns of websites as the architecture of the network. The first map (Figure 5.11) sizes nodes based on inlinks, identifying the nodes that were influential as sources
for other media producers. It shows the central role that the Fox DC affiliate and Fox News played in developing and propagating the story to other media, and how central YouTube was to disseminating Fox News network programming online, particularly Hannity. It also shows the central role the Washington Post and CNN played in criticizing Fox.

The second map (Figure 5.12), with node sizes based on Facebook shares, emphasizes the media outlets that wrote stories that were more widely shared on Facebook. Its most remarkable feature is how central the Gateway Pundit and YourNewsWire.com were on Facebook. YourNewsWire.com’s most popular stories on Facebook appeared in July–August 2016. Its core role appears to have been to implant and spin up the Seth Rich conspiracy theory. The Gateway Pundit had stories that were frequently shared on Facebook both in the original effort to point the finger away from Russia and toward the DNC in July–August 2016 and during the May 2017 Fox-led effort to revive the story. YourNewsWire.com was not a marginal flash in the pan. In the first quarter of 2018, according to SimilarWeb metrics, YourNewsWire.com had

**Figure 5.12** Seth Rich conspiracy diffusion on the right, and debunking on the left. Nodes sized by Facebook shares.
about one-third the number of monthly visits of the National Review, three-quarters the audience of Reason, and more than 30 percent more visits than the Weekly Standard. The Gateway Pundit, in turn, had 50 percent more visits than the National Review. From the election these ratios remained roughly stable throughout 2017 and early 2018. The Hill’s relatively prominent place was driven by stories about Wheeler’s lawsuit, the Fox News retraction, and Hannity losing advertisers over his Seth Rich conspiracy campaign. Vox’s most shared story on Facebook was an essay describing the linkages between the epistemic crisis and social-identity theory.

**Uranium One: Fox News vs. the Rule of Law and the Idea of Professional Journalism**

On September 19, 2017, FBI agents broke down Paul Manafort’s door and executed a search warrant as part of the investigation led by Robert Mueller. Two days later, Mueller requested phone records from Air Force One related to the claim that President Trump had dictated the misleading initial response to revelations of Donald Trump Jr.’s now famous June 9 Trump Tower meeting with a Russian attorney. Trump Jr. appeared to believe the attorney was working with Russian state authorities to get dirt on Hillary Clinton. Mueller also issued a subpoena to Facebook for records of accounts tied to suspected Russian operations. Congress, in the meantime, was considering steps to protect Mueller from the threat of being fired.

By the first week of October, concern over Russian interference in the 2016 election mounted, as Facebook disclosures of Russian advertising purchases gave shape to the previously more amorphous sense of Russian efforts. At the same time, the investigation surfaced the fact that the president’s daughter and son-in-law were using private email accounts, possibly for government-related work, again drawing the president’s family into the maelstrom. By the end of the second week in October, reporting emerged that the president’s legal advisers were cooperating with the investigation and considering how to permit the president to sit for an interview with Mueller.

The following week, the Uranium One story erupted with an intensity and vehemence not seen at any point since Peter Schweizer first published the allegations in April 2015 (we describe the role of the Uranium One story in pre-election debates over the Clinton Foundation in Chapter 6). Over the coming weeks, as Michael Flynn’s plea bargain and cooperation with the investigation were announced, reporting on Uranium One as “the real
Russia scandal” reached a fevered pitch. Newt Gingrich called it “the greatest corruption scandal in American history” on Hannity. 55 Sebastian Gorka, former deputy assistant to the president, claimed that “this is equivalent to what the Rosenbergs did, and those people got the chair.” 56

In reality, it turns out that Hillary and Bill Clinton were not quite the twenty-first-century heirs to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. What instead happened was that Hannity, Gingrich, and the rest of the right-wing media ecosystem were resurrecting a two-and-a-half year old story with a completely new twist—framing it as an attack on the integrity of special counsel Robert Mueller and deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein. The original story had been told in Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How and Why Foreign Governments and Businesses Helped Make Bill and Hillary Rich, published in May 2015 by Peter Schweizer. Schweizer was at the time a “Breitbart Senior Editor at Large.” 57 He cofounded with Steve Bannon the organization that funded his research on the book, the Government Accountability Institute (GAI). 58 The GAI was funded by Robert Mercer, a major investor in Breitbart and a super PAC donor to the Trump campaign. 59 At the time the book was published, Clinton Cash received wide coverage. Most prominently, the New York Times published an extensive piece based on the research materials in an advance copy of the book, titled “Cash Flowed to Clinton Foundation Amid Russian Uranium Deal.” 60 The heart of the story was that the Russian atomic energy company Rosatom purchased a Canadian firm, Uranium One, which had acquired uranium extraction rights around the world, including to 20 percent of uranium deposits in the United States (the deal did not include a license to export the uranium). The chairman of Uranium One had, over the prior years, made over $2 million in donations to the Clinton Foundation, and as Rosatom announced its intention to purchase Uranium One, Bill Clinton received $500,000 for a speech he made to a Russian bank that was promoting Uranium One stock and had ties to the Kremlin. The Times’s angle in the 2015 story was buried in the tenth paragraph:

Whether the donations played any role in the approval of the uranium deal is unknown. But the episode underscores the special ethical challenges presented by the Clinton Foundation, headed by a former president who relied heavily on foreign cash to accumulate $250 million in assets even as his wife helped steer American foreign policy as secretary of state, presiding over decisions with the potential to benefit the foundation’s donors.
As we will see both here (Figures 5.18, 5.19a, and 5.19b) and in Chapter 6, the *Times* story provided legitimation and validation for a broad and aggressive set of political attacks on Hillary Clinton as having given control of over 20 percent of American uranium to the Russians. These attacks were fact-checked extensively. The *Washington Post* Fact Checker awarded four “Pinocchios” to the claim that “Hillary Clinton gave uranium to the Russians.” The *Post* explained: “The State Department was one of nine agencies on the committee that approved the deal. The deal was also separately approved by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. There is no evidence Clinton herself got involved in the deal personally, and it is highly questionable that this deal even rose to the level of the secretary of state.” Moreover, the company being bought held uranium extraction rights but not an export license that would have allowed it to take uranium, once extracted, out of the country. Fact Checker found that “[t]he author of ‘Clinton Cash’ falsely claimed Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State had ‘veto power’ and ‘could have stopped’ Russia from buying a company with extensive uranium mining operations in the U.S. In fact, only the president has such power.” PolitiFact gave a “mostly false” grade to a version of the story that Trump offered as a candidate in June 2016 and it added a point-by-point response to efforts by the author of *Clinton Cash* to sustain the claim. As the *New York Times* wrote in April 2015, the Clinton Foundation raised “special ethical challenges” when Hillary Clinton was secretary of state, but as it also stated in the tenth paragraph of that story, “[w]hether the donations played any role in the approval of the uranium deal is unknown.” To anyone not enmeshed in the right-wing echo chamber, the story recounted by Hannity, Gingrich, Lou Dobbs, and Judge Jeannine—and more than anyone, Donald Trump—that Hillary Clinton as secretary of state gave Russia 20 percent of our uranium, is simply false. Its truth did not increase with repetition or the incendiary vehemence of its delivery.

Searching for Uranium One in our corpus of stories from the pre-election and post-election periods offers a sense of how unusual the spike in coverage of the story was over the month beginning in the third week of October 2017 (Figure 5.13). Even the initial spike in coverage, which followed the release of Schweizer’s book and the big *New York Times* story about it, was a fraction of the October–November 2017 spike. The campaign-period coverage of the topic in August 2016, when there was much focus on the Clinton Foundation, was dwarfed by comparison.

We can get some quantitative purchase on the shift in emphasis in the discussion by comparing the results of a standard clustering algorithm
(Word2Vec) that draws a spatial arrangement of words that often appear together (Figure 5.14). Looking at Uranium One coverage online from April 2015 to October 2017, there are two main clusters: those anchored in “Hillary Clinton” associated with “Russia” and a large cluster around “Clinton...
Foundation.” Bridging the word “uranium” and the foundation cluster are words related to the mining business: “mining,” “investors,” and “transactions.”

The pattern of usage after October 15, 2017, reflects the shift in the media framing of the topic (Figure 5.15). In addition to the foundation-related cluster, a new cluster emerged around the terms “dossier,” “allegations,” “scandal,” and “probe.” These clusters are bridged by the term “prosecutor.” In the latter half of October 2017, the Uranium One story had been promoted in conservative media as a counternarrative to the Mueller investigation and coverage of the two had become tangled up.

A different perspective is offered by mapping the web-linking structure of Uranium One media coverage. Figure 5.16, which is based on all the sites that published stories on Uranium One from April 2015 to February 2018, exhibits a highly atypical structure, with a core of right-wing sites clustered tightly around the New York Times and The Hill. On the left (in deep blue), the primary sources are Fact Check and PolitiFact, and the story that makes the Washington Post relatively prominent is the Post’s fact-checking story, which gave the Uranium One story four Pinocchios. Few images reflect so clearly how the New York Times coverage of the Uranium One story was used as a key source of legitimation for the right.

Additional insights can be gleaned by decomposing the image into three distinct periods: the initial release of the Clinton Cash book in April–May 2015

![Figure 5.15](image-url)  Word2Vec clustering of terms in Uranium One–related stories, October 15, 2017–February 27, 2018.
The Fox Diet

(Figure 5.17a); the August 2016 period associated with the Breitbart release of the Clinton Cash movie (Figure 5.17b); and the October 2017 coverage (Figure 5.18). In the first two periods we see very clearly that coverage was anchored in the legitimating power of the New York Times story, which drew upon a prepublication copy of the Schweizer book. We will return to this in Chapter 6. By October 2017, although the New York Times story continued to play an important role as a source of authority, coverage in The Hill largely took over.

The quantitative measures and maps point us toward the timing of key events and inflection points, and provide macrolevel validation that something significant was going on, as well as identifying the most influential media sources. However, getting into the guts of what happened requires a more detailed examination of the stories themselves.

Figure 5.16 Network map of Uranium One stories, April 2015–February 2018. Architecture and node sizing by media inlinks.
Figure 5.17a April–May 2015.

Figure 5.17b August 2016.
Network map of Uranium One stories. Architecture and node sizing by media inlinks.
On October 17, 2017, John F. Solomon coauthored a detailed piece of investigative reporting on the Uranium One story in *The Hill*. Solomon, executive vice president at *The Hill*, is the former editor-in-chief of the *Washington Times* who was hired away by Sinclair Broadcasting to serve as chief creative officer for its relaunch of Circa News. Circa also published

![Network map of Uranium One stories, October 2017. Architecture and node sizing by media inlinks.](image)

**Figure 5.18** Network map of Uranium One stories, October 2017. Architecture and node sizing by media inlinks.
a piece based on the same revelation that same day.\textsuperscript{66} The opening three paragraphs of the Solomon article set the stage.

Before the Obama administration approved a controversial deal in 2010 giving Moscow control of a large swath of American uranium, the FBI had gathered substantial evidence that Russian nuclear industry officials were engaged in bribery, kickbacks, extortion and money laundering designed to grow Vladimir Putin’s atomic energy business inside the United States, according to government documents and interviews.

 Federal agents used a confidential U.S. witness working inside the Russian nuclear industry to gather extensive financial records, make secret recordings and intercept emails as early as 2009 that showed Moscow had compromised an American uranium trucking firm with bribes and kickbacks in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, FBI and court documents show.

 They also obtained an eyewitness account—backed by documents—indicating Russian nuclear officials had routed millions of dollars to the U.S. designed to benefit former President Bill Clinton’s charitable foundation during the time Secretary of State Hillary Clinton served on a government body that provided a favorable decision to Moscow, sources told The Hill.

Despite the insinuation of payments from Russians to the Clinton Foundation, the remainder of the story explained that the FBI was investigating Russians who were abusing their position while directing the U.S. operations of the Russian company that bought Uranium One. The charges alleged that the Russians offered contractors no-bid inflated price contracts in exchange for kickbacks. The Russian executives were cheating the Russian owners of Uranium One to enrich themselves at the expense of shareholders or other owners of the firm. Indeed, the remainder of the story has very little to say about the Clintons, dedicating a mere 100 additional words to recalling Schweizer’s book. The emphasis, instead, was on the nefarious character of Russian corruption and the supposed failures of the Department of Justice in investigating, charging, and reporting on the matter.

“The Department of Justice (DOJ) continued investigating the matter for nearly four more years,” Solomon and Spann wrote, “essentially leaving the American public and Congress in the dark about Russian nuclear corruption on U.S. soil during a period when the Obama Administration made two
major decisions benefiting Putin’s commercial nuclear ambitions.” This is where they introduce the new element into the story, finding fault with the Department of Justice. This element remains prominent and distinct, as the word clouds make clear, throughout the coverage over the next several weeks. The story in *The Hill* makes an explicit connection between that alleged failure and the compromised position of the central figures of the Trump-Russia investigation and lays the groundwork for what will follow in the next three weeks of coverage:

The investigation was ultimately supervised by then-U.S. Attorney Rod Rosenstein, an Obama appointee who now serves as President Trump’s deputy attorney general, and then-Assistant FBI Director Andrew McCabe, now the deputy FBI director under Trump, Justice Department documents show. Both men now play a key role in the current investigation into possible, but still unproven, collusion between Russia and Donald Trump’s campaign during the 2016 election cycle. McCabe is under congressional and Justice Department inspector general investigation in connection with money his wife’s Virginia state Senate campaign accepted in 2015 from now-Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe at a time when McAuliffe was reportedly under investigation by the FBI. The probe is not focused on McAuliffe’s conduct but rather on whether McCabe’s attendance violated the Hatch Act or other FBI conflict rules.

The connections to the current Russia case are many. The Mikerin probe began in 2009 when Robert Mueller, now the special counsel in charge of the Trump case, was still FBI director. And it ended in late 2015 under the direction of then-FBI Director James Comey, whom Trump fired earlier this year.

*The Hill* story then reported that the investigation ended with a whimper when the defendant pleaded guilty to one charge of conspiracy to commit money laundering. The authors implied that the plea, the understated announcement from the Department of Justice, and the fact that the evidence cited for the plea only covered actions that occurred after approval of the Uranium One deal all suggested that the Department of Justice was at least derelict in its handling of the matter. The piece closes with a quote from a Republican former representative that leaves the impression of a cover-up: “Not providing information on a corruption scheme before the Russian uranium deal was approved by U.S. regulators and engage appropriate
congressional committees has served to undermine U.S. national security interests by the very people charged with protecting them."

The story in The Hill by Solomon and Spann received some immediate coverage in mainline publications, including Newsweek, Bloomberg, and Yahoo! News, but took off like wildfire in the right-wing media ecosystem. On the day it was published, we collected over 40 stories that picked up the original story: from Fox News and the New York Post, through Breitbart and the Daily Caller, to the Gateway Pundit, Infowars, and Truthfeed. Several YouTube videos were made about it. One, made by an alt-right activist, received over 48,000 views, while Alex Jones’s Infowars version received 42,000. The Gateway Pundit, as usual, cut to the chase with a headline: “DEEP STATE SWAMP: Comey, Mueller, Rosenstein, Are Linked to Clinton Uranium One Deal—MOST CORRUPT OFFICIALS EVER!” Alex Jones, not to be undone, titled his segment “BREAKING: Mueller Transferred Uranium To Russia, Hid Clinton Crimes.” For all the excitement online, the Uranium One story is not actually a story about social media or online dissemination, but a traditional media story. All the stories published on October 17 combined received slightly over 400,000 Facebook shares, about half of which were of The Hill story itself, and almost all the remainder distributed between the New York Post and Breitbart. Rush Limbaugh raised The Hill story on his talk radio show that day, saying:

The FBI, folks, we have learned that there was collusion between the FBI and the Obama administration and the Russians in 2009 and 2010 over this uranium deal. Real collusion! Much more collusion than whatever Russia was doing by spending a hundred thousand dollars buying ads on Facebook. This is a blockbuster story, and it comes from our old buddy John Solomon, used to be at Circa, used to be at AP, used to be at the Washington Times, now he is at TheHill.com.

This really is a bombshell, except outside of TheHill.com it’s being ignored because it totally upsets every premise behind the get-Trump investigation. While they have no evidence of any collusion by Trump with Russia or versa-vice-a, there is all kinds of evidence that the FBI has had since 2009 and 2010 and suppressed over the Clintons, Bill and Hillary and the Canadian mogul that donated to their foundation and the transfer of United States American uranium
to Russia. Bill Clinton personally was enriched by thousands and thousands of dollars, as was the Clinton Foundation, the Crime Family Foundation.68

But the real powerhouse driving the story became Fox News.

As the map in Figure 5.20 shows, Fox News served alongside The Hill as a prominent node in the coverage. YouTube also clearly played a significant role. To understand that role, we analyzed the 92 YouTube videos that received links from stores related to Uranium One over the course of 2017. We coded them all, after removing the four which were off-topic. In Figures 5.19a and 5.19b, which depict the top 10 and top 30 videos by number of views, respectively, we see that the “Hannity Show” on Fox News is by far the most popular. Five of the top 10 videos are Hannity shows. The first- and third-most watched videos were two different versions of the same October 19 Hannity monologue, which we discuss in detail below. The second-most watched video in the set is from the Young Turks, a YouTube news and commentary program. They offered a middle-of-the-road validation of The Hill story and then a debate between its two hosts as to the validity and legitimacy of

![Figure 5.19a Top 10 most watched videos about Uranium One, 2017.](image-url)
concerns. An MSNBC segment debunking the Hannity storyline made the top 10, along with two more independent productions that repeated and validated the Hannity claims (InspoNews and WeAreChange).

Expanding the set to the top 30 increases the diversity of outlets but not the lopsided nature of the coverage. Lou Dobbs and Judge Jeannine

**Figure 5.19b** Total views of the top 30 most watched YouTube videos on Uranium One by producer, 2017.

**Figure 5.20** Screen of Hannity monologue, October 19, 2017.
join from the Fox lineup, as does Alex Jones's Infowars lower down the
viewership distribution. We also begin to see independent right-wing sites,
including four that are explicitly alt-right or white-identity sites. Only a
single video among these 30 top videos by viewership joins the MSNBC
rebuttal.

On the day of the original Hill report, Fox Business led television coverage
with mentions in three shows: “After the Bell” at 4:00 p.m., “Making
Money with Charles Payne” at 6:00 p.m., and “Lou Dobbs Tonight” at
7:00 p.m. Dobbs spoke with former Deputy Assistant to the President
Sebastian Gorka who, after throwing an aside at James Comey for “almost
single-handedly” destroying the reputation of the FBI, declared that an FBI
source was going on record with evidence of “pay for play, of corruption
occurring, and people will have to go to prison, because, it’s going to be a
humdinger.” The next day, Fox News aired segments about Uranium One
on their two most highly rated shows, Hannity and Tucker Carlson. The
Hannity segment included an interview in which Gingrich introduced
a version of a claim he would repeat, that this was “the biggest scandal in
history.” Following these reports, in the early morning hours of October 19,
President Trump tweeted: “Uranium deal to Russia, with Clinton help and
Obama Administration knowledge. Is the biggest story that Fake Media
doesn’t want to follow!”

Later that day, Trump again emphasized the story and its significance to
the ongoing investigation of his own campaign with Russia in a television
interview:

If the mainstream media would cover the uranium scandal and that
Russia has 20% of the uranium for whatever reason, and a lot of people
understand what those reasons may be—I think that’s your Russia
story. That’s your real Russia story, not a story where they talk about
collusion, and there was none. It was a hoax. The real Russia story is
uranium and how they got all of that uranium, vast percentage of what
we have. That is, to me, one of the big stories of the decade.

Harris Faulkner and Neil Cavuto ran segments on these comments on
Fox that day, but the most important piece was Hannity’s monologue that
night.

Hannity’s October 19 monologue, which ran nearly 15 minutes, became
the most viewed YouTube video on this controversy. But while its half million
views make it dominant on YouTube, it’s important to remember that the
same show got over three million viewers on cable, assuming that Hannity
had an average-for-him audience that evening. Hannity’s segment opened with a dramatic statement:

Tonight, massive bombshell breaking news developments in the biggest scandal ever involving Russia. We will continue to do what the corrupt lying mainstream media will not do because we will prove they are complicit in what is a huge cover-up. We will explain how the Clintons and Obama administration created a massive national security crisis by handing Vladimir Putin and Russia 20% of America’s uranium, which is the foundational material to make nuclear weapons and tonight we will explain in detail who and how many people knew that the Russians had infiltrated America’s uranium market and how all of this was before the Uranium One deal.73

The opening includes the three elements of misdirection. First, Uranium One, not the Trump-Russia investigation, is the really big scandal involving Russia. Second, any media organization that tells you otherwise is part of “the corrupt lying media.” And finally, all this is a huge cover-up involving the very people now investigating Donald Trump. Hannity then claimed that Bill Clinton had been paid $500,000 and cited both *The Hill* and the Circa reports that the FBI had evidence that “includes eyewitness accounts, that the Russian nuclear officials were funneling millions and millions of dollars to the Clinton Foundation while Hillary was actually serving as Secretary of State and personally signing off on the Uranium One deal. According to both explosive reports, the Obama Administration hid the evidence of this Russian bribery plot from Congress.”

As Hannity was saying these words, the screen behind him showed an image of the Clintons with the words “Clinton Kickback Scheme?” *The Hill* report at no point said that Hillary Clinton had personally approved the deal—there is no evidence she was involved at all, the State Department was one of nine agencies that voted unanimously, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission separately signed off on the deal. And the “eyewitness accounts” reported by *The Hill* were of kickbacks from American contractors of Russian companies to the Russian executives. The kickbacks had nothing to do with the approval or the Clintons. Hannity’s audience, however, was actively led to believe that all the evidence pointed to kickbacks from the Russians to the Clintons for the approval of the uranium deal. That assertion was purely fabricated.
The Fox Diet

The fundamental purpose of the revival of the story became clear toward the end of the segment. Hannity turned from old adversaries to new, just as The Hill piece did:

Of course these names will all sound familiar. The deputy Attorney General today, Rod Rosenstein, of course is second under the department of justice, under our attorney general Jeff Sessions. Then we have Andrew McCabe. They oversaw the FBI operation into the Russia bribery case. They clearly were well aware about what was taking place. They need to be put under oath. They need to tell us, why were they silent? Then Robert Mueller, too. He should not be leading any probes into Russian collusion. Guess why? He should be answering questions about the real Russian scandal. He should be put under oath. The conduct of Rod Rosenstein, McCabe, Mueller, it’s inexcusable. There’s a massive conflict of interest. They told nobody and in no way can they be trusted to conduct a fair investigation into anything—it’s time for them to literally resign—get out of the way or come public with everything they know. That’s my position. I think they’ve been compromised. Especially when it comes to Russia. It’s well past time for many of them to go. These people are corrupt and they’ve been compromised.74

Robert Mueller was a Republican who was appointed by George W. Bush to be the director of the FBI and who oversaw the reorganization of the FBI into a counterterrorism agency after 9/11. James Comey was a registered Republican for most of his adult life and had served as deputy attorney general under George W. Bush. As FBI Director, Comey likely tipped the 2016 presidential election to Donald Trump with his October surprise announcement about the Clinton email server investigation. Rod Rosenstein’s conservative credentials were such that he was nominated to become a federal appellate judge by George W. Bush. He was blocked by Maryland’s two Democratic senators and held up in a Senate Judiciary Committee controlled by Democrats. Andrew McCabe was a career FBI agent who told ABC News that “I have considered myself to be a Republican my entire life,” adding “I’ve voted for every Republican candidate for president in every election, except the 2016 one, in which I did not vote.”75 Fox News subjected these mainline law-and-order Republicans to the libel that they corruptly aided Russia in strengthening its nuclear weapons capability while weakening ours. Yesterday’s “Heroes of the Revolution” were overnight denounced as today’s counterrevolutionaries.
Hannity ended the segment as he started it, with an attack on the media. On the backdrop (Figure 5.21), a slide depicted the logos of CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post, ABC, CBS, NBC, and MSNBC, while Hannity said: “Finally, you’ve got the liberal media. For years we’ve been telling you journalism is dead. They’ve been lying to you, the American people, for well over a year about Russia, Russia, Russia. The press has been spreading fake news conspiracy theories almost 24/7 nonstop. Why are they so silent in this case?”

In this one brief quote, Hannity explained precisely why American conservatives distrust professional journalism. In the upside down world of the man who peddled in “Orgy Island” smears, cribbed “spirit cooking” conspiracies from Infowars, and trumpeted the Seth Rich conspiracy, these professional journalism outlets have been “spreading fake news conspiracy theories almost 24/7 nonstop.” As he put it, “For years we’ve been telling you journalism is dead.”

Hannity had it right. Right-wing media have been attacking mainstream journalism for decades. The theme of mainstream media bias has been a fixture of right-wing media at least since the 1944 launch of right-wing magazine Human Events by remnants of the America First Committee that had opposed U.S. entry into the war against Nazi Germany, and was an oft-repeated theme in the other media outlets that made up the first wave of postwar conservative media that we will describe in Chapter 11. But Rush Limbaugh, as he launched the second-generation right-wing media ecosystem, gave the attack on mainstream media its hyperbolic anti-journalism tone. Limbaugh christened

**Figure 5.21** Screen of Hannity monologue, October 19, 2017.
CNN the “Clinton News Network” in 1999, described the New York Times as “a coordinated leftist house organ,” and called the Times’s editor Howell Raines “Mullah” Raines, featuring his picture on his “website wearing a superimposed turban” in 2002. And in 2011 Limbaugh coined the term “The Four Corners of Deceit,” that “in our culture ... altogether combined, suffice to lie to students and the American people. The Four Corners of Deceit are government, academia, science, and the media.” Fox News’s own “Fair and Balanced” motto has from the start primed its viewers that other outlets are not. The continuously stated message is that all media not dedicated to a right-wing view are biased and partisan and that only those that are right-wing partisan are truthful and fair. That message was touted from the bully pulpit of the presidency weekly during the first year of the Trump, capped by President Trump’s 2017 Fake News Awards to CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post, ABC News, and so forth (Figure 5.22).

FIGURE 5.22 Donald Trump tweet announcing the 2017 Fake News Awards.
In Chapter 11 we describe the extensive evidence of asymmetric patterns of distrust in media in the United States. In particular the data describe a long-term pattern among conservatives that combines extremely low and decreasing trust in most media outlets and media in general, combined with a level of trust in Fox News that is extraordinarily high for any media source. Liberals and people with mixed liberal and conservative views spread their attention more evenly. And while liberals and moderates on average have much higher trust in media as a whole, they are generally more skeptical of any given outlet and trust no single outlet to the high degree that conservatives trust Fox. The attacks on journalism that we describe throughout this book almost certainly influence these patterns of trust and explain how conservatives have come to trust Hannity and Limbaugh as liberals trust the BBC and PBS.

On October 20, the day after Hannity’s extraordinary segment on Uranium One, Fox and Friends ran a segment about the Uranium One deal in which the spoken text was “the BIG Russia story is the fact that Bill and Hillary Clinton, because of her position as Secretary of State, were able to cash in one of the largest scandals that have ever involved the United States.” On October 20, the day after Hannity’s extraordinary segment on Uranium One, Fox and Friends ran a segment about the Uranium One deal in which the spoken text was “the BIG Russia story is the fact that Bill and Hillary Clinton, because of her position as Secretary of State, were able to cash in one of the largest scandals that have ever involved the United States.”

The big block letters at the bottom of the screen read: “Trump: Fake Media Excusing Dem Russia Deal.” As the text shifted to emphasizing that this story was about nuclear weapons capability, Mueller’s stint at the FBI, and Loretta Lynch at the Department of Justice, the bold caps under the screen scrolled

**Figure 5.23** Screen appearance on Fox and Friends, October 20, 2017.
the outlandish claim that “Russia Got 20% of U.S. Nuke Industry Under Obama.” (Figure 5.23)

That evening, Lou Dobbs interviewed Peter Schweizer, author of Clinton Cash, on his Fox Business show, opening with how vindicated Schweizer must feel. On October 24, Hannity returned to the Uranium One story, interviewing former Speaker Newt Gingrich. Gingrich opened his segment by calling the story “the greatest corruption scandal in American history,” bigger, he said, than the Teapot Dome in the 1920s, worse than the Grant administration in the 1870s, arguably the most corrupt administration in American history.82 That same evening, Lou Dobbs on Fox Business opened his show with the words:

Incriminating evidence, tying former President Clinton to the Uranium One scandal. The former president, Hillary Clinton, the Obama Administration are NOW, now, clearly in focus in what appears to be a quid pro quo deal that gave Russia ownership of a fifth of US uranium. NOW, those carping about Russian collusion with the current administration, they are silent as the REAL collusion involving collusion has been staring everyone straight in the face for years.

Three days later, Hannity aired a Sebastian Gorka interview, comparing the Clintons’ involvement in Uranium One to the Rosenbergs handing over nuclear bomb design secrets to the Soviet Union, and helpfully reminding viewers that the Rosenbergs had been executed for their deeds.83 One or more Fox programs returned to this “biggest scandal,” every day for the remainder of the month. It then died down for a while until November 14–15, when Jeff Sessions announced that the Department of Justice would take a closer look at the allegations, and then testified on the Hill about Russian influence during the 2016 election.

As Figures 5.2.4a and 5.2.4b show, the peaks in coverage on Fox Business and Fox News are closely aligned with coverage on the web. Certainly, there was a lot of coverage online throughout this period, but online audiences were dwarfed in comparison to the reach of Fox television. Given the sustained, repeated attention paid to the Uranium One story, at all hours of the day nearly every day, and the tenor and tone of these Fox News stories as they spun vastly overstated, often simply false versions of the events, combining actual spoken words with strong on-screen imagery, it would be
difficult to see the coverage from October to November 2017 as anything but a coordinated, sustained propagandist effort by the cable television network to shift attention to Uranium One as the “real Russia scandal” and to discredit the president’s opponents and discredit the ongoing...
investigation against him. Whatever efforts anyone else made on Facebook, Twitter, or the open web were largely secondary to the efforts of the most important source of news for nearly half of Trump’s voters: the network that 65 percent of Republicans trust; indeed, the only source of news that they consistently trust.