

TRUTH

A year-long conversation about knowledge crises
& politics from humanistic perspectives

ALICE KAPLAN INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANITIES
Northwestern University

A Truth Dialogues Report/Reflection

by [Fiona Maxwell](#)

Franke Undergraduate Fellow of the Kaplan Humanities Institute

Reporting Truth

(Jane Mayer and Peter Slevin—January 29, 2018)

On Monday, January 29, 2018, the Kaplan Institute for the Humanities and the Medill School of Journalism co-hosted a conversation between Jane Mayer and Peter Slevin. The talk was the winter keynote event in the Kaplan Institute’s yearlong series of “Truth Dialogues.” The McCormick Tribune Forum auditorium was filled to capacity, with extra chairs added to accommodate the large audience. Attendees included many Evanston community members, some of whom heard about the event through the Evanston Public Library; Northwestern students majoring in journalism and other disciplines; and faculty from across fields.

Jane Mayer is an investigative journalist, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, and the author of *Dark Money* (2016), in which she exposes the role of “big money” in politics and the hidden network of billionaires behind the rise of the radical American right. Peter Slevin is a Medill faculty member, who was previously on staff with *The Washington Post* and recently wrote *Michelle Obama: A Life* (2016). Their conversation addressed the politics of truth in today’s media, and examined questions concerning the role of evidence in an era of “fake news,”

Twitter, and “bots,” as well as what it means to be a journalist when the President of the United States repeatedly attacks the press.

Slevin began by broaching the topic on everybody’s minds, asking for Mayer’s thoughts on Donald Trump. Mayer described the President as “baffling, exhausting, and fascinating,” and recounted her first-hand experience with Trump when she interviewed him in the summer of 2016. She interpreted his behavior as evidence of his love/hate relationship with the press; Trump’s hunger for attention and media coverage leads him to make himself more available to journalists than more conventional politicians. Yet, Mayer called this relationship between Trump, who needs to be heard at all times, and members of the press, who need Trump to provide “great box office,” a “Devil’s deal.” Mayer analyzed Trump’s conception of “truthful hyperbole” and “alternative facts” as revealing his low estimation of human nature. Trump believes, Mayer argued, that he simply tells people what they want to hear, even if they “want” to hear lies. Mayer grimly doubted whether Trump was capable of changing his habit of lying, but she believes that ultimately the truth will catch up with him either from his waning popular support or through Robert Mueller’s special counsel investigation.

On the flip side, Slevin asked Mayer for her opinion about Trump’s constant depiction of the media as an enemy of the American people. He wondered whether Trump’s behavior affects reporters and undermines people’s perception of media credibility. Mayer agreed that although Trump is not the first president to dislike the press, he is the first to claim that the press has no legitimate role in our democracy. Mayer stated that the situation in the United States is not yet comparable to other countries whose leaders have silenced their press, but she admitted that she is unsettled by Trump’s consistent attacks against truth, truth tellers, and independent authority. She is particularly disturbed by Trump’s replacement of a scientific, fact-based worldview with

alternative facts that serve his self-interest. When Slevin asked Mayer where this would all lead, Mayer asserted that the press is currently producing the best news coverage in a long time, and that the galvanization of civil society, legal institutions, and NGOs represent a possible silver lining resulting from Trump's onslaught against the truth.

The conversation next turned to Mayer's investigations into the Koch brothers, the Mercers, and other billionaires who pour money into radical, right-wing political interests, as explored in her book *Dark Money*. Mayer delved into the history of this phenomenon. She connected the dots from our current situation all the way back to the 1971 Powell Memo, which marked the beginning of the attempt by big business to create an establishment designed to advocate for corporate rights. Mayer described how this establishment as a far right, wealthy, private political machine that promotes anti-regulation and libertarian ideology by funding professorships, lawyers, accountants, lobbyists, think tanks, and grassroots movements. She argued that the Koch brothers moved from the fringes to the center of Republican power through a combination of targeted spending and propaganda. Examining the 2016 election, Mayer noted that Trump was the sole candidate for the Republican nomination who was not backed by the Koch brothers. She asserted that Trump's victory revealed the public's embrace of right wing populism and rejection of the Koch brother's anti-social safety net agenda. However, the Koch brothers and other activist billionaires had laid the groundwork for Trump by instilling an anti-establishment, anti-government message in the public consciousness for forty years, and by fueling the flames of the Tea Party. Ultimately, the Kochs lost control of their own creation, and Trump won the Republican nomination. Nevertheless, Mayer asserted that while the Koch brothers didn't get their candidate, they did "get the government" because Vice President Mike

Pence, Justice Neil Gorsuch, EPA chief Scott Pruitt, and other figures in key positions are all funded by the Kochs' machine.

Mayer next described her investigations into the Mercer family, Steve Bannon, and Breitbart News. She described her research subjects as “interesting characters,” and imagined that the American people would be shocked if they found out who “had all the power.” In the Mercers, she identified the same process propelled by the Koch brothers: extremists imposing their interests on mainstream politics through money and propaganda. She described how Steve Bannon translated the Mercers' agenda into political reality by helping them to buy and build Breitbart News, thus creating a powerful ideology machine. Mercer-funded opposition research into Hillary Clinton was turned into a book, *Clinton Cash*, which was then fed to the *New York Times* and placed on the front page of a mainstream media outlet. The rumors that were spread by this process possessed a shred of truth but lacked context and balanced presentation. The fact that the stories couldn't be dismissed off-hand contributed to their pernicious vitality. Mayer labeled this sort of campaign “information warfare.” She remarked that the wealthy are becoming even more capable of manipulating public opinion through social media. When Slevin asked Mayer how journalists could fight these sorts of battles, Mayer emphasized that the truth takes time. She believes that people must abandon the current emphasis on speed in favor of reading longer stories by journalists who take their time to conduct extensive, detailed research.

The conversation ended with thoughts about the recent statement by Pope Francis concerning fake news and journalists' duty; the Koch brothers' attempt to smear Mayer's reputation to prevent her *New Yorker* story that exposed their operations from winning a prize; and the community fostered amongst investigators when searching for the truth. The event ended with a question and answer session. Mayer answered inquiries concerning Steve Bannon's

depiction of Trump as revealed in Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury*; the alt-right's use of racist dog whistling to engender popular support for an otherwise unpopular agenda; NPR's acceptance of donations from the Koch brothers; the Koch brothers' recent purchase of Time, Inc.; the relationship between White House denials and journalistic credibility; and the Koch brothers' investment in a right wing takeover of the judiciary through the Federalist Society. Mayer ended with advice to Medill students, saying that journalists are living in a fascinating time but that they should focus on the less glamorous aspect of Trump administration: the content and impact of his policies.

Mayer's description of her investigation process reveals her to be a fearless scavenger and teller of the truth. The content of her work – namely, the role of money in shaping our politics and conceptions of reality – reminds us that we must be aware of how private agenda can inform and distort what is presented as truth. The commitment to fine-grained detail, methodical detective work, and the sense of service that underlays Mayer's reporting is inspiring for any journalist, writer, scholar, or student who seeks to conduct and present accurate, evidence-based research.

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The 2017-18 [TRUTH Dialogues](#) are a year-long conversation about knowledge crises and politics from humanistic perspectives, co-presented by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities in partnership with multiple Northwestern departments and programs.

[Franke Undergraduate Fellowships](#) are awarded to three promising seniors pursuing independent humanities research projects. Franke Fellows receive a stipend and research funds, and enrich their projects by taking part in a senior humanities seminar and interdisciplinary exchanges sponsored by the Kaplan Humanities Institute. They present their work at the annual Future Directions Forum in the spring.