

“Reality” Is Splitting

In April 2004, a dozen men traveled from cities across the country to attend a clandestine meeting in a quaint, tucked-away corner of Dallas. The men were in their late fifties and early sixties, and they had about them a similar look: weathered yet tough. For more than thirty years, they had led divergent lives, but they were here to revisit their shared past—the crucible of Vietnam. John Kerry, the Massachusetts senator and decorated Vietnam veteran, had recently emerged as leader in the contest for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. Like Kerry, the men in Dallas had once served on navy Swift boats, the shallow-water craft used in dangerous counterinsurgency missions around the Mekong Delta, in southeastern Vietnam, between 1968 and 1970. These men couldn’t stand the thought of their fellow vet becoming president. When they considered the manner in which Kerry, as a young man, had protested the

war, words like *traitor* and *criminal* came to mind. Now they hatched an audacious plan to undo Kerry's reputation as a hero. Here's the amazing thing: it worked.

The men gathered in a grand two-story mansion that functions as the headquarters of Spaeth Communications, a public relations firm founded by a brilliant PR expert named Merrie Spaeth. Spaeth had agreed to host the meeting at the request of her old friend John O'Neill, the Swift boat veteran who rose to prominence in 1971, when he and Kerry debated the war in an appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*. O'Neill and the others who'd assembled here all agreed on one thing about Kerry: he was "unfit for command," a phrase they would later fashion into a slogan for their campaign. But now, as they planned their effort, there emerged among the men a disagreement concerning the fundamental nature and scope of Kerry's Vietnam-era sins.

In 1971, shortly after Kerry returned from Vietnam, he declared his opposition to the war in an unforgettable speech to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. For decades, veterans have simmered over his suggestion, during that testimony, that American troops had committed atrocities against Vietnamese civilians. The best course of action now, some at the Dallas meeting suggested, would be to remind voters about Kerry's speech and to explain why many who served in Vietnam resented the senator for it. The United States was again embroiled in war, and questions of patriotism dominated politics. If the men could show that Kerry had once betrayed our troops, some argued, they could prompt voters to think twice before giving the senator ultimate command of the military now.

But most here wanted to go further. Early in 2004, the historian Douglas Brinkley published *Tour of Duty: John Kerry*

and the Vietnam War, a best-selling account of Kerry’s service based largely on the journals Kerry kept during the war. But Kerry’s version of what had occurred in Vietnam, as reported by Brinkley, did not square with what some Swift boat veterans recalled. “They all brought along the Brinkley book,” Spaeth remembers of the meeting in her office that spring day. “They had annotated it, tabbed it. There were a million sticky notes.” Again and again during the course of the afternoon, the men referred back to their copies, pointing out passages they considered suspect. “They would say, ‘Look what it says here. And look what it says here. That’s not the way it was.’”

To these veterans, the Brinkley book represented an ambitious politician’s attempt to repackage a scurrilous period in his life into a time of high-flying heroism. The John Kerry they remembered was no hero—he’d behaved dishonorably after the war, but, more important, they believed he’d acted badly *during* the war. The Kerry they remembered had engaged the enemy recklessly, endangering other men; he had lied to win his medals; and he might even have committed war crimes. To these veterans, it would not do to indict Kerry only for his *postwar* actions. They pressed for an expansive case against the candidate—a case that posited, *Everything you think you know about John Kerry in Vietnam is wrong*.

Merrie Spaeth was skeptical. Spaeth is a gregarious, middle-aged woman who has attempted to influence the public mind all her life. As a teenage actress in the 1960s, she landed walk-on roles in a couple of long-forgotten TV shows and a big spot alongside Peter Sellers in *The World of Henry Orient*. Spaeth later worked as a newspaper reporter, then produced local and network television news shows. In the eighties she went to Washington, D.C., where Ronald Reagan spotted her easy conversational

manner and installed her as head of the White House Office of Media Relations. Today, Spaeth works on ways to inspire word-of-mouth praise for corporate clients. She describes herself, with characteristic confidence, as “the world’s expert in what makes people remember certain things and pass them along.” Telling the nation that Kerry lied about his time in Vietnam did not look to Spaeth like an immediately winning strategy. She sided with the minority—better to stick to criticizing what Kerry did after the war, not during it.

Spaeth’s instinct rested on a commonsensical axiom of advocacy: when you’re taking your case to the American public, you’ve got to marshal your best evidence. Spaeth believed there was plenty of audio and video documentation to support the case that Kerry had maligned his fellow vets when he returned from war and that such footage could have made for a damaging campaign against the senator. Video of Kerry testifying to the Senate had him pointing to soldiers who’d “personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians.” There were images of Kerry at sit-ins and protests, and there he was again and again on TV, alleging that the United States had lost its soul in Vietnam. To be sure, many voters saw nothing amiss with this history; Kerry’s supporters weaved these documents into a narrative of bravery and political strength. But any skilled opponent could turn the pictures and the sounds into something less flattering, easily painting Kerry as anti-American, a pacifist, a hippie, or the many other epithets critics hurled his way.

Arguing that Kerry had displayed little courage while *in Vietnam*, however, would call for manipulation of a wholly different order. Every bit of important evidence—from Kerry’s wartime journals to the navy’s official papers—suggested that Kerry had

been an uncommonly brave fighter. In fact, some of the very men who'd come to Dallas had long praised Kerry's service, even signing his commendation letters. Their sudden turnabout was bound to appear suspiciously partisan. Moreover, only one of the Swift Boat veterans who eventually turned on Kerry, Steve Gardner, had actually served on the same boat as the future senator. Many hadn't even been in Vietnam at the same time as Kerry.

That day in Dallas, the men who would later label themselves the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth made an intriguing—and underreported—decision about how they might derail Kerry's bid for the White House. The two roads before them could not have been more divergent: Would the veterans choose to focus on a point of the past that really was not in doubt—that Kerry had protested the war, and that many veterans reviled him for it? Or would they instead claim that Kerry had been disloyal during the war, a point about which nothing could be verified? Would they stick with well-documented facts, or would they ask the public to dismiss the record, overlook the evidence, and accept something far murkier? Would they work from the accepted truth—or would they choose to market a truth all their own?

Several years have passed since that meeting. Everyone who follows politics is familiar with the path that the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth chose that day: they decided to make the expansive case, charging Kerry not only with betraying the troops after Vietnam, but also with lying about his behavior during the war.

Of course, they made the right call.

It's true that when journalists later looked at the vets' case against Kerry, they unearthed virtually nothing to disqualify the senator's claims to heroism. But that didn't matter. Indeed, this is exactly what's so remarkable about the Swift Boat campaign,

and the reason I mention it here, at the inception of a book about truth in the digital age. During the summer of 2004, the historical record played a very small part in the debate concerning Kerry's service in Vietnam. The veterans lacked any compelling evidence to support their claims, yet they managed, anyway, to plant a competing narrative, a kind of alternate version of reality, into the minds of a small but important slice of the electorate. As a result of their efforts, a war hero became, to many Americans, a liar, a traitor, unfit for command. George W. Bush won reelection by a hair more than 2 percentage points. The vets might well have swung the whole thing. But how?

Years later, the question lingers: why did the Swift Boat Veterans' completely fact-free campaign work? Contrary to widespread assumptions, at the start of their campaign the men had relatively little money and little access to the news media. How did they ever convince Americans to accept a new, unprovable theory about John Kerry?

Because they designed it that way. As we'll see, in the early months of their effort, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, with Spaeth at the helm, put forward something distinctly new. The campaign was nearly magically effective because it took advantage of the defining media force of the day. Scholars call this force "media fragmentation." The phrase simply refers to the way that information—broadly, everything that you know about the world—was once disseminated by a handful of organizations but has lately been cracking up. Today, people can get the news from all directions. It's a revolution we're all familiar with: the revolution of the Web, cable TV, talk radio, iPods, digital cameras, and every other buzzing, beeping mainstay of modern life.

But the Swift Boat campaign points to a critical danger of what you might call the modern *infosphere*. People who skillfully manipulate today's fragmented media landscape can dissemble,

distort, exaggerate, fake—essentially, they can lie—to more people, more effectively, than ever before. In this environment, as the Swift Boat Veterans proved, evidence doesn’t matter. What they managed to do in 2004 wasn’t a fluke. It was a sign of things to come.

Like many on the right—and, increasingly, on the left—Merrie Spaeth is suspicious of the national journalistic organs known in the zeitgeist by the collective label “the MSM,” or mainstream media. The largest metro newspapers and national wire services, in addition to the broadcast TV networks, have long enjoyed unrivaled power in shaping national perceptions. That these outlets exist mainly to push a liberal point of view has been a mainstay of right-wing punditry for at least four decades, and Spaeth takes unmistakable glee in the MSM’s recent troubles. “You know what my favorite statistic is these days?” she asked me one afternoon. “You may have heard this. So the *Washington Star* goes out of business in 1981, and the *Post* becomes a monopoly. In the last two decades the population in Metro D.C. has doubled, and income has doubled. But what’s happened to the circulation at the *Washington Post*? Down 5 percent.”

For more than forty years, ABC, CBS, NBC, the Associated Press, and a half dozen large newspapers, including the *Post*, working in loose concordance, have collectively set the American news agenda. You could picture the old-time network news anchors—men like Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw—as particularly attentive and imposing hosts of a national dinner party. For decades, they guided their guests, the American people, to whichever topics they considered worthy of our attention, and we hung on their every word. Their power was legendary. Early in 1968, CBS’s Cronkite, a man Americans would have trusted with their checkbooks,

ended a Tuesday evening telecast with his view that the United States was “mired in stalemate” in Vietnam. “If I’ve lost Cronkite,” President Lyndon Johnson remarked to an aide, “I’ve lost Middle America.” Johnson soon announced that he wouldn’t stand for reelection.

But the MSM is now an institution in winter, with the largest media outlets serving ever-narrower slices of the public. The mainstream is drying up. In some ways, we are returning to the freewheeling days before radio and television launched the very idea of mass media—the era of partisan newspapers and pamphleteers. But our niches, now, are more niche than ever before. We are entering what you might call the trillion-channel universe: over the last two decades, advances in technology—the digital recording and distribution of text, images, and sound over information networks, aka, the modern world—have helped to turn each of us into producers, distributors, and editors of our own media diet. Now we collect the news firsthand through digital cameras, we send our accounts and opinions to the world over blogs, and we use Google, TiVo, the iPod, and a raft of other tools to carefully screen what we consume.

This trend toward niches, which began decades ago but has recently been accelerating at a blinding pace, has itself become a topic of national conversation, feted for its capacity to return power to the people. You need look no further than your favorite political blog to understand the thrill of these people-powered movements—now, finally, ordinary folks can propel outré political candidates to the big time and turn forgotten events into the biggest news events of the day.

A peculiarly utopian sensibility colors much of the discussion about how these new tools will affect politics and society; the tone is surprising, given the magnitude of the shift we’re talking about. It’s probably unrealistic to think that we’ll undergo these

changes without any pain or that, indeed, we’re not undergoing any pain now.

To continue the analogy: We, the guests at Cronkite’s dinner party, have all jumped up from the table and turned the event into a stand-up cocktail affair, open bar. Now we’re free to talk amongst ourselves. We mingle, flitting from group to group, or we stay put in our own circle of friends. This party is democratic and egalitarian; information no longer flows from a furrowed-brow host at the top, and now we all get to talk and listen to whomever we want, about whatever we want. The shindig is undeniably messier than in the past. There’s a guy in the corner yelling about how NASA didn’t really land on the moon, and he’s attracting a crowd. A woman in a lab coat claiming to be the surgeon general of the United States is dispensing medical advice. You’re suspicious of her credentials, but all your friends seem to believe her. On a table somewhere, people find a stash of photos of Britney Spears mistreating her baby. They make a million copies. Within minutes, a fellow is comparing Spears to Adolf Hitler. Rumors spread, cliques form. The prettiest girl in the room attracts all the attention. The people dressed in blue hold a secret meeting on the left side of the room. Everyone is wary.

The analogy may sound simplistic, but I mean only to highlight, in brief, some of the dangers I’ll examine in this book. Studies of the media and of human psychology, some conducted recently but many long before the digital revolution, provide compelling insight into the consequences of a fragmented media. Although information now flows more freely than it did in the past—and this is certainly a salutary development—today’s news landscape will also, inevitably, help us to indulge our biases and preexisting beliefs.

While new technology eases connections between people, it also, paradoxically, facilitates a closeted view of the world,

keeping us coiled tightly with those who share our ideas. In a world that lacks real gatekeepers and authority figures, and in which digital manipulation is so effortless, spin, conspiracy theories, myths, and outright lies may get the better of many of us. All these factors contributed to the success of the Swift Boat campaign. New media, patchworks of niches, were at the scene of that crime.

To understand what I mean when I talk about how niche media cultivate bias, consider a study by Shanto Iyengar, a professor of communications at Stanford, and Richard Morin, the *Washington Post's* director of polling. In 2006, the pair set out to discover how the source of a particular news story affects readers' attraction to that story. For instance, is a Republican reader more likely to read a piece of news because it comes from Fox News rather than from NPR?

To do this, the researchers obtained a list of news headlines spanning six broad categories—there were headlines about U.S. politics, the war in Iraq, race relations, crime, travel, and sports. Without disclosing which news outlet the headlines had come from, Iyengar and Morin asked some of the participants in the study to rate their interest in the headlines. This gave the researchers a baseline measure of the intrinsic attractiveness of each headline. Then, with another group of participants, Iyengar and Morin slightly tweaked how they presented the news stories. They added one of four randomly picked news logos alongside the headlines—from either Fox News, NPR, CNN, or the BBC. How would the logos affect people's interest in the headlines?

As they expected, people were biased toward certain news sources—Republicans preferred stories with the Fox News logo, and Democrats converged on CNN and NPR. But the nature and the intensity of the bias that Iyengar and Morin

found are intriguing. For starters, they discovered that Republicans were far friendlier to Fox than were Democrats to either CNN or NPR; Republicans showed, in other words, a much greater propensity toward giving in to their bias. Adding the Fox label to a story about Iraq or national politics tripled its attractiveness to Republicans. No label prompted so great a shift in people on the left. The greater Republican bias is in keeping with numerous psychological studies that show conservatives to be much more willing to consume media that toe the ideological line. This phenomenon, which I’ll explore in some detail in forthcoming chapters, helps explain, in no small degree, the amazingly successful right-wing pundit factory.

The team’s most surprising finding, though, didn’t have to do with politics. Rather, it concerned “soft” news—people showed bias even when looking at news stories about travel and sports. “It’s one thing when people prefer sources that they agree with when the news is talking about Iraq or President Bush—that’s perfectly understandable,” Iyengar says. “But what we show is that it even applies for issues on which the boundaries between Democrats and Republicans are not as clear-cut. If you’re looking for a Caribbean getaway, why would it make any difference whether it’s coming from Fox or NPR?” But it did make a difference—adding a Fox label to travel stories made them more attractive to Republicans and less attractive to Democrats. People “have generalized their preference for politically consonant news to nonpolitical domains,” Iyengar says—in other words, they’ve become addicted to their own preferred spin. “They’ve gotten into the habit of saying, ‘Whatever the news is talking about, I’m just going to go to Fox.’”

Think back to the height of the 2004 presidential campaign. Try to recall how you felt every time an advertisement for the Swift

Boat Veterans for Truth popped up on your television screen. If you are a Democrat, it's likely that the ads provoked in you the sort of anger whose intensity can only properly be rendered here in a string of typewriter expletive symbols (#%&@!). What the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were saying about John Kerry was plainly false. Everything you'd learned about Kerry, and everything you'd learned about the Swift Boat Veterans, corroborated this idea: Web sites, newspapers, and books teemed with evidence to support your view, and anyone who believed otherwise was willfully ignoring reality. If, on the other hand, you supported George W. Bush, you felt something like pure joy on seeing the same Swift Boat ads. To you, what the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were saying about John Kerry was plainly true. Everything you'd learned about Kerry, and everything you'd learned about the Swift Boat Veterans, corroborated this idea: Web sites, newspapers, and books teemed with evidence to support your view, and anyone who believed otherwise was willfully ignoring reality.

My guess about how you might have reacted to the Swift Boat campaign is informed by opinion surveys taken at the time, which show that Democrats and Republicans experienced the ads in diametrically opposite ways. When Democrats saw the group's first TV spot—which alleged that Kerry lied about the medals he'd earned in Vietnam—they immediately recognized it as false, and the vast majority felt no need to change their belief that Kerry had been a hero at war. Republicans, meanwhile, saw the commercial as pretty much on the mark; it confirmed what they'd suspected of Kerry all along, that his claims to heroism weren't true. In a survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, 68 percent of Republicans who saw the ad reported finding it believable, while 73 percent of Democrats found it *unbelievable*. At first blush, such survey

results might not sound too surprising. Of course people of different political parties had different reactions to this heated political campaign—isn't that what you'd expect in politics?

But there is something remarkable about the contrary ways that Republicans and Democrats reacted to the Swift Boat ad; it has to do with the chief question that the Swift Boat campaign raised in the public mind: did John Kerry legitimately earn his medals in Vietnam? Now, unless you subscribe to a fuzzy, post-modern view of the world (more on that later), it's clear that there can be only one correct answer to this question. Either John Kerry earned his medals, or he did not.

There is, in other words, a definite, inarguable truth to what happened in the Mekong more than thirty years ago. This truth has been documented, and it can be verified through investigation. Moreover, the truth is universal—it ought to be consistent across party lines, whether the person who's answering the question is a Republican or a Democrat. The Swift Boat controversy over whether Kerry truly did earn his medals, then, can be seen as a fight over two competing *versions of reality*. In essence, the ads were asking us to look at history—the history of Kerry's time in Vietnam—and to decide which reality *actually occurred*.

This may sound obvious, but most debates in modern politics simply aren't like this. When we fight over important issues, we're not usually arguing over the fundamental state of the world but instead over what to do about it. Your stance on health-care policy in the United States, for instance, hinges on your specific economic, ethical, religious, legal, and civic views: What would constitute a fair distribution of health care to the public? Do you believe health care falls under the list of services a government should provide to its citizens? How much should anyone spend to save a single life? And so on.

People harbor profound disagreements about all these questions, and yet, at the same time, there clearly are facts about health care in the United States with which everyone agrees. Tens of millions of Americans currently lack health insurance. Heart disease and cancer are, by far, the nation's most deadly ailments. Prescription drug use is on the rise. These are examples of a shared political reality—empirical, verifiable measures of the world about which there are, and really can be, no argument. For any issue, we find a set of such basic shared truths, a view of the world that is largely consistent regardless of partisanship.

At least, it has been this way until now. But there were few shared truths in the story of John Kerry's service in Vietnam. Shared truths are absent in other areas, too—in many issues surrounding national security policy, for instance. Whether or not Saddam Hussein was “personally involved” in the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is, like the question of Kerry's medals, an issue for which there is a definitive, correct answer. Either he was, or he was not. Although the Bush administration at one time suggested (loudly) otherwise, the White House now admits Saddam didn't do it. More important, every major investigation of the issue—including by the nonpartisan 9/11 Commission—determined that Saddam had no role in 9/11, while other government reports have proved that Iraq was not tied to al-Qaeda. A stunningly large number of Americans, however, blame Saddam. In the fall of 2003, a poll commissioned by the *Washington Post* showed that almost 70 percent of the nation thought the Iraqi dictator had been personally involved in the attack. A *New York Times* survey taken four years later, at the six-year anniversary of the attacks, marked a huge improvement—but it's still amazing. A third of Americans said they saw Saddam's hand in 9/11, despite a complete lack of evidence to support the position.

Did Iraq possess weapons of mass destruction at the time of the U.S. invasion? The most comprehensive investigations into Iraq's WMD programs prove that Saddam had no banned weapons. Even President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney now acknowledge this point. But a Harris survey conducted in July 2006 showed that half of Americans reject this idea. They believe instead that the weapons were there.

It's not only in expectedly partisan national security issues that we see Americans disagreeing about what's happening in the world. Look, for instance, at global warming. Every major American scientific body that has studied the world's climate has concluded that the planet is heating up due to human activity. In 2004, Naomi Oreskes, a researcher at the University of California, San Diego, surveyed the 928 studies concerned with climate change that were published in peer-reviewed scientific journals between 1993 and 2003. Not a single one, she found, disagreed with the consensus view about global warming. But the American public is not nearly so united. Polls show that, first, few Americans believe the science. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2006 revealed that only 41 percent of respondents think that there's solid evidence that humans are changing the Earth's climate. Democrats, though, are twice as likely as Republicans to accept the evidence. Even scientific fact isn't safe from politically motivated perception.

Perhaps the most striking example of Americans' partisan divisions over what's really happening in the world involves the economy. For several years, says Andrew Kohut, the director of the Pew Research Center, Democrats and Republicans have largely agreed with one another when asked about the current state of the economy. This, he points out, isn't very surprising, because economic questions "are not as directly associated in the public mind with political parties or political figures." If

someone asked you how well the nation's economy was doing, you'd probably think about your job and the jobs of people around you, rather than, say, about President Bush. Indeed, this was the case during the 1990s. We remember the Clinton years as extremely politically volatile, with Republicans and Democrats at odds on just about every issue of the day, but Americans were largely united in their view of the nation's prospects. When unemployment declined, satisfaction rose across the board, the blue lines and the red lines commingling on graphs of national opinion.

But that's no longer the case, Kohut has found. Just before President Bush's State of the Union Address in 2006, surveyors at the Pew Center called up 1,500 Americans and asked, "How would you rate economic conditions in this country today—as excellent, good, only fair, or poor?" The results were vastly divergent. Fifty-six percent of Republicans believed that the economy was in either excellent or good shape, while only 23 percent of Democrats thought this was the case. Sixty-two percent of Democrats said it was difficult to find a job in their communities, but only 38 percent of Republicans thought so. You might wonder whether this was because Republicans actually *were* facing better job prospects than Democrats were—could Republicans have been reporting better economic conditions because their lives were economically better off than Democrats'? Actually, no.

The Pew study found that the partisan bias held even when controlling for the respondents' incomes. Two-thirds of Republicans who made more than \$75,000 a year thought the economy was in great shape, but only one-third of Democrats who earned as much had the same idea. Similarly, Democrats who made less than \$50,000 annually were far more gloomy about economic conditions than were Republicans in the same bracket.

Think about this for a minute. Here were people living in the same economy as one another, folks with a roughly equal likelihood of finding a job or seeing wealth in the housing market or hitting on hard times. They were swimming in the same pool—but half of them thought the water was lovely, while the other half were dying of chill. They were, Kohut says, “living different realities.”

It was in this tide of divergent, parallel realities that the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth launched their ship. For thirty years, there had been a shared national truth regarding John Kerry—whatever his behavior after the war, the evidence showed that he’d fought honorably in Vietnam. To many partisans, though, this was an unwelcome truth. And the new truth offered by the Swift Boat campaign, the version of reality they sought to propagate, was much friendlier to the right-wing cause.

Welcome to the Rashomon world, where the very idea of objective reality is under attack.

