established historians like Jon Meacham and Doris Kearns Goodwin.

At the same time, the information revolution has eroded faith in the institutions that once served as arbiters of reality. Mainstream journalism, government reports and academic research have lost the weight of truth for much of the population. From 2006 to 2016, Americans became 10% less likely to have faith in Congress or the media. In 1958, almost three-quarters of Americans trusted the government most of the time—now, that number is down to 1 in 5. A recent Pew study found that 70% of Democrats trust scientists, compared with just 15% of Republicans—and only 16% of Republicans believe the factual statement that scientists are in a near unanimous consensus on climate change.

So instead of institutions, people look to their social networks for information, and social networks are where conspiracy theories thrive best, egged on by Trump’s enormous social power. Passed from Facebook to Facebook, retweeted by thousands of anonymous accounts, ideas can spread quickly without verification or context. People tend to share content that gets the most extreme reactions, which means a terrifying but untrue story will be shared more widely than a mildly alarming but accurate one.

And Trump has done his best to discredit the few remaining news organizations that display any rigorous adherence to fact. He regularly tweets at the “failing @nytimes” and smears its “disgusting” and “dishonest” coverage. He calls out CNN for “phony reporting” and slams its “boring anti-Trump panelists, mostly losers in life.” He is quick to attack anybody who exposes his falsehoods, painting legitimate news sources as biased and phony.

Five years ago, people could tell whether a news source was legitimate by looking at the site’s home page for context. Now all the credibility of publishers is often discarded. In April, Trump announced that Ted Cruz’s father was involved with Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin of John F. Kennedy, based on an unsubstantiated, grainy photo published in the National Enquirer. “What was he doing with Lee Harvey Oswald shortly before the death?” Trump asked. “It’s horrible.”

In 2015, the comedian Stephen Colbert, who now hosts The Late Show on CBS, had mocked political deception as “truthiness,” or half-truths with one foot in reality and one foot in fiction. “You know what the facts are, but you go with what feels more truthful to you,” Colbert told TIME, explaining the technique.

But in recent months, Colbert, a fierce satirist of Trump, has come to believe that his old critique no longer applies: “Trump’s [version] is completely divorced from reality.” How does it feel to watch the new version of truthiness take over America? “How does a parent feel when their baby ends up in a police lineup?” he asks.

WHATEVER THE OUTCOME In November, none of this will end. A Clinton victory will not usher in a return to truth and accuracy or restore American faith in institutions. If anything, a Trump loss could convince his supporters that the system is just as rigged as they’ve been led to believe it is. Pandora’s box has been opened, and once enough people believe something false, it begins to sound almost true.

But even people who believe the conspiracy theories still have a sense that their reality is warped. Sitting at a bar in Wilmington, N.C., Gary Wilson tries to explain his skepticism. “There’s a lot of conspiracy theorists out there, and some of them are goddamn wack jobs,” he says, before explaining his process for figuring out what to trust. “If I hear it from several different sources, I tend to believe it,” he says. “Let me think about that myself, let me see if I can find that one conspiracy even slightly believable.”

The popular New World Order theory passed that litmus test: Wilson believes that global elites are conspiring with the U.N. to create a world government that will act like Big Brother to ordinary people, and that trade pacts are the first step in the process. (The U.N. is not involved in the enforcement of trade deals, which are signed as agreements between participating nations.)

“I just believe it,” he says. “Where did I find my sources? Alex Jones is a good one.” Jones is the host of a radio show that is an entertaining mixture of outrage and conspiracy theory; he has become a champion of Trump. At various times, Jones has claimed that the government has poisoned juice boxes to make citizens gay, that the Bush Administration was complicit in the Sept. 11 attacks and even that Trump was a secret agent working for Clinton by sinking Republican chances of winning the White House. “Your reputation is amazing,” Trump said on Jones’ show in December. “I will not let you down.”

Wilson says he began to notice four or five years ago that 9/11 had been an inside job after “a friend of mine turned me on to a couple websites.” He hates both candidates but says that if it comes down to it, he’ll have to vote for Trump. “A lot of what he says is the truth. He doesn’t bullshit,” Wilson says. “He has no problem saying sh-t that me and him would be saying at the bar.” And this is not a place where anyone is asked to prove their assertions. —With reporting by Tessa Berenson, Philip Elliott and Zeke J. Miller/Washington

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