Defending Truth in the Age of Deception

The role of scholarship in the emerging information paradigm

by Carlos Álvarez-Aranyos

Author Bio

Carlos Álvarez-Aranyos is a globally-renowned strategic communications professional who oversaw Protect Democracy's organization-wide communications, media relations, and strategic communications campaign to protect the 2020 election. Prior to joining Protect Democracy, Carlos provided strategic communications counsel to the US Department of Defense, and consulted for many prominent organizations, including the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, HSBC, the Yacht Club de Monaco, and the California Federal Public Defender's Office. He is an avid adventurer, motorcyclist, mandolinist, boxer, SCUBA diver, and cook.

Note: The speech was originally given as the keynote address at Publisherspeak US 2024.

I extend, first and foremost, my humble gratitude for the invitation to speak to you today. It is truly an honor for me to address such a distinguished audience at such a consequential time.

You have an awesome responsibility: To discover and validate truth, distill wisdom, and organize and archive human knowledge. In this age of social media, artificial intelligence, and information laundering, what you do is perhaps the most essential of all human endeavors.

So, I will kick off by thanking you for your service to humanity. For your adherence to process and respect for outcomes. For your fealty to the highest of human ideals and your role in sustaining civilization. For your continuation of traditions dating back to Gutenberg 600 years ago.

I also want to apologize for the attacks you're enduring. As humans grapple with cataclysmic change and a cycle of political cynicism, they are once again attacking truth and those who protect it. You are caught in the political crossfire, and you don't deserve to be.

That said, the only constructive path is forward, and I'm here to discuss the state of truth in our evolving information ecosystem, the role scholarship must play in helping us address the existential challenges it faces, and the innovations required to protect it.

Restoring truth to its rightful place at the center of our public discourse will not be a passive process. Those who benefit from undermining it have made too much progress and have the momentum. If we do nothing, we will lose this battle. The downstream consequences of that loss would be catastrophic: Public policy can't be made without accurate data and analysis, public health can't be protected without public trust in medical information, and political choices can't be made in the absence of shared facts. We can't pass on our collective wisdom or learn from our mistakes without responsible scholarship.

For the first time in modern history, truth is an underdog, and its successful defense will require a proactive campaign not only leveraging the collective will of all who believe in it but also a massive effort to convince those who don't.

Democracy can't survive without a trusted public square, and trust in ours is crumbling.

That's why I'm here.

You wouldn't normally find someone like me speaking to this audience. As a strategic communications practitioner, I'm extremely comfortable toeing the line between truth and lies and weaponizing information to deliver political outcomes.

People like me are the ones who constantly remind political candidates that they can't do the good stuff they want to do unless they win, and that winning often requires entering some murky waters when it comes to truthfulness, openness, and transparency. Within a set of ethical guidelines, I will say just about anything to deliver political victories.

Yet here I am, speaking to quite possibly the most truth-committed audience on the planet and serving as the co-founder and chief communications officer of The American Sunlight Project, where my job is to protect our information environment and increase the cost of lies that threaten American democracy.

So why is an information warrior like me speaking to you today and helping lead the fight against disinformation?

Because the organizers of this event are keenly aware of how the information environment is changing and how the evolution of our society threatens to dismiss human scholarship as an anachronism. They also understand how important what you do is to our collective future and are seeking to equip you properly for the fight to come.

I have exploited the information landscape for a very long time, and I can, therefore, see how acute the threats have become. Like an expert logger looking at an empty forest, I've realized that if we cut down any more trees the forest will never be restored.

My commitment to democracy is greater than my commitment to strategic communications. My expertise in fighting political battles tells me that we've reached a point of no return. That—without expert political engagement—the liars will win, the truth will lose, and the battle won't be particularly close.

Lies currently have the most powerful marketing team on earth.

Coupled with a technological revolution that is empowering every individual on Earth to become a disinformation superpower and an audience that is entirely addicted to the information flows, it creates a threat unlike any we've confronted before.

The emerging information paradigm is exploiting our openness, our democracy, our freedoms, our social and professional networks, and our technology—and weaponizing them against us.

That campaign doesn't depend on defined victories, but on erosion. The longer it continues, the more beachhead it consumes, until truth has nowhere to plant its flag.

While we've seen attacks on truth at this scale before, we've never seen them interact with the accelerants that are currently in place. I've often wondered what Nazi propaganda efforts would have achieved if they had access to modern technology and social networks, and I have a very real fear that the answer may come to us not as theory, but as example.

Given enough time and continued erosion, our information environment will become so polluted that our public square will resemble a spam folder where we're being bombarded with believable falsehoods specifically targeted to activate our pre-existing biases. Information is nearly impossible to validate in real time, and where everything we consume is curated by algorithms, we are being siloed into ever-smaller compartments of belief and being robbed of the freedom to think.

Meanwhile, because that reality is settling in slowly and organically, we have yet to fully identify the threat, activate our defenses, and mount an organized

response, so the momentum is firmly on the other side. We are frogs in a pot, and the water is getting warmer.

Those of us who work in politics see it very clearly, and I know you do, too.

Our worlds—yours of seeking and validating truth and mine of delivering political victories—are on a collision course, and this future of yours largely depends on how you navigate mine.

So, I'm here to provide you with a political consult and to lay out the state of play and help you build a strategy for countering an existential threat to your sector and the world at large. To ensure that those who know truth the best become its most effective defenders.

The attack on truth isn't new, nor is it accidental. While many elements have aligned to make the current threat particularly acute, what we're seeing now is the result of an intentional strategy.

In 2016, we saw the completion of a political transition fifty-five years in the making: The subjugation of truth to perception, driven by an affirmative effort from a significant portion of our political establishment to move from lies of convenience to lies of existence.

They couldn't win with the truth, so they embraced lies, and they developed a long-term political strategy to overwhelm our social order with those lies.

Their strategy involved removing certain guardrails against false information, including the fairness doctrine and rules governing media ownership, and building massive broadcast networks to repeat the lies until they were believed as fact.

They were aided by technology, including the rise of cable television and the advent of the Internet.

Their campaign has been extremely successful: Since 1969, we've seen a dramatic erosion of trust in public information and institutions, and our national debate has devolved from constructive argument to destructive confrontation.

According to Pew Research, "US adults under 30 now trust social media almost as much as national news outlets." Cable news has deliberately blurred the lines between opinion and fact, and large language models are quickly becoming normalized despite clear evidence that they can be wildly wrong.

The result is that we are as polarized as we've ever been; every disagreement is framed in existential terms, and we have nowhere to look for reliable information that can be accepted by all sides to settle our debates.

Meanwhile, artificial intelligence and social media have empowered every individual on Earth to produce and disseminate false but believable information quickly and widely without any form of accountability, and the evolution of deepfake technology threatens to undermine our faith in all multimedia content.

To be clear, while there are clear partisan origins to this sustained campaign against truth, both sides have contributed to its normalization. Every lie told by our leaders to sustain their power has served to undermine our faith in public information. Every attack on science as a convenient scapegoat for a lack of political action has deepened the crisis. Every doubt expressed about inconvenient truths has turned us into unreasonable cynics, self-empowered to disagree with experts because we don't want to confront a daunting reality.

We've licensed ourselves to disavow facts based on feelings and suspicions, casting aside the respect the academic process has earned through its longstanding commitment to rigorous scholarship.

Meanwhile, the first generation to have existed entirely under the emerging information paradigm is reflecting our traditional stubbornness and dismissing responsible information management as an unwelcome burden, choosing to value narratives over facts and subscribing to the idea that perception is more important than reality.

The "good" actors in this new paradigm are monetizing fake lives on Instagram and Snapchat. The "bad" ones are willfully unraveling decades of norms meant to protect us from our worst impulses or—in many cases—actively enabling the creation and dissemination of disinformation under claims of "free speech absolutism."

Both the "good" and the "bad" are embracing falsehoods for personal benefit and ignoring the impact their actions have on our social order.

Social media platforms are disowning their responsibility over their content, enabled by a government either unwilling or unable to properly govern them. Artificial intelligence companies are leaving ideals behind in favor of monetary incentives. Disinformation researchers are being relentlessly attacked, falsely accused of censorship by those who want to normalize lies for political benefit.

Books are being banned and, in some cases, burned. Expertise is being rejected. People want to "do their own research" without understanding or respecting any of the processes that validate actual research.

And we can't remedy any of it through fact-checking, partly because the elevation of narratives over facts has resonance: A good story serves its point by interweaving fact and fiction, and a good storyteller can be forgiven for lies told in service of a higher truth.

The most effective pieces of disinformation build on kernels of truth, allowing those who propagate them to use those truths to deflect from their malign intent and to indemnify themselves from the downstream consequences of their actions.

Expressing indignation at this state of affairs is useless. We can't fault humans for preferring narratives over unequivocal truths. Doubt is a central component of individuality. We feel special when we reject what everyone else accepts, and bringing others to believe in our irrational views is the most democratized form of leadership there is. For many people, it's the only thing they can do to feel involved in our public discourse.

Now more than ever, contrarianism is conflated with intelligence, and those who reject normative thinking are considered pioneers. We have empowered haters and trolls to such a degree that there is little keeping them from corrupting our entire information ecosystem as a way of placating their insecurities.

Their momentum is enormous, and those of us committed to defending truth find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of feeling like everything is aligned against us, that we're losing the battle, and that we have no chance of victory.

That's a feeling you become very familiar with when you work on political campaigns. There are days when everything is crashing around you, and you struggle to maintain the will to fight.

Those of us who succeed in politics have an ability to internalize that pressure differently. We use it to compress the problem, focus our thinking, and gain additional clarity.

In these moments, the essential thing is to stop thinking in terms of change and start thinking in terms of innovation.

While change is usually a defensive response to incoming attacks, innovation is an offensive one: It moves us from reacting to the actions of our opponents to manifesting new lines of attack of our own.

Being proactive allows us to control the directionality and scope of our efforts and reduce our exposure to our opponent's actions. Rather than accepting to fight on their terms, we move them to ours.

The difference between change and innovation mirrors the difference between management and leadership: While managers attempt to repair broken systems, leaders show the courage to scrap antiquated systems and begin anew.

This moment demands leadership, and you are best positioned to provide it. Your relationship with truth puts you at the center of this fight.

But it will require innovation because you won't be able to fully address our external concerns until you've dealt with your internal challenges.

Scholarly publishing is confronting unprecedented change. As curators of human knowledge, you're facing existential questions about how to protect the integrity of your processes amidst a technological revolution. The rise of

digital publishing and its impact on audience expectations. The challenge of monetization. The loss of public respect for expertise and the scientific process. The rise of big data and artificial intelligence. The form, function, and future of peer review.

Most of these challenges revolve around how to properly value processes and outcomes and how to reckon with the proper role humans should play in the scholarly process.

As of now, you seem to be prioritizing tradition over evolution—which is logical given the generational responsibility you hold in organizing human knowledge—but there is a real danger that the emerging information paradigm and the technological revolution that's fueling it will overwhelm your traditional processes and structurally challenge the integrity of the entire academic construct.

What will expertise mean in the age of artificial intelligence? How will peer review integrate technological advancement? How will that affect authorship? Will the public be willing to wait for scholarly processes before reaching faster conclusions by prompting computers? What will constitute plagiarism in this new environment? How will credit and value be allocated?

These questions don't have easy answers. While the scholarly publishing industry is still healthy, it's clear that securing its future will require an overhaul and that answering these questions—and others like it—will be essential to getting it right.

To get a sense of what's at stake, it's useful to look at what's happened to journalism, which has faced similar challenges and struggled to adapt.

As of now, journalists have failed to find a business model that can succeed in the new information environment, and their failure may be a harbinger of things to come for your sector.

In fact, unlike scholarly publishers, journalists don't face significant up-front costs and long production timetables, so in some ways, they have considerable advantages over the scholarly publishing industry.

It is important to reimagine your industry while you are still strong and have the assets required to make big bets on the future. If you allow yourselves to slide towards uncertainty and then respond to that slide, you will likely meet the same fate journalism has met.

In circumstances like these, adapting to challenges as they continually emerge becomes a game of whack-a-mole, only serving to constantly displace you from your strategic trajectory, undermine your confidence, and erode public trust in your work. That path is a losing path.

The alternative is innovation.

Your task is to reimagine what scholarship is and to build it as a mechanism capable of defending truth in the digital age. To construct new systems to meet a new moment and protect the central role of scholarship in the marketplace of ideas.

Thankfully, the academic community has profound experience with hard problems, intellectual humility, and collaboration, and approaching the overhaul of scholarship as a collaborative academic exercise is a good place to start.

Truth needs a historic marketing effort, and scholars are perfectly positioned to lead it. To tell the story of truth and make it go viral. To elevate your processes and teach a new generation why what you do matters.

To inspire young people to scholarship, and remind the world that expertise delivers by driving the very technological progress that is creating so many of these challenges.

In the process of building a new scholastic paradigm, you have an opportunity to help restore some of the basic tenets of human existence: the concept of truth, the responsibility humans have to keep each other informed, the openness to listen to each other and engage in honest debate, the will to fight for new ways to deliver equity, representation, and hope, to make it easier for citizens to meet their responsibilities to their nation and the world, and the discipline to archive knowledge and use it to draw the wisdom we need to avoid repeating our mistakes. Above all, the ability to admit when we're wrong.

The story of technology and scholarship need not be a story of doom. It can be a story of empowerment. One that clarifies where humanity stands and positions us to meet the future.

This is a moment of opportunity, where a seismic shift in our information paradigm presents you with an opening to reclaim your rightful place as humanity's curators of knowledge and guardians of truth.

It will require a great shift: Where scholarship was once limited to researching, testing, and reporting truth, you will now be asked to occupy an additional role as advocates who embrace a political fight and win it and sell the world on why truth matters.

Amid a global competition for attention and validation, you can't label the game as beneath you and skip it. You have to remind every generation that your position is earned, that your process is rigorous, that your results are important, and that we ignore you at our peril.

You have historically resisted taking part in political fights in order to preserve your impartiality. While you should always continue to keep politics away from scholarship, you must be willing to make an exception in the political

struggle to protect truth precisely because your fate hangs in the balance.

And while that will draw you close to boundaries you've never been willing to cross, it is the most important innovation you can make.

You are teachers, and you are called to teach the world why truth matters. You can no longer allow others to use you as political pawns without entering the fray.

I'm not suggesting that you become political operatives like me, but I am suggesting that you analyze what I do and adapt it to your fight.

Getting people to believe in you isn't about proving that you're right; it's about crafting narratives about the future your path will deliver for them. About leveraging the benefits you provide to secure your own future.

To build an inspirational vision and contrast it with the alternative: What would a world without scholarship look like? How would it impact our children? Our lives? What is the value of truth? Of intellectual humility? Of collaboration? Of the willingness to accept new information and change our minds?

We've always considered the answers to these questions to be so obvious that they're not even worth answering. That is sadly no longer the case.

Scholarship needs to build a communications strategy and to mount a political campaign. You need to explain to our planet that your efforts drive their progress and that respecting your process protects and empowers their lives.

To meet people where they are and inspire them to believe in what you produce.

You will have a lot of help, particularly from people like me who see the cataclysm we will face if the rejection of truth is normalized. People who know that democracy can't survive without a trusted public square.

Our future is in your hands, and all of those standing on the right side of history will be standing beside you as you lead this campaign.

I challenge you to leave this meeting with a new purpose: To innovate new scholarship. To open new channels of communication, explore new ways to brand yourselves and your work, elevate effective voices, and mount a strategic communications campaign worthy of your legacy. To think intentionally about how you might adapt your processes to meet this impossible moment and the moments to come, and to empower your continued stewardship of knowledge and wisdom for the next 600 years.

That is your mission. Please choose to accept it.

Thank you very much.