

On the events of January 6th and elite  
accountability.

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I teach and conduct research on strategic political communication and digital campaign practices. In a pair of publications — “On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths” (2019) and “How Digital Disinformation Turned Dangerous” (2020) – I have written about the unique dilemmas posed by recent shifts in the online information environment. While many other researchers have focused attention on the effects of disinformation and misinformation among the mass public, and focused attention on the mediating role that digital platforms (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in particular) have in algorithmically amplifying disinformation and misinformation, my research focuses on the supply side of misinformation. I study the political and media elites who seed, fertilize, and reap rewards from online conspiracy, distrust, and deception. Two insights from this research are pertinent to the work of the January 6th Select Committee.

In my academic essay “On Digital Disinformation and Democratic Myths,” I argue that the deleterious effects of disinformation campaigns have often been misdiagnosed. Using the Cambridge Analytica scandal as an instructive case, the article notes that the direct effects of digital disinformation are often vanishingly small, particularly in the realm of electoral politics where attitudes among the mass public are deeply held and persuasion of any sort is extremely rare. However the indirect effects of digital disinformation can still be deeply corrosive to democracy, because it undermines the “myth of the attentive public.”

The myth of the attentive public is a “load-bearing myth.” It is (or, at least, it once was) a shared normative belief among political and media elites. Elected officials and their peer networks acted as though the mass public paid attention to their behavior and would hold them accountable for lies, broken promises, and corrupt behavior. We are governed both by formal laws and by informal norms. The myth of the attentive public undergirds informal behavioral norms that are a necessary condition for a functional and at least minimally responsive representative government. We cannot require the mass public to be politically engaged and aware at all times, but we must have a political class that behaves as though the public were engaged and aware.

Digital disinformation campaigns in the past half-dozen years have damaged this core pillar of American democracy not by misinforming the mass public, but by undermining this central governance norm among political elites. If all news is “fake,” then truth becomes subjective and elected officials learn to chase power and profit through lies and attacks on responsive government.

In my book chapter for *The Disinformation Age*, titled “How Digital Disinformation Turned Dangerous,” I outline how the development of the online media environment over the past 25 years has accelerated and incentivized lies and misinformation. The rise of algorithmically-optimized social media platforms has accelerated the speed at which online rumors and conspiracy theories can spread. The growth of the online audience and online advertising economics has created a situation in which there is far more power and profit to be found through cheap disinformation tricks than there was in decades past. And this has occurred against the backdrop of weakened elite permission structures, in which strategic actors have learned that there is often no penalty for building power on a foundation of outright fabrications.

I believe the findings from these two publications are relevant to the Select Committee when considering the unique problem of holding political elites responsible for inciting the insurrection.

Consider, for example, the language that John Eastman used when addressing the rally of Trump supporters just hours before many of those supporters descended upon the Capitol building: “we know there was fraud... we know that dead people voted... but we now know (...) how the machines contributed to that fraud.” He went on to describe a “secret folder” in the voting machines that produced fake votes for Biden on November 3rd and also asserts that the same rigged machines awarded Senators Warnock and Ossoff their narrow victories on January 5th.

If Eastman had been telling the truth – if there was, in fact, clear evidence that the Democratic Party in the State of Georgia had electronically rigged the voting apparatus such that their party could no longer lose elections – then mass revolt would be justified. In countries that rig the voting machines so only one party can ever win, regime change only comes through mass insurrection.

But Eastman’s statement was nonsense. It had been laughed out of every courtroom in which it had been presented. The claim was pure fabrication, but it was also a strategic fabrication – a rhetorical ploy meant to galvanize an outraged response from a crowd predisposed to believe him. Why did so many believe that the election was stolen? Because they heard it online, and on the radio, and on television. They heard it from trusted political elites who presumably knew more than they did. And those political elites fabricated a narrative that sought to undermine faith in American elections because they expected to derive personal benefit from the narrative and feared no repercussions from spreading outright lies.

If we are to repair trust in our political institutions and prevent the next January 6th, we will have to repair the myth of the attentive public in the eyes of our media and political elites. We must find a way to hold the most powerful members of American society to a higher standard than we hold everyday American citizens.

Part of what led to the events of January 6th was the assumption, amongst at least some members of our political class, that they would be held to a lower standard and could face no social approbation, normative shunning, or legal repercussions for their actions.

American democracy can only function if we have elites who behave as though violating the public trust can have negative consequences.

## Citations

David Karpf, "On Disinformation and Democratic Myths" Social Science Research Council, December 10, 2019. <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/expert-reflections/on-digital-disinformation-and-democratic-myths/>

David Karpf, "How Digital Disinformation Turned Dangerous," in Steven Livingston and W. Lance Bennett, *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).