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This block shows the header of a news article. On the left, there is a white hamburger menu icon. To its right, the 'Forward' logo is followed by the article title 'It's Not Cambridge Analytica We Need To Worry About, It's Our Minds' in white text on a dark blue background. Below the title, the author's name 'By Marty Kaplan' and the date 'March 24, 2018' are listed. On the right side of the header, there is a photograph of Mark Zuckerberg wearing a headset, with a large, semi-transparent 'Facebook' logo in the background.

The Cambridge Analytica furor, like the uproar over Russian penetration of Facebook that preceded it, has painted a bullseye on Mark Zuckerberg.

I get why he and other social media CEOs are waffling about testifying at congressional hearings: They're afraid that pictures of their oath-taking will remind people of the tobacco company executives in the '90s who raised their right hands and swore that cigarettes don't cause cancer.



Oh Kaplan, My Kaplan

It's not a huge leap from nicotine addiction to the dopamine habit of the 2 billion of us hooked on "likes" by Facebook, Twitter and You Tube. Joe Camel's customers pay cash; Facebook users pay attention, which Zuckerberg sells to advertisers, who crunch the personal data Facebook purloins from us to determine whose minds will be most susceptible to their messages.

The premise of advertising, whether it's selling soap or Senator Soap, is the vulnerability of audiences to influences. Media moves us. And today, thanks to our "social graphs" — the profiles that Facebook, Amazon, Google et al assemble from our histories of browsing, searching, buying, friending, tweeting, liking, linking — audiences can be segmented into tribes and sub-tribes whose characteristics maximize their malleability to particular messages.

In other words, we're sheep. The business model of Silicon Valley is herding us. So is the business model of broadcast and cable news, where — even without sophisticated psychographic segmentation — it's gospel that people's attitudes and behavior can be manipulated and changed.

Russian trolls bet their bots on the belief that hateful memes spread on Facebook by fictitious friends could widen the cracks in American society into crevasses, and they turned out to be right. Fox News bet on conspiracy-mongers and anchor-bullies to pull viewers in, and they were right, too. Sinclair Broadcasting's local TV stations, now on the verge of reaching 70% of American households, is also aiming at cultivating an audience avid for Trump propaganda. They wouldn't try to sell it if they didn't think their right-wing content could grow an audience to buy it. They just have deep enough pockets that they can play the long game.

The protagonist of The Trump Show may only have only one setting — lying bully — but it turned an Obama landslide into a Trump victory. It remains a crowd-pleaser; a new [Quinnipiac poll](#) has him winning the approval of 84% of Republican voters and 40% overall. Even congratulating Putin for winning his rigged election and giving him a pass on poisoning British citizens — cravenness that revealed our bully as President Pussy — has yet to cause one Republican in Congress to call Trump, as Crooked Hillary did, [Putin's puppet](#).

Ross Douthat [notes](#) that whatever advantage Trump cadged from Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, it's the exposure he gamed out of old-fashioned TV, right before our eyes, that got him elected. That undersells the part Twitter

has played in his rise and reign, I think, but the point's a good one. Trump is entertaining; entertainment captures attention; attention is the currency of TV news; ergo, Trump must get (apparently limitless) attention from TV.

But whether a message is delivered by old or by new media, it's not the quantity of voters' exposure to it that matters; what counts is the *impact* of that exposure on those voters. Repetition does pack a punch; it's no accident that Trump repeats NO COLLUSION as often as MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. But exposure isn't impact.

What determines whether a message hits its mark? The place to look isn't, as Douthat says, right before our eyes. It's the place where those eyes reside: in the bodies of homo sapiens, whose brains and limbic systems and microbiomes run our reason and our feelings about right and wrong, true and false, us and other, hope and hate.

When media messages barrage citizens, we urge them to rely on critical thinking. We count on enterprises like education, science and journalism — enemies of the people, per the current administration — to help us find information we want and to evaluate information that wants us. We tell people to consider the source; to scan for biases in what we consume, and in ourselves; to break out of our filter bubbles; to construct truth from a variety of perspectives.

But when we read Plato, we discover that our appetites can do an end run around our judgment, even when we're sensitive to being manipulated. When we read [Daniel Kahneman](#), we learn how our psychology can run circles around our intelligence, even when our guard is up. Study after study says that when facts are in dispute, tribal affiliations matter more than evidence; stories matter more than data; who we are — our identities and affiliations — matters more than what someone says is true.

Today, new technology is making it even harder to protect ourselves from fake news (meaning fabrications, not news that gets that sobriquet because it pisses Trump off). The software to make convincing digital counterfeits of any picture or [video](#) or [voice](#) you can imagine, to simulate any media brand's text or website or app, is upon us. The tools to detect and delete forgeries are being outpaced by the dark arts of deep fakery. The viral disinformation propagated by Cambridge Analytica and the Russians is about to seem like a head cold in comparison with the epistemological Ebola on its way.

Reviewing two books on impeachment, Andrew Sullivan [wrote](#) that “the kind of authoritarian slide that America was actually founded to overthrow” is supported by “a solid plurality of Americans.... You can impeach a president, but you can’t, alas, impeach the people.” Maybe, instead of hauling Zuckerberg to the Judiciary Committee, the witnesses should be Republican leaders who stand with Trump come hell or high water, and voters who like and “like” him.

Marty Kaplan is a senior columnist for the Forward. Follow him on Twitter at [@martykaplan](#)