

The Washington Post

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Could footnotes be the key to winning the disinformation wars?

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Armed with footnotes, we can save democracy

By Karin Wulf

We are at a distinctive point in the relationship between information and democracy: As the volume of information dissemination has grown, so too have attempts by individuals and groups to weaponize disinformation for commercial and political purposes. This has contributed to fragmentation, political polarization, cynicism, and distrust in institutions and expertise, as a recent [Pew Research Center report found](#). So what is the solution?

Footnotes.

Outside of academics and lawyers, few people may think about footnotes once they leave school. Indeed, there is a hackneyed caricature about footnotes as pedantry, the purview of tweedy scholars blinking as we emerge from fluorescent-lit libraries into the sun — not the concern of regular folks. [A recent essay in the Economist](#) even laid some of Britain's recent woes at the feet of historians who spend too much time “fiddling with footnotes.”

But nothing could be further from the truth. More than ever, we need what this tool provides: accountability and transparency. “Fiddling with footnotes” is the kind of hygienic practice that our era of information pollution needs — and needs to be shared as widely as possible. Footnotes are for everyone.

Though they began as an elite practice, footnotes became aligned historically with modern democracy itself. Citation is rooted in the 17th-century emergence of enlightenment science, which asked for evidence rather than faith as key to supporting a conclusion. It was an era when scientific empiricism threatened the authority of government and religious institutions and newly developing institutional science publications, the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, for example, began to use citations for evidence and reference. In one of Isaac Newton’s contributions to the journal in 1673, a reply to queries about his work on light and the color spectrum, he used citations to his initial publication on the subject (“see no. 80. Page 3075”).

By the 18th century, and with more agile printing, the majority of scientific publications included citations, and the bottom of the page was emerging as the preferred placement. Where scientific scholarship traveled, [humanists were not far behind](#). The disdain of French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes for any discipline without rigorous methods was part of the prompt for historians to embrace citations.

By the 1770s, David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and historian who influenced American revolutionary leaders, was complaining to his

publisher that another of the 18th century greats, Edward Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Republic," had poor citation placement. And since then, the proper way to footnote and cite sources has been a hot topic.

Everyone from scholars to [Supreme Court justices](#) has debated footnotes vs. endnotes, and online writing has incorporated hyperlinks as a hassle-free way of citing sources, albeit not one without flaws.

But the format is not the point: It's the principle and the function behind the reference tool that's so essential. It allows us to weigh evidence against assertion. A footnote reveals the load-bearing structure of a piece of writing, whether it is scientific research, historical analysis or a legal finding.

On what evidence does the claim rest? Is it lab data, a material artifact or a previous court opinion? And then, how does that evidence add up? Does it in fact support the assertions being made and, when accumulated, is it persuasive? The footnote, as historian Anthony Grafton observed, allows readers "[purchase, leverage, an Archimedean point from which to shift and crack the ... certainties of the text they supposedly support.](#)"

This is not to say that footnotes — or any other manner of citation — ensure infallibility. Even peer-reviewed scholarship with extensive footnoting can be wrong. But in such cases, the footnotes provide a road map to evaluate claims that have proved to be false. In one of the most serious and consequential retractions in recent history, in 2010, the editors of the esteemed medical journal the Lancet retracted an article that reported, based on falsified research, a link between autism and vaccines. There were always doubts about this work, but it was by carefully tracking the cited data

that the fraud was exposed. The citations are the evidentiary trail.

Is scholarship too ponderous for everyday reading? Sure. But we can and should expect information transparency in citing both facts and arguments in everyday forums. A footnote can link to a specific fact, and the digital world makes this easier. For example, [Founders Online](#), the great resource of the National Archives, makes the papers of George Washington and five other founders available online. So when I tell you that George Washington had a puppy named Drunkard, I can direct you [to the place in his 1768 diary](#) where he recorded it.

But more significantly, footnotes show how arguments are formed. For example, Georgetown Law School Dean William Treanor argued in a fascinating recent paper that [the intent of the federal Constitutional Convention may have been subverted at the moment of origin](#). He pointed to how its Committee of Style, and specifically its leader, Gouverneur Morris, inserted interpretive changes to the document's text that have reverberated for centuries. His footnotes included references to recent debates about originalist readings of the Constitution, biographical information about Morris and his colleagues, and the records of the Constitutional Convention itself (specifically a [four-volume edition](#) of those records by Max Farrand).

Footnotes also show how knowledge is a collaborative production and [give credit](#) to this intellectual community. Scholarly books depend on the work of other scholars, just as podcasts frequently rely on sources that contributed to the framing or information provided in an episode.

But footnotes do even more: They also teach us how to be active and knowledgeable citizens. The transparent exposure of the evidence being used to make claims puts the reader in charge of assessing their relationship. This is precisely the deliberative process that self-governance asks of us. Even when the evidence is not exposed explicitly through an apparatus like a footnote, every day we expect — or we ought to expect — that the assertions of journalists are backed up by sources cleared by their editorial process, government reports have been through expert review, and the conclusions of judges and lawyers are founded on strong evidence.

Footnotes can also enable readers to dive into a topic. In [a 1996 interview](#) with Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., Harry Belafonte described the relationship between his intellectual and political awakening and footnotes. Reading “Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace” (1945) by W.E.B. Du Bois, “I discovered that at the end of some sentences there was a number, and if you looked at the foot of the page the reference was to what it was all about — what source Du Bois gleaned this information from.” Following up, “I went to the library with a long list of books.”

The footnote was developed in an era of information scarcity, but we are now in an era of information profusion, and it’s never been so necessary. We all ought to be acknowledging the sources on which our work relies, and demanding it from others. Where footnoting isn’t practical, there are other ways to accomplish citation. We ought to know — in fact, we need to know — the foundation for claims.

Accurate, full and contextualized information is the most important weapon wielded on behalf of accountable and transparent government. That is why despotic regimes want to control and restrict it. It is why we have the First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of the press. It is the heart of the

Freedom of Information Act. Information itself is democracy's shield and sword, and the footnote every American's birthright.

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