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Research Statement

My research explores the interaction of epistemology, politics, and the media. With a nod to a former defense secretary, I am particularly interested in how the news influences what we know about what we know. In this sense, I am more interested in how issues are portrayed than the specific topics that are covered.

I first was drawn to political communication by the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas; the battlefield of social debate where truth is tried, tested, and ultimately triumphs over falsehood. This model offered a rational justification for free speech as the bedrock of vibrant democratic society. The standard line is that free and open debate, mediated by an independent press, educates the public and helps keep elites in check. This argument, elegant and persuasive, undergirds theories of democratic peace and the virtue of democracy more generally. It was comforting to think that, given enough time, society's collective conscience would prevail. For a time, I slept easy at night.

This was not to last. The more deeply I explored the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas—not just in research, but also living through the past thirty-odd years—the more I found it wanting. The unifying theme in my research, from my time as an undergraduate to the present, is understanding when and why the marketplace of ideas falls short of its democratic ideal. This is particularly important for international conflict, where failures in public debate can come at tremendous cost.

I was in college during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The lead-up to each war, and the fallout from Iraq in particular, tempered my view of the prevailing wisdom of democratic debate. A modern manifestation of Vietnam's infamous credibility gap, there was often a chasm between what the public was being told and what was actually unfolding on the ground. This sentiment motivated my master's thesis, *Conflicting Conflict*. I ran a series of experiments assessing how dissonant information in the news influences public opinion. I constructed contrasting combinations of elite narrative and images in hypothetical news stories and was able to peek inside the black box of perceived credibility and audience evaluation.

However, assessing the impact of what politicians say only tells part of the story. Breaking news: politicians occasionally (often?) make inaccurate statements. The real test for democracy is not just what politicians say but, importantly, how the public marketplace of ideas processes and evaluates the information it receives. This fundamental question lies at the heart of my research, both individual and collaborative, over the past five years.

Advocates of democratic theory have proposed scores of expiations—and even specific mechanisms—for how free social debate can help temper whatever falsehood and exaggerations are proffered by those in power. In *The Axis of Evil and Nuclear Proliferation*, a manuscript readying for journal review, my coauthors and I used the issue of nuclear proliferation across several cases to assess the health and function of the marketplace of ideas. The goal was twofold. The first goal assessed if the invasion of Iraq stands as an exceptional failure of public debate, or simply a salient example of deeper and systematic failures. The second goal was to

operationalize and then assess empirically, the primary mechanisms theorists traditionally suggest hinder or help public debate.

A content analysis of six nuclear proliferation debates underscored a common theme: skeptics of public deliberation are not nearly skeptical enough. None of the mechanisms traditionally touted actually brought the prevailing tenor of market sentiment any closer to conditions on the ground. Iraq may appear an exceptional failure because of its cost, but the actual process of deliberation was no worse than any of the other cases.

My interest in media coverage security issue extends beyond nuclear proliferation. A few years ago I was part of a joint venture between GMU and Human Geo, a private sector firm, to create a geo-mapped database of news stories about Middle East for the Pentagon. In this capacity I helped train and lead team of twenty undergraduate and graduate students in content analysis. The collaboration was a classic win-win; we were able to leverage their expertise scraping the web for content, and our coding provided a baseline reference for our partner's work in computer learning and automation.

What struck me, after reading thousands of news stories—both in nuclear proliferation and terrorism—was the lack of nuance in coverage of such inherently complicated issues. This poignantly underscored by a now famous quote from Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. When asked about the connection between Iraq's purported WMD program and terrorists groups, Rumsfeld quipped about the difficulty of appreciating the known and unknown unknowns. It was a rare concession of fallibility from an typically confident man. However one might feel about the secretary, this sentiment is *exactly* how one would hope those in power would speak.

The world, after all, is a terribly complicated place. One would hope that democratic debate would be sensitive to nuance and complexity. Yet tune into the news, and coverage often sidelines circumspection and nuance in favor of conviction and simplicity. While this may make for slick coverage, it threatens to undermine the media's critical role in democracy. This is not limited to the issue of nuclear proliferation, but to sociopolitical debate as a whole.

The certitude-complexity gap is the foundation for my dissertation *Certainly Biased?: How Media Influences What We Know about What We Know*. The crux of my research is that two factors—society's inherent cognitive bias for certainty and the dynamics of new communication technology—combine to create an information environment increasingly skewed towards certitude. This is not to suggest that new communication technology is responsible for creating this bias. The predisposition towards certainly is as old as politics itself. Rather, emerging media platforms have simply made it easier to throw fuel on long-smoldering social pressures.

Psychological research has long suggested that humans have an innate predisposition for clear and straightforward analysis over uncertainty and nuance. The underlying concern, therefore, is that public debate is in danger of becoming captured in a self-reinforcing circle of certitude. In the world of political media the public choirs, more than ever, chooses their preferred preacher. The public's increasingly dynamic role is not lost on content producers. Awareness that a particular presentation may have a more receptive audience can influence the very process of content creation. Journalists may add an extra dash of certainty, a smidge of simplification, to maximize

public interest. In doing so appropriate nuance may be sacrificed in pursuit of saleable certitude. Critically, if this embellishment is followed by increased engagement, this will pressure media executives to continue along the same path. In short, knowing what types of stories “sell” better today may change the way coverage is crafted tomorrow.

The cycle of certitude comes full-circle when knowledge of this dynamic between the public and the media influences the way elites communicate in the first place. Experts and politicians have individual and institutional incentives to capitalize on mainstream media exposure. If they believe that journalists and/or the public favor a particular flavor of certitude, elites may adjust their messages to increase the probability of appearing (and reappearing) on the news. Or, armed with social media and the knowledge that the public likes certainty, this past election demonstrated that political figures can circumvent traditional media channels altogether. By catering to the audience, demand in the marketplace increasingly drives the production of information.

Ultimately, each actor in the public sphere reinforces the pro-certitude biases of the others. If the marketplace of ideas fails in cases like Iraq, it is not simply because elites mislead. Nor is it simply because the media thrives on sensationalism. The surfeit of certitude is made possible, in no small part, because it caters to public demand. If the marketplace falters, it is because every facet of society systematically contributes to its failure.

I no longer sleep so easy at night. From nuclear proliferation, to terrorism, to media coverage in general, I find it increasingly hard to accept the traditionally sanguine view of the marketplace of ideas.

The sliver lining, however, is that these reservations are fertile fodder for future work. I am particularly focused on two extensions to my current research. The first is a natural expansion of my dissertation, exploring other factors which create self-reinforcing cycles of exaggeration or misinformation.

The second branch has gained greater urgency in the wake of the recent election. My deeper concern is that the whole premise of the marketplace of ideas, with truth as the ultimate arbiter, is itself misguided. It's not just an issue of real or fake news; the public does not always seem to even *care* what the truth may be. Personal belief, it seems, increasingly trumps truth as the deciding factor shaping public perception.

Looking forward, I hope to outline and explore a new model to compete with the Marketplace of Ideas: The Marketplace of Values. I suggest that it is increasingly important to focus on the interplay of value and subjective belief, rather than facts, to gain insight into the dynamics of sociopolitical debate and the evolution of public opinion.