

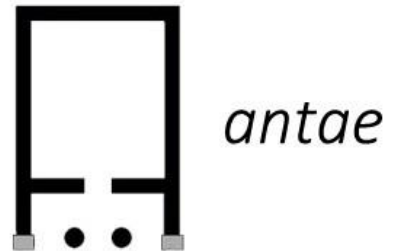
Introduction to Deadly Delusions #5

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Introduction to Deadly Delusions #5

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How did mass media campaigns encourage these acts of mass violence?

- The Holocaust, 1941-45
- Genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda, April-July 1994
- The murder of at least 274 people in the United States by right-wing extremists since 2007¹

In these three cases, mass media campaigns encouraged perpetrators by exciting irrationality, hatred, and violence. These campaigns were deadly because they fabricated grievances, dehumanised others, and preached eliminationism, which I define as discourses, actions, and social policies that seek to suppress, exile, or exterminate perceived opponents.² Nazi leaders used radio, film, and print. Hutu extremists used radio primarily. Right wing propagandists in the United States, such as Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Ann Coulter, use television, radio, print, and the Internet. These propagandists push their followers to the threshold of violence.

A threshold is the point of arousal at which an agent takes an action, such as joining a lynch mob. Joshua M. Epstein explains that an agent's disposition is the sum of affective and deliberative components. 'If one's total disposition [...] exceeds the threshold, [...], then the action is taken'.³ Other agents' dispositions, such as fear and rage, function as contributing factors and can have contagious effects. One example is Jim David Adkisson, who killed two and injured others at a Unitarian church in Tennessee in 2008. Adkisson's manifesto explains:

Who I wanted to kill was every Democrat in the Senate & House, the 100 people in Bernard Goldberg's book. I'd like to kill everyone in the mainstream media. But I know those people were inaccessible to me. I couldn't get to the generals & high ranking officers of the Marxist

¹ Christopher Mathias, 'Murders by U.S. White Supremacists More than Doubled in 2017, New Report Shows', *Huffington Post*, (17 January 2018). <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-supremacist-murders-2017-report_us_5a5f59b0e4b0ee2ff32c4bea>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

² My definition is adapted from David Neiwert, *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American Right* (CA: PoliPoint Press LLC, 2009).

³ Joshua M. Epstein, *Agent_Zero: Toward Neurocognitive Foundations for Generative Social Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 7-8.

movement so I went after the foot soldiers, the chickenshit liberals that vote in these traitorous people.⁴

Propagandists such as Limbaugh, Beck, and Coulter distort the worldviews of people like Adkisson with lies: Obama was born in Kenya; climate change is a hoax; all Muslims are terrorists; liberals invented stories about Russian interference in the election to discredit Trump; Hillary Clinton runs a child sex ring out of a pizza parlor; millions of people vote illegally. These lies, which became mass delusions, shape political discourse and result in wars, environmental destruction, attacks on democratic institutions and processes, economic inequality, human rights abuses, and daily acts of violence against people in scapegoated groups.

I began the comic series *Deadly Delusions* in 2013 in response to the increasingly extreme and dangerous right-wing propaganda I had observed over the past several decades.⁵ My aim for the project has been to combine scholarship, maximal rhetorical force, and a punk do-it-yourself aesthetic. *Deadly Delusions* shifts away from debates about whether the media is biased or if it is fair to both sides. Rather, it asks whether the media is spreading mass delusion and pushing eliminationist policies. As Muhammad Idrees Ahmad writes:

[D]isdain for truth has become a defining feature of modern politics. The function of lies is no longer to persuade; it is to challenge the primacy of facts. Relativism has been weaponised by the powerful to eliminate the very possibility of justice.⁶

Only one side of the political spectrum, however, consistently commits the most serious crimes against truth. As Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein famously wrote in 2012: 'The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.'⁷ Deadly delusions in the United States are springing from the lies of GOP leaders and from their propagandists in the media.

⁴ David Neiwert, 'Knoxville Church Shooter's Manifesto Leaves No Doubt: Murders Were Political Terror against Liberals', *Crooks and Liars*, (29 May 2012). <<http://crooksandliars.com/david-neiwert/knoxville-church-shooters-manifesto>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

⁵ Barry Mauer, 'Deadly Delusions, Issue 1: Eliminationist Rhetoric in Mainstream Political Discourse', *Itineration: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Rhetoric, Media, and Culture*, (2014) <<http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/itineration/dd1>>; 'Deadly Delusions, Issue 2: Madness and the Cult of the Right', *Itineration: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Rhetoric, Media, and Culture*, (2014) <<http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/itineration/dd2>>; 'Deadly Delusions, Issue 3: The Roots of Denial,' *Itineration: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Rhetoric, Media, and Culture*, (2015) <<http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/itineration/dd3>>; 'Deadly Delusions, Issue 4: Smart Idiots', *Itineration: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Rhetoric, Media, and Culture*, (2015) <<http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/itineration/dd4>>. [All accessed 12 September 2018]

⁶ Muhammad Idrees Ahmad, 'Syria and Beyond: Manufactured Doubt and Moral Atrophy', *The New Arab*, (11 October 2017). <<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/10/11/syria-and-beyond-manufactured-doubt-and-moral-atrophy>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

⁷ Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, 'Let's Just Say It: The Republicans Are The Problem,' *The Washington Post*, (27 April 2012).

A delusion, as defined by Lawrie Reznek, professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto, is a belief ‘firmly held in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary’.⁸ When mass media propagate misinformation we get not only misinformed citizens but also *folie a culte*, or shared delusion.⁹ Followers of Limbaugh and his ilk are cultish when they show unwavering support regardless of how wrong or destructive their leaders become. What might otherwise be benign identities, such as Christian and white, become toxic through propaganda that transforms people into a group subject with a new worldview full of paranoid grievances and raging resentments, which act like drugs that short-circuit reason and empathy.

Nearly all humans are vulnerable to such propaganda, but some more than others. Reznek argues that most people who commit evil acts do so because they convince themselves they are good people doing the right thing. They are dangerous because they are deluded and because their disposition is likely to cross the threshold for action. We see similar delusions and threshold crossings in cults, such as People’s Temple or Heaven’s Gate, in which people committed mass suicide and/or homicide because they were convinced of the fatally flawed worldview offered by their leaders and they felt themselves free of societal constraints against violent actions.

Consider the dangers posed by Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, two of the most influential right-wing propagandists in the United States during the past decades. Beck stated that President Obama had sympathies for terrorists,¹⁰ is a Marxist,¹¹ fascist,¹² and racist who ‘has a deep seated hatred of white people and white culture,’¹³ and that his health care plan included government-run death panels.¹⁴ Limbaugh stated that Obama was not a Christian¹⁵ but a socialist¹⁶ and that

(Cont’d). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lets-just-say-it-the-republicans-are-the-problem/2012/04/27/gIQAxCVUIT_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b7153524ba3c>. [Accessed 11 September 2018].

⁸ Laurie Reznek, *Delusions and the Madness of the Masses* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), p. xvi.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 69-91.

¹⁰ ‘Glenn Beck: Obama Is “Sympathetic” To Terrorists’ “Cause”’, *HuffPost Media*, (18 March 2011).

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/18/glenn-beck-obama-sympathetic-terrorists_n_837447.html>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

¹¹ Alex, ‘Glenn Beck: Obama is a Marxist, Great Depression Happened in 1948, and Beck Has The Charts To Prove It’, *News Hounds*, (12 January 2010).

<http://www.newshounds.us/2010/01/12/glenn_beck_obama_is_a_marxist_great_depression_happened_in_1948_and_beck_has_the_charts_to_prove_it.php>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

¹² Christine Schwen, ‘Beck Continues Long History of Invoking Nazis by Comparing Fox to the Jews during the Holocaust’, *Media Matters for America*, (13 October 2009).

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¹³ ‘Glenn Beck: Obama is a Racist’, *CBS News*, (29 July 2009). <http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250_162-5195604.html>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

¹⁴ Amanda Terkel, ‘Beck Agrees with Palin’s “Death Panel” Claim: “I Believe It to Be True”’, *Think Progress*, (10 August 2009). <<http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2009/08/10/55462/beck-death-panel/>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

¹⁵ ‘Limbaugh: “Obama Says He’s a Christian but Where’s the Evidence?”’, *Media Matters for America*, (19 August 2010). <<http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/201008190034>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

climate change is a myth and a plot to destroy the United States.¹⁷ Whether Beck and Limbaugh actually believe what they say matters less than whether their followers adopt the worldviews they offer.

Because right wing propagandists such as Limbaugh have been allowed to operate for so long in a large media space, they have shaped the worldviews of their audiences, making them more likely to accept false information. Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, following the work of Walter Lippmann, argue that to understand how persuasion works, we first have to account for the pictures in our heads, which provide context for understanding any persuasive message.¹⁸ Additionally, Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber argue that the mass media is a platform for public relations companies to package distorted pictures of the world.¹⁹ Finally, Carl Sagan claims that a lack of scientific literacy in America has rendered us unable to evaluate scientific claims that appear in the media and, furthermore, that modern forms of pseudo-science, such as widespread belief in alien abductions, are merely secular versions of witch crazes.²⁰

Propagandists hijack the mass media and distort the worldviews of their audiences, making them vulnerable to eliminationist rhetoric. These conditions pose a direct threat to democratic and tolerant societies because, as Lawrie Reznik states, '[t]olerance must imply being intolerant of intolerance.'²¹ Is this statement a contradiction or merely a paradox? How do democratic and tolerant societies deal with their antidemocratic elements without losing democratic and tolerant forums? It is up to us to confront intolerance, but by no means is it easy. In confronting intolerance, we run the risk of destroying our own forums and our values. I suggest we forcefully address those cases in which media figures employ violent rhetoric. Typical comments include these from Ann Coulter: 'My only regret with Timothy McVeigh is [that] he did not go to the New York Times Building,'²² or 'We need somebody to put rat poisoning in Justice Stevens' *creme brulee*', which she called a 'joke'.²³ Such rhetoric, and the people who employ it, should be denied a platform because it inspires acts such as these:

¹⁶ 'Limbaugh: If We Can't Call Obama a Socialist Because We'll Be Called Racist, "We May As Well Just Give Up"', *Media Matters for America*, (21 December 2011). <<http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/201112210012>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

¹⁷ 'Rush Limbaugh: Climate Change Misinformer of the Year', *Media Matters for America*, (29 December 2011). <<http://mediamatters.org/research/201112190006?frontpage>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

¹⁸ See Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York, NY: W.H. Freeman and Company, 2001).

¹⁹ See Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles with Your Future* (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2002).

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²¹ Reznik, p. 193.

²² Philip Elliott, 'Coulter Draws Fire for Bashing 9/11 Widows', *The Washington Post*, (9 June 2006). <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/09/AR2006060900226.html>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

²³ 'Ann Coulter "Jokes" That a Supreme Court Justice Should Be Poisoned—And is Compared to Lil' Kim', *Editor & Publisher*, (27 January 2006). <<http://www.editorandpublisher.com/news/ann-coulter-jokes-that-a-supreme-court-justice-should-be-poisoned-and-is-compared-to-lil-kim/>>. [Accessed 12 September 2018].

- Richard Poplawski killed three Pittsburgh police officers out of fears that Obama would take away his second amendment rights.
- Charles Wilson threatened to kill Washington Senator Patty Murray for her vote in favor of health care reform.
- Byron Williams was on his way to kill members of the ACLU but got caught in a gun battle with California Highway Patrol.²⁴

When we perceive dangerous delusion in others, we must choose our response. We may do nothing, reasoning that the deluded person will realise their error. We might rationalise that the deluded person will restrain himself should the urge arise. We can justify inaction with the bromide that everyone is entitled to his own opinion no matter how wrong, or with the cliché that beliefs by themselves are not dangerous.

These arguments for justifying inaction are themselves based on delusional thinking. We face an epidemic of delusion in the mass media and we need a comprehensive plan to treat it. Such a plan must include provisions to identify delusions and to identify the propagandists who foster them. Finally, any plan to preserve a democratic and tolerant society must make provisions to hold propagandists accountable or they will continue to lead us further down the road to catastrophe.

²⁴ David Brock and Ari Rabin-Havt. *The Fox Effect: How Roger Ailes Turned a Network into a Propaganda Machine* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), pp. 152-53.

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