A decade ago, some barons of the media establishment designated themselves America’s official arbiters of political truth (or “truthiness,” as satirist Stephen Colbert might call it). One of their tools is PolitiFact, a project of the Tampa Bay Times and several other major newspapers, which issues an award for the year’s most outrageous falsehood foisted on the public. Last year’s election was infested with so much disinformation and dishonesty, however, that PolitiFact’s 2016 Lie of the Year was not a single prevarication, but that cluster bomb of whoppers collectively branded “Fake News.”

Of course, even that label is misleading, since these items are not news at all. They’re political rubbish, completely bogus pieces of character and policy assassination concocted by campaign hucksters and click-bait purveyors and disguised as breaking news to dupe the gullible. (One infamous example: the “Pizzagate” story that popped days before the election, alleging a child sex ring associated with Hillary Clinton, and run out of a pizza shop in Washington.) While partisan hacks have spread this sort of cock-and-bull political venom at least since the 1796 Thomas Jefferson v. John Adams race, the noxious “news” items in last year’s election-turned-freak show were internet-propelled, reaching millions of voters quicker than you can shout “Horsehockey!” A flood of lies coursed through Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites, turning some into open sewers of slander and trumped-up hoaxes that connected with enough angry and spongy minds to be a factor in the presidential outcome.

The chief beneficiary, of course, was The Donald, who also had been an unflagging dispenser of fictitious crap throughout the 2016 race. He became our first Tweeter-in-Chief, largely by convincing a decisive segment of the electorate that the profusion of faux facts that spilled out of his mouth was true: Mexican immigrants “are criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc.” Obama was “perhaps born in Kenya. Very simple, OK?” During the 9/11 crash bombing of the World Trade Center, “There were people over in New Jersey that were watching it, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down.” Told that Jersey police investigated and found that no such celebration took place, Trump capped his lie with another—“It was on television. I saw it.” Infuriated by the fact that 3 million more Americans voted for Hillary than for him, he simply tweeted an “alternative fact”: “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.”

Fake news? Let’s go make some real news

Here’s a great story our media should be covering:
Cities around the country are breaking corporate chains

In our [media] now, it’s just [about being] first. …We don’t care who it hurts. We don’t care who we destroy. We don’t care if it’s true, just say it, sell it. Anything you practice you’ll get good at—including BS.

— Actor and director DENZEL WASHINGTON, speaking to reporters last December.
[EDITORIAL OBSERVATION: Delusion used to qualify one as mentally ill; apparently it now qualifies one to be president. As Bill Moyers noted in 2005, even before the GOP’s tea party insanity thrived, “The delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe to sit in the seat of power in the Oval Office and in Congress.” The level of delusion Moyers described has now reached a Trumpian level, threatening to do unthinkable harm.]

FAKE NEWS has been able to spread like crabgrass because the healthy turf of legitimate journalism has been allowed to deteriorate.

Mainstream fakery

PolitiFact nailed the surge in fake news, but—hello—what about the state of establishment news? Like crabgrass, fake news has been able to spread with surprising speed because so much of the healthy turf of legitimate journalism has been allowed to deteriorate, poisoned by the establishment’s appetite for sensationalism, nonsense, bias toward corporate interests, elitism, and a general lack of coverage of issues important to America’s workaday people.

The dominant mass media outlets, particularly TV, have been corporatized, not only in their business structure, but also in their news perspective and operating culture. Today’s broadcast hierarchies are directed by highly paid executives who view the great unwashed from distant high-rise headquarters, and are concerned less about their duty to democracy than their fealty to the bottom line. No longer “of the people” or even among them, these decision-makers don’t know the people. Thus, they were clueless about last year’s political uprising, literally laughing at both Trump and Bernie Sanders’ convention-shattering insurgencies.

Media chieftains still don’t get it. Not content with deploring the fabricators of fake news, they dismiss some fine reporting by smaller independent media and deplore everyone who explores any internet or other “non-authorized” news source as airheads lost in a mass of misinformation. A January article in the New York Times Magazine, for example, excoriated those who drift from the mainstream in their search for facts, truth, and relevance: “With only themselves and their appetites as a guide, they bypass any information that doesn’t suit their predisposition and their worldview.”

As millions of free thinkers and truth seekers have figured out, the daily news feed served up by conventional media powers is pre-packaged to suit the “predisposition” and “worldview” of those who own and control the system. Indeed, the big news conglomerates have sanctioned and incorporated layer on layer of fabrications in their model of corporate-driven journalism:

ADVERTISING. Start with the fact that the establishment’s version of news is literally paid for by deceptions that are given special dispensation because they’re labeled “ads.” The brand-name charlatans of Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Finance, etc. are allowed to pound the public with an incessant barrage of falsehoods (from gauzy misrepresentations to fraudulent hoaxes) to hawk their stuff, buff their images, or cover up their malfeasances. Selling time and space for duping the public is a corrupt exchange that has become normal, as normal as the increasingly blurred line between news and ads.

PUBLIC BROADCASTING. Even “commercial-free” PBS and NPR have sullied their credibility as independent sources of news by allowing such moneyed powers as the Koch brothers to influence programming and by accepting millions of dollars for “enhanced underwriting announcements” from such civic-minded donors as Goldman Sachs, BP Oil, Dow Chemical, GlaxoSmithKline, and UnitedHealthcare. As NPR ombudsman Edward Schumacher-Matos noted in 2012, “While public media often tries to deny it, sponsors are no different from advertisements in commercial media in the crucial aspect that money passes hands.” The potential conflicts between honest programming and the interests of the funders undermine trust: David Koch, a major funder of climate change denying, fake science “research” organizations, has also been a major underwriter of PBS’s NOVA—a science show.

VIDEO NEWS RELEASES. Local TV stations all across the country secretly pad their daily news broadcasts with free “content.” These insidious features cheerfully tout products and policies, never mentioning that the featured corporations paid for, scripted, hired...
the actors, and mass distributed these video “reports.”

**FAKE NEWS OF THE CENTURY.** Remember, the most destructive piece of recent news fakery did not come from a shady website promulgating conspiracy theories or bigotry, but from the promotion by most of America’s prestigious news sources of the catastrophic lie in 2001 that “Saddam Hussein Possesses Weapons of Mass Destruction.” Sixteen years later, people are still dying every day in the senseless war incited and legitimized by this lie.

It’s not that we should never trust established news sources—many fine reporters still work for establishment outfits, digging up important public interest stories that we would not otherwise hear. But with corporate media owners out to squeeze every buck from their news operations, thousands of experienced reporters have been laid off in recent years, wiping out years of institutional knowledge. Without those watchdogs, we, as citizens, all need to keep our BS detectors permanently switched to high.

**Real News**

Just as troubling as fake news is the media’s systematic omission of grassroots news that people could really use. I’m not talking about “happy news” snippets that local outlets like to pop into their coverage as cheap substitutes for actually reporting what’s going on in our towns and neighborhoods. What’s missing is real news of the ordinary Americans in practically every zip code who are teaming up, taking charge, and finding innovative solutions to big problems that the elites do nothing about.

Uplifting local actions are blooming throughout our land, yet most people are unaware of them or the results: that people and communities everywhere are breaking the corporate chains that shackles them. Here are a few examples:

**INEQUALITY.** In 2014, American CEOs earned 350 times the average worker, creating the world’s greatest income gap—more than double that in Switzerland and Germany, and more than four times the norm in the UK and Japan. Washington’s response to the grotesque inequality that’s rending our nation has been to blow political hot air at it and hope it drifts away. It hasn’t. So, in December, the mayor and city council of Portland, Oregon, decided to stop talking about the even-widening gap and actually try to shrink it. They added a surcharge to the local tax bill of any corporation that gives its top exec more than 100 times the median pay of its rank-and-file employees, providing a financial incentive for corporate boards to seek some balance and at least to consider pay fairness. The main sponsor of the provision called it “The closest thing I’d seen to a tax on inequality itself.” The mayor called Portlanders problem solvers willing to tackle big issues and test new ideas that can be adapted and refined by others: “Local action replicated around the country can start to make a difference.”

**PUBLIC EDUCATION.** With Betsy DeVos, the right-wing ideologue and billionaire Amway heiress, now about to lead an all-out Trumpster charge to destroy America’s public schools and privatize educational opportunity, what chance is there for school kids from low- and middle-income families? Don’t despair, for there is hope in local people’s common sense commitment to the common good, as presently being demonstrated in San Antonio, Texas. A few years ago, Mayor Julian Castro launched a democratic process for ordinary citizens to decide the best way for the city to invest in its future. After weeks of city-wide conversations about dozens of potential projects, San Antonians chose a single priority: Invest in our children’s future by providing quality, full-day, pre-kindergarten education for all four year olds. This was no small task, for the government of this extremely rich state is run by boneheaded tea-party Republicans who constantly shortchange our public school system and refuse to fund more than half-day pre-K programs. So where to get the money? The people did what the anti-public-school halfwits said would never happen—they taxed themselves, voting for a 1/8th of a cent sales tax hike that put $31 million a year into the successful experiment called Pre-K 4 SA. San Antonians recognize the wisdom of the old bumper sticker: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

**CORPORATE POWER.** Trump and his likeminded Congress critics are gearing up to unleash corporate profiteers from practically all restraints that protect us ordinary people, our natural resources, and even our core values from their greed. But they might want to ponder how North Dakota voters reacted to a similar power play last year. At issue was a monumental 1932 state law that bans nonfamily corporate farm ownership, reflecting the people’s desire to maintain family farms, healthy rural communities, and sustainable agriculture practices. Nostalgic hogwash, growled Big Ag lobbyists, who got obsequious legislators and the corporate-funded governor to overturn the eight-decade-old ban on industrial ag. In turn, progressive forces, led by the North Dakota Farmers Union, plowed the grassroots, recruiting volunteers to put on last June’s ballot a referendum giving common voters the final say. And speak they did, loud and clear: 76 percent of North Dakotans rejected the corporate powers and the politicos who served them, restoring the outright ban on corporate-controlled farming.

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**SAN ANTONIOS DID WHAT** the anti-public-school halfwits said would never happen—they taxed themselves to fund quality, full-day pre-K for all four year olds.
HOMELESSNESS. This problem, we’re told by pious politicos, is impossible to cure, and so more and more cities are resorting to criminalizing people struggling to live on the streets. But wait, say proponents of a new way of thinking: Yes, some street people are addicts or mentally ill, but the vast majority are out there because they lost jobs, got hit with major medical bills, suffered family violence, or had other personal crises. And, get this, they’re homeless because they don’t have a place to live! Until the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan reduced tax incentives for developers to create low-income homes, America didn’t have mass homelessness. But now we’re millions of units short of housing that hard-hit people and families can afford. So why not address the cause?

IMAGINE A RICH, WHITE SUBURB and a neighboring community of mostly poor families—like the folks of Morris Township, New Jersey—merging their school districts in a deliberate attempt to be “a model of diversity and togetherness.”

Follow me from downtown Austin, Texas, to the eastern edge of Travis County, turn onto Hog Eye Road and go a short distance where you’ll come on a giant sign saying “WELCOME.” It fronts an astounding success named Community First! Village—a 27-acre, master-planned community (as opposed to temporary shelters) for 250 chronically homeless people—about a fourth of Austin’s street dwellers. It’s the creation of a small non-profit group, Mobile Loaves and Fishes, that’s richly rooted in the religious mission espoused in Jesus’s “Sermon on the Mount,” admonishing the faithful to serve the needy. Indeed, the village doesn’t proselytize, it serves—by providing a welcoming community of, by, and for the very people who have previously been publicly disparaged, shoved out of sight, and denied even minimal human dignity. Here, “home” is an eclectic collection of 140 micro-houses, each with a front porch to encourage engagement and communication with others. Rents are affordable, and all residents put their unique skills and talents to work—in the woodworking shop, gardens, chicken coops, medical facilities, an art trailer, communal kitchens, laundry, bee hive and aquaponics operations, an outdoor movie theater and 500-seat amphitheater for music and plays, or on the elected community council. By treating the people as valued assets rather than problems—then providing a secure and supportive community—the homeless can become their own solution. Imagine that!

Or imagine this: Instead of constantly conniving to stop poor people, minorities, students, et al. from voting, Oregon officials choosing to make democratic participation easy with automatic voter registration and mail-in ballots. Or a rich, white suburb and a neighboring urban community of mostly poor families (Morris Township, NJ) merging their school districts in a deliberate attempt to establish some racial and economic balance and striving to be “a model of diversity and togetherness.” Or cities around the country rejecting the tar sands and fracking wells of Big Oil’s climate-changing fossil fuels and following the energy/environmental sanity lead of Park City and Salt Lake City, Utah, by committing to move steadily away from fossil fuels and produce 100 percent of their electricity from renewable sources within the next 15 years (a goal already achieved in 2015 by Burlington, Vermont).

The list of progressive innovations at the grassroots level goes on and on, dealing with one big, complex issue after another that small-minded, corporatist ideologues refuse to tackle (often under the “principle” that government—i.e., the public, i.e., you and me—shouldn’t be involved). Not only should we, but we must, for our activism is the only hope of restoring America’s democratic principles and uniting ethic of the common good.

The place to focus our intense activism is where the action is already happening—right in the communities and states where we live. Yes, Trump, Inc. is out to turn Washington into a plutocratic Heart of Darkness and, yes, we must rally together to resist the horrors it promises. But our greatest strength is not in Washington rallies and protests—it’s in our ability to organize and mobilize masses of local people around issues of populist justice and progressive solutions, mounting campaigns all around the country to elect candidates, pass initiatives, and enact reforms in city halls, school boards, legislatures, and regulatory boards.

If we commit to steadily amassing a people’s movement—bigger and bolder than what the corporations and media deem possible or desirable—that movement can become the government.