**Headline:** Big Data, Big Oil and White Supremacy: Unveiling the Dark Forces Behind Trump’s 2020 Reelection Campaign With Josh Fox

**Teaser:** In his new solo performance piece “The Truth Has Changed,” the “Gasland” director raises an alarm: The Democrats are ill-prepared for Trump’s oncoming misinformation campaign.

By Reynard Loki

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**[Article Body:]**

Josh Fox, the Emmy-winning and Oscar-nominated filmmaker behind “Gasland,” the documentary that started the global anti-fracking movement, is bringing a new message to audiences across the country with “[The Truth Has Changed](https://www.internationalwow.com/tthc.php),” a live theater-based project that sounds the alarm on the right-wing disinformation campaign working to secure President Trump’s reelection. Commissioned by legendary documentary producer Sheila Nevins for HBO as a solo performance to inspire grassroots action, “The Truth Has Changed” traces Fox’s personal arc from 9/11 to present-day America to tell a story that is both a warning and a prescription to save our democracy—and the planet.

I talked to Fox about this new project and the dark forces working to spread lies and misinformation to influence the 2020 presidential election.

**Reynard Loki**: Your films have been about the environment, and the fight to save it from climate change, fracking, pipelines, the activists at Standing Rock. How has your previous work led you to your new live performance-based project, “[The Truth Has Changed](http://www.internationalwow.com/tthc.php)”?

**Josh Fox**: That’s a great question. It started with an intriguing proposal from HBO. They said, “We know you do theater. We know you’ve been on the road for 10 years bringing your films to people. And you in a live setting is a part of the show, right? It’s not just that people come out to see your films. They come to see you, so how about you do a one-man show that brings that reality to the people?” And that was an assignment from Sheila Nevins when she was at HBO. And I said, “Absolutely; I’ll try this.” And then I started to really think about it, and at first, it was kind of a reporter’s notebook, but to be honest, what I really zeroed in on was the fact that for the last 10 years, the oil and gas industry has made a huge effort to discredit my work and discredit all of the people who spoke about how bad fracking is. And this is very similar to the campaigns of climate denial, which hinge on widespread misinformation and then spreading disinformation and propaganda, smear and lies.

**RL**: Can you describe the effort to discredit your work?

**JF**: Big names in conservative smear campaigns were following me all around the country. [Steve] Bannon. Conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart. Filmmaker Phelim McAleer, whose pro-fracking documentary “FrackNation” attempted to refute my own documentary “Gasland.” Conservative activist James O’Keefe. GOP media strategist Fred Davis. These high-profile right-wing charlatans clearly did opposition research on me. They collected all this data on me and figured out how to attack me personally. They tried to get inside my psyche to unnerve me. And they did it in a very specific and deliberate kind of way.

**RL**: What exactly did they do?

**JF**: They created hate emails specifically designed for my personality. There were tweets threats; there were death threats on Twitter. They highlighted my life in the theater, my hairline, the fact that my family’s Jewish; they found out that I had quit smoking several years ago, but they found a picture of me with a cigarette in my hand online from the past, and they ran that as a pro-fracking TV ad in Ohio saying, “This environmentalist is a smoker.” They followed me around the country for years. They booked shadow tours of our films. They tapped into ethnic and regional stereotyping. And then they tried to paint me as some kind of rich, intellectual, New York City liberal, which is not the case. They flung all of these stereotypes at me. They gathered all this information about me—my background, my ethnicity, my age, my race, where I live, where I went to school, how much money I made, what I had done in my previous life before the films.

**RL**: Are you saying that those techniques used against you are similar to the current disinformation campaigns we’re seeing today? Could you have been a kind of beta test for this data-based approach to spread propaganda?

**JF**: Absolutely. Basically, what Steve Bannon did to me from 2010 to 2015, he did to the entire American electorate in 2016. In developing “The Truth Has Changed,” I made two startling realizations. One was that the people who ran those campaigns against me had a very strong hand in influencing the 2016 election: Steve Bannon, who was running Breitbart when all these attacks were happening against me, took over the Trump campaign and his team profiled the electorate in the exact same way. This connection led me down two trails in my own life. The first looked back to my own personal history as a grandson of Holocaust survivors. I have an intimate knowledge of how white supremacy works, how the Nazi playbook operates, and feel a sense of intergenerational trauma. The second trail looks to the present time and the future, to how the same techniques that were used in a smear campaign against an individual through Google, Facebook, data collection, [and] [addressable ad technology](https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/5-things-you-should-know-about-addressable-ads-more-dollars-shift-digital-173653/), which enables advertisers to selectively segment audiences to serve different ads, are used to influence a massive amount of people. And instead of just following one person around and knowing one person’s data—mine—now they know the personal data of tens of millions of people, and they use that information to create highly personalized ads according to different personality types.

**RL**: How important was big data to Trump’s victory in 2016?

**JF**: During the 2016 election, CNN called political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica “[Donald Trump’s mind readers](https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/04/politics/donald-trump-political-ads-cambridge-analytica/index.html)” and his “secret weapon.” They gathered up to [5,000 data points on more than 220 million Americans](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/episode-359-harvey-weinstein-a-stock-market-for-sneakers-trump-s-data-mining-the-curious-incident-more-1.4348278/data-mining-firm-behind-trump-election-built-psychological-profiles-of-nearly-every-american-voter-1.4348283). And they used that data to tailor ads specifically toward people’s personality types to influence their thinking. The same folks are currently rallying white supremacists all across the world and are making a bid to get Trump reelected in 2020. Their digital campaign created [5.9 million different ad variations in 2016](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/us/elections/trump-campaign-ads-democrats.html), versus just 66,000 ads created by Hillary Clinton’s campaign. It was so key to Trump’s victory that Trump’s digital campaign manager [Brad Parscale is now his campaign manager](https://www.wired.com/story/brad-parscale-campaign-manger-trump-2020/).

**RL**: So in “The Truth Is Changed,” you’re connecting big oil and white supremacy to big data—and how these forces are working together to influence the 2020 election.

**JF**: Yes, we’re talking about Bannon and the white supremacy movement. We’re talking about Trump’s former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who, before that, was the head of ExxonMobil and the oil and gas industry, which has brazenly taken over the government. We’re talking about Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and their collection of the personal data of billions of people around the globe. Together, they have created a situation in which big data, big oil and white supremacists powerfully influence the way the United States government operates. And certainly, in the 2020 election cycle, we’re going to have a very hard time figuring out what is true. I think we’re going to see the largest smear, misinformation and disinformation campaigns in the history of any election. So in “The Truth Has Changed,” I’m taking a deep dive not only into the smear techniques of big oil and how they work from a new technology perspective, from psychographics to addressable ad technology, but going into how that is now how we run elections in America, and then we’ve entered the age of misinformation because right now it’s very hard for people to tell what’s true.

**RL**: Do disinformation campaigns rely on gullibility?

**JF**: No, I wouldn’t say that at all, not with the state of our education system right now. This entire project starts with a high school girl in the front row of one of my films putting her hand up and asking me, “Josh, how do we know what’s true?” She said, “You say all these things about how fracking is bad, and climate change is real, but then we can look online, and we see that people are saying that the opposite of this is true. So how do we know?” She’s not gullible. She’s trying, but can’t figure out the difference between a persuasive argument that is true, and a persuasive argument that is false.

Friends of mine send me fake things all the time because it appeals to them. I’ve sent fake things out accidentally because they appeal for my sensibility. And it’s not only that these ads say things like, vote for Donald Trump, he’s a nice guy, or he’s a tough guy, or he’s a strong guy, or he’s a compassionate guy. It’s often taking people who are upset with the Democratic Party and funneling them toward, for example, Jill Stein, when they might otherwise vote for Hillary Clinton. And a lot of people will get really mad at me and say, “No, no, no, Jill Stein represents what I believe in.” But if you’re in Pennsylvania and you’re voting against the Democratic platform, which Bill McKibben, Cornel West and I helped write and which has real progress in it, and that vote then gets siphoned away to put Donald Trump in office, then you’ve been manipulated. These disinformation campaigns often take the most deep-seated things that are really important to you and turn that into their own political gain. People are assuming that there is some kind of standard for truth because there always used to be. But last year, when Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified to Congress and declared that [political candidates no longer had to abide by any kind of standards of truth](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/10/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-lies-trump-ads.html), they abandoned a century’s worth of journalistic integrity. And they are arguably the largest news publisher in the world.

**RL**: In the face of all of this, what can we do to suss out truth from lies?

**JF**: We always have to check for accuracy. The pursuit of the truth is not something that can be done easily, and it never has been. However, we are now seeing the standard-bearers of journalism consistently undermined, and they themselves also make mistakes and who are also subject to manipulation. The New York Times publishes things directly from State Department press releases constantly; it’s maddening. Today, people need to work harder to get to the truth. But beyond that, we must control and own our own data, because if someone knows you really well, it’s really easy for them to manipulate you.

Take, for example, the 1988 presidential election that pitted incumbent GOP Vice President George H.W. Bush against Democratic Governor Michael Dukakis. [Those who are old enough] probably remember the [Willie Horton ad](https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/01/politics/willie-horton-ad-1988-explainer-trnd/index.html), a racist ad put out by the Republican campaign against Michael Dukakis, and it obviously caused a huge wave of controversy and anger because it was racist. But it only caused that level of controversy because it was visible to everyone. Now you can run 1,000 Willie Horton ads. You can run 10,000 Willie Horton ads. You can run a Willie Horton ad supposedly put out there by a fake Black Lives Matter page, and no one would ever know. So if you put out a racist ad and only racists can see it, it causes absolutely no controversy, but it’s deeply effective in rallying people. And a lot of the times people don’t even know that they’re racist. So you might have things happening to folks on an unconscious level, on a deep psychological level that they’re not aware of. But the internet knows. If you’ve got 5,000 data points on somebody, you know them on a very intimate level, you know their psychology, you know what they’re afraid of, you know their sexual orientation, you know their medical history, their age, their race. So your campaign to win them over becomes very effective.

**RL**: So, how do we get to a point where [owning your personal data is a human right](https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/01/21/we-need-to-own-our-data-as-a-human-right-and-be-compensated-for-it)? Is this ever going to happen?

**JF**: There have to be laws, and those laws have to be in line with the current technology. We’re currently working with the New York State Senate to create a new slate of laws. There’s a [privacy law in California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Consumer_Privacy_Act) that’s just recently been passed, but there’s [some dispute as to how companies are supposed to comply](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/29/technology/california-privacy-law.html). And so there have to be laws about data privacy that we can campaign for, but the Democrat campaigns must also address this issue. The New York Times recently reported that the [Democrats have no strategy to stop this wave of misinformation](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/15/technology/2020-campaigns-disinformation.html). But they need to understand that how they handle misinformation is going to be the difference between tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of votes in battleground states like Michigan and Pennsylvania and Florida. So the Democrats have to get really serious about this issue—and they have to address it really fast. I’ve appealed to the Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and other campaigns, saying that this is really serious because it’s about to happen—and it’s going to happen worse than it’s ever happened before.

**RL**: Should we be allowed to sell our data?

**JF**: That is a fascinating question. I don’t know if I have a real clear answer. I mean, it’s being collected by your action, right? Everything you buy, everywhere you go, everything you search for, all things you know and all the things you don’t know, all that data goes in, and the algorithm learns what you personally crave and what you personally lack and what you really want in life, so that’s a digital map of your dreams, your insecurities, your life. And it is sort of like you’re on the road, right? It’s your digital biography. Do you own your movements in the world? It’s a very interesting question. I imagine there are some benefits. So, for example, if you’re on Instagram and you’re a man, and you’re constantly getting ads for feminine hygiene products, they’re an annoyance; they’re not useful to you. So perhaps you want to get ads that are more tailored to you. And of course, the way the news works these days is the news gives you back things that you agree with and that you want to see and that you want to read because there’s so much information out there. This does backfire upon you because, at that point, you end up being manipulated by the fact that now interests that are foreign to you and nefarious to you and harmful to you can start to target you.

**RL**: How has the truth crisis impacted the climate crisis?

**JF**: They go hand-in-hand. We get our terrestrial proof from the Earth. The planet is empirical data. Climate change deniers are saying that the empirical data that’s coming from the Earth is not true. Where do they say that? Principally, they say that online, which is its own “planet,” the cybersphere. It’s a planet that doesn’t exist on Earth. It exists by its own rules and has its own set of priorities. And if you leave terrestrial Earth, yeah, you can make it wherever you want. So when you’re in that cybersphere, it reigns true whenever you feel like on that particular day, for whomever is willing to pay for it.

The tobacco industry originally started doing this. They started to say things like, “Smoking is good for you.” And they created all this bogus science and fake reports that said, “These cigarettes are fine.” And what they were trying to do is sow confusion in people and stave off regulation. The exact same technique has been used by the oil industry.

**RL**: Why is the truth crisis such an urgent matter?

**JF**: It’s so important because the further we get away from the terrestrial planet as our source of empirical reality, the closer we come to being evicted from the planet like climate change, and that is those same forces, the oil industry and the conservatives that are forcing us to an unlivable world. This is an emergency because of the climate. It’s also an emergency because we’re seeing right now the reemergence of white supremacists and Nazis on this planet, and they are taking over. Right-wing authoritarian governments are sweeping elections across the earth, and they’re doing so primarily by using Facebook and WhatsApp and by lying directly to the public. [Sixty-eight thousand fake Twitter accounts](https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/w/tens-thousands-fake-twitter-accounts-set-back-bolivia-coup) helped push the recent Bolivian coup. In the UK, Boris Johnson’s recent election, [88 percent](https://metro.co.uk/2019/12/10/investigation-finds-88-tory-ads-misleading-compared-0-labour-11651802/) of the conservative parties’ advertisements were misleading. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro was elected with the help of [fake news messages sent via WhatsApp](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/25/brazil-president-jair-bolsonaro-whatsapp-fake-news), a messaging app used by 120 million Brazilians, saying that his opponent was a criminal. Obviously, there’s Donald Trump, who had [5.9 million ad variations](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/us/elections/trump-campaign-ads-democrats.html) using Cambridge Analytica. There’s also Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Narendra Modi in India. There are dozens of examples. So you’re seeing right-wing, authoritarian, racist regimes cropping up all over the world. And in 2019, Steve Bannon raised [$100 million](https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/the-brink-movie-review-steve-bannon-812011/) for his white supremacist project in Europe.

So what is really dangerous about all of this is the two-headed monster of the rise of white supremacy, Nazism and racism on the one hand and on the other hand, climate change denial and the fossil fuel industry. And these are linked, and these are linked in the persona and in many actions by the Trump administration. In 2017, Rex Tillerson, former CEO of ExxonMobil turned Secretary of State, created a [contract between the State Department and Cambridge Analytica](https://time.com/5372923/cambridge-analytica-state-department-terrorist-propaganda/), and their mission was to influence elections all across the world. Big data and big oil running American diplomacy. And that continues to this day.

**RL**: Why should people see “The Truth Has Changed”?

**JF**: Because this is a chance to rally for the truth. It’s the chance to rally for a new America. This project concerns itself with the oil industry, the world at war post-9/11, climate change. We’ve seen the United States get [closer to war with Iran](https://www.truthdig.com/articles/war-with-iran/). We see Australia on fire, and authorities there must battle [misinformation campaigns contending that the fires were caused by arson and not climate change](https://www.npr.org/2020/01/10/795218092/australias-wildfires-spark-disinformation-battle-as-they-take-a-tragic-toll). We know that we’re watching the [extinction of countless species in real time](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/20/climate-change-and-the-new-age-of-extinction). We’re in an emergency.

At every single performance of “The Truth Has Changed,” there will be activists in the room who are campaigning on these issues, and that’s what we need to do. We need to set the record straight. We need to say climate change is real. We need to say fracking is bad, we need to see Donald Trump as a racist and say that is not who we are as a nation. So we have to take our country back, and this is our effort to try to fight back against this wave of lies, smear and misinformation.

*“The Truth Has Changed” opens at New York’s Public Theater this January and will tour across the United States. For more information, visit* [*internationalwow.com/tthc.php*](https://www.internationalwow.com/tthc.php)*.*