Lindsay: Welcome to The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in era of Trump. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Before we start, I want to thank all The Breach fans who've taken the time to review our show on iTunes. It makes all the difference. If you'd like to help extend the reach of The Breach, please give us a review on iTunes and subscribe today.

My guest today is journalist and critic Jeet Heer, a senior editor at the New Republic magazine. He's been billed as one of Canada's leading public intellectuals by The Globe and Mail, Canada's newspaper of record. Jeet was one of the first people to recognize the philosophical implications of Donald J. Trump's unconventional relationship with facts and truth. Jeet argued that Trump's not a liar, but rather, a bullshitter, in the sense identified by Princeton philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt in his classic essay On Bullshit. A liar, according to Frankfurt, cares a lot about the truth, because he's committed to leading you in the opposite direction. After all, a liar wouldn't be a liar if he didn't think he knew the truth. Whereas, a bullshitter is indifferent. Jeet, welcome to the program.

Jeet: Good to be here.

Lindsay: You've written that, contrary to popular belief, Donald Trump is not a liar but something else entirely. What is he?

Jeet: Well, I argue that he's a bullshitter, which is, I think, a distinction distinct from being a liar. I should say that this distinction is not something I came up with, but was argued for by the philosophy Harry Frankfurt a few years ago in his book On Bullshit. It's really like an essay that was published in the form of a book. It made an argument that I think is very applicable to Trump, which is that a liar is someone who tells an untruth knowing that it's an untruth, whereas a bullshitter is someone who doesn't care about the distinction between truth and untruth. Therefore, Frankfurt argues, is a more dangerous figure.

Lindsay: What does it mean to not care about the difference between truth and untruth? Doesn't everybody who talks and asserts things, in some sense, care about truth?

Jeet: No. I mean, truth really varies a lot in life, depending on what your goal is. If you're doing scientific research or scholarly research, it matters a great deal. If you're in a relationship with someone and you value that relationship, you value it a great deal. There are other circumstances where truth is not of high utility. I think if you're, say, a quack salesman and you're selling your product that is of dubious value, then it doesn't actually help you to know whether it works or not. It's more helpful if you don't actually care whether it works or not. You can believe in the product more.

Lindsay: Would it be fair to say bullshit artists talk, instead of aiming at truth, to kind of present themselves in a certain light?

Jeet: Yeah, that's right. I think that that's the goal. It's to move the discussion away from is
what is being said true or not to is the figure presenting it compelling. Trump always says, "Believe me," right? "I'm going to build a wall and make the Mexicans pay for it, believe me." The believe me is a very important thing. The goal is to gain credence, to win over the rooms, to get a gullible audience. I think in a lot of the things that Trump says, it's a mistake to try to find out what he actually thinks, because what he thinks varies from situation to situation. He'll say what he believes is useful for him in a particular situation. If he's addressing a crowd of dispossessed factory workers in Ohio, he'll say China's a currency manipulator and he's going to call it that and he's going to change policy. Then, when he's talking to the president of China and finds out he needs China's help to contain North Korea, then he'll say, "Well, I just discovered China's not a currency manipulator." Now, the second statement happens to be true, but it's not the case that he came to the truth. He just came to find out that this new align is more convenient for him right now.

Lindsay: It's kind of amazing, because then there was that third stage in which he went to the AP reporter and said, "Well, he kind of is a currency manipulator, but I can't say that, because I need his help on North Korea."

Jeet: That's right, yeah. Yes, exactly. Exactly. Which I think is preparing the groundwork for if he ever wants to return to the position. Like if he's running for reelection, he can go back to that. I think there's always a kind of escape route. There are no fixed beliefs. I think that's very important. It partially explains his appeal, but also why it's so troubling a figure. I think a lot of people who supported him, it's not like they were totally fooled by this. They could see that he's kind of a salesman who's making a pitch, but they thought that that meant that he's very pragmatic and that he's not bringing ideological priors to issues, so he'll negotiate when necessary. It's not so much pragmatism as opportunism. I think that for a political figure, not having principles is actually a liability, because if you believe in certain things on a certain level, then your behavior is more predictable, and also people can rely on you. There's also some things that you won't do. It gives you a sort of strength in negotiations. Actually, for Trump, one problem he's running into is people know that he doesn't believe in a lot of things, so they feel like they can push him around and get him to their point of view.

Lindsay: He's done that so many times, where he says things like, "NATO's obsolete," and then the NATO ambassador comes, and 10 minutes later, he's convinced that NATO's the best thing ever.

Jeet: That's right. No, it's become a recurring feature of the presidency. I mean, I can understand the appeal of wanting a more pragmatic leader. I think it's interesting. You felt something in the Republican votes as well, that maybe they felt like some of their own leaders were too hardcore on issues and that Trump was a way for the party to return to a type of pragmatism. Again, I think just as there's a distinction between lying and bullshitting, there's a distinction between pragmatism and opportunism.

Lindsay: It introduces an incredible amount of chaos, because it seems like what Trump believes is whatever the last person he talked to was.
Jeet: That's right. That's exactly right. I think that that level of chaos is exactly what we're seeing. It could pose all sorts of problems. I think the easiest way to see it is in foreign policy, where there's been a couple of cases where he's been at variance with the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense, so it makes it very hard for other nations to know where the United States stands. I think almost the classic bullshit thing is saying those aircraft carriers are on their way to Korea when they weren't. I think it's a very dangerous thing for a nation like the United States to be making threats that, in policy, it's not demonstrably backing up.

Lindsay: It's kind of unclear at what point they actually figured out, the administration itself, because there was all that back and forth where the Defense Department seemed to think one thing and the Oval Office seemed to think another. I was unaware of where the bullshit came in, whether they just lost track of that aircraft carrier and then had to pretend like they knew where it was all along.

Jeet: There's not a lot of clarity as to what they knew or didn't know, but I think it goes back to the original point, which is in some ways they don't care. They feel like they can impose their will on reality. By saying that they're doing something, that in itself counts. They ran into a lot of problems where people called them out on that.

Lindsay: Yes. Imagine what would have happened if North Korea had taken them seriously and reacted as if this was a provocative gesture, and then the aircraft carrier that we were relying on to actually defend in the area was thousands of miles away, it would have been a total disaster.

Jeet: That's right. No, exactly. I think a little bit reassuring thing that's kind of coming out is it seems like a lot of nations aren't taking him seriously. It's going to pose, also, some problems for the United States in the future, but it does seem like there's kind of an international consensus emerging that this guy is a paper tiger and his bark is worse than his bite, but you never know, right?

Lindsay: Yeah.

Jeet: That's exactly the situation which could also provoke the country to overstep the bounds and then Trump, or more likely his military advisors, feel like they have to react, right?

Lindsay: Yeah.

Jeet: So it really introduces a level of uncertainty. I feel like not enough people are thinking about this or worried about the problem that this is going to pose and how dangerous this is.

Lindsay: Just recently, Trump started out saying that he was going to leave NAFTA by executive order, and by the end of the work day, he'd gotten on the phone with the Prime Minister and President from Canada and Mexico and had decided that he's going to announce that he's going to make NAFTA stronger.
Jeet: That's right. No, all in one day. Less than a work day, like less than 12 hours.

Lindsay: He sent the peso into a tailspin, which is going to be really bad for real people.

Jeet: No, no, that's right. Again, I feel like, at some point, there's got to be some sort of inoculation that comes in, right? Initially, when he was making threatening comments to various companies on his Twitter account, their stocks would go down. What happened after a while was that there'd only be that brief dip and then they'd recover, because people figured out that what he's saying isn't necessarily what he's going to back up. That's just the whim of a moment.

Lindsay: This is the first presidency where Twitter has been a huge part of the president's moment-to-moment outreach. Do you feel like that medium contributes even more to the sense of unreality surrounding him?

Jeet: I think so, yeah. I think the Twitter and even more the reality show television of the Sean Spicer briefings and Trump's own press interactions. It seems like maybe one way to think about this is that Trump is really the first post-Gutenberg president, the first president that's really not a reader. There's famously Marshall McLuhan, but also Neil Postman and Father Walter Ong who theorized about the impact of print culture on thinking, that the Gutenberg era created a type of culture, a mass culture, of people reading a lot and getting the habits of thought that come from print, which include patience but also linear thinking, consistency of type. Trump really is ... It's not so much that he uses Twitter and he watches all the cable news, but that he doesn't read, so he doesn't have the reading to counteract that. He has all the mental habits of the social media world and of the TV world, which is that everything is instantaneous. Everything is now, right?

Lindsay: Everything is cut off from sources of evidence and justification. It's all about personal authority and the rant and the quip or the long-form argument or the well-documented position.

Jeet: That's right. Also, moment-to-moment consistency doesn't matter. In some ways, what the theorists like McLuhan and Ong argue is that it's a return to oral culture, but technological oral culture. In that oral culture, everything is always a momentary victory. You're face to face, and one person says one thing and the other person says another. For Trump, every political interaction and every interaction is that. He'll say Rosie O'Donnell's a pig, and then later, nobody respects women more than I am. Whatever wins that moment.

Lindsay: I feel like actual cultures that trade on the oral tradition can't afford to be so hapless about what happened, that they have elaborate mechanisms of oral history and art and witnessing traditions like pot latches to conserve a very close consensus of what happened.

Jeet: That's absolutely true, yeah. He's kind of the oral warrior cut off from any sort of culture
to preserve it, but he has that trait of if you look back on the classic epics like Homer, Beowulf, the epic hero is always the figure that's very well-equipped with insults. The way he's always creating nicknames for foes like Crooked Hillary and Lying Ted. Then, really, the world more closer to home, professional wrestling. Again, I think Trump's relationship to a normal presidency is the same as professional wrestling's relationship to a normal sport. Professional wrestling is a sort of simulation of a sport. It looks like it. It has the competition, the prizes, and then requires real athletic ability, but then it also has a huge element of fiction and scripting. I think that Trump is trying to have a presidency of that order.

Lindsay: What do you think this kind of pervasive unreality bodes for the Trump administration's relationship with Canada? Canada seems like—I grew up there—it's very evidence-based kind of political discourse relative to a lot of other countries.

Jeet: Yeah. I think that that's a very interesting question. Well, he's very unpopular here. I think there has been Canadian politicians who are trying to follow in Trump's footsteps, and so far, they haven't been very successful. The conservative party here is having their own primaries for a leader, and one of the ones who most closely imitated Trump has just dropped out. I think that Canada is a little bit lucky in being a little bit more old-fashioned. For example, we don't have a Fox News. There was an attempt to create a Fox News in the form of Sun TV, which failed. Then, also, the existence of something like CBC, which is still one of the major media outlets and which still has public broadcasting commitment to truth kind of makes a Trump figure a bit harder. Although, who knows? I think it's just maybe a matter of time. I think that what is more generally happening is that Trump is constantly coming into contact with people in other nations and with the political culture of other nations. Just because I don't think that reality show aspect that his fan base finds attractive is attractive to people in other cultures, including people who are actually quite conservative. I think conservative people in Canada or in France or in England would find Trump like a very drawing and shocking figure.

Lindsay: The stuff that's leaked about Angela Merkel's reaction to him has been pretty damning and very much in line with what you said.

Jeet: I think that's right, yeah. I also think that, in some ways, America is just at the cutting edge of this stuff, the cutting edge of mediated culture. If we try to see Trump as being partially a product of that, then it's not too difficult to imagine 10, 15 years down the line, that these other countries would also ... I mean, in some ways, some of them have already created their own Trump figures like Berlusconi or Rob Ford in Toronto.

Lindsay: I mean, Vladimir Putin is very much a creature of illusion who does a lot of pro-wrestling type tropes in his own self-preservation in Russia.

Jeet: That's right. In some ways, I think that that is not ... We shouldn't make such an absolute distinction between the United States and other countries. I think the forces that produced Trump exist in many different societies. I think that what Trump might pose for other countries is a question of how do they resist their own demagogues and what are the institutional barriers. One thing you're seeing is a reaction to fake news in places
like France and Germany, where there's a real effort to see if that was part of the problem, than to try to clamp down or challenge outlets that are presenting outright lies and bizarre conspiracy theories.

Lindsay: Do you think that there's a connection between the rise of these emotive, fact-impoverished communication styles and the rise of authoritarianism itself?

Jeet: Yeah, very much so. I think that the authoritarianism is the natural politics that goes along with it. In some ways, it's not just a matter of being averse to facts, but also being averse to a style of politics that is traditionally democratic, which involves conciliation, compromise, discourse, debate, right?

Lindsay: Justification, evidence, process.

Jeet: Yeah, exactly. There's a whole array. The populace demagogue presents himself or herself as the antithesis of that, because the idea is that that system was corrupt and inadequate and bad. The leader is the voice of the people and is precisely the qualities that are off-putting.Crudeness, the simplification, aggressiveness, unwillingness to compromise, these are marks of authenticity. They're the marks that this person is the voice of the people, and it can pretend that, what are seen as the faults of traditional democratic politics.

Lindsay: Is that a cyclical thing, where a more emotive style tends to alternate with a more deliberative style in different eras?

Jeet: I don't know. I'm generally skeptical of cyclical views of history. I feel like it's-

Lindsay: Maybe more like fads in fashion like skirt lengths or tie widths, where you have different swings towards one pole or the other, not necessarily that it's a cycle like sun spots.

Jeet: Sure. I think that there is going to be an element of fad-ish-ness, but if there is something, I think it's more deeply rooted in political economy and in technology. I do think that once you have new technology, they can allow voices that are not otherwise heard to make themselves heard and can sort of short-circuit the traditional norms. Also, the economic situations of rising inequality and stagnant economies also make these same voices very appealing. I wouldn't necessarily say ... I mean, cyclical feel, a little bit like this happens by itself. I do think it's very much connected to things that we can actually identify.

Lindsay: Does this shift to the more emotive style of politics put the Left and Progressives at a systematic disadvantage?

Jeet: I'm not sure it probably works that way. There are elements of the Left that can very much take advantage of this. I think that this sort of a emotive style cuts across the Left/Right divide. Someone like Chavez or other politicians on the Left could very easily exploit the same style. To the extent to which, if you consider Left-wing politics to be tied to policy and the evidence, then yeah. I think it cuts more against any politics that is
very heavily empirical. I think the bias is more anti-empirical than anti-Left.

Lindsay: It's interesting. I go back and forth on this. It seems like in the current political climate where Leftist progressive politics is pretty centrist and still very evidence based at the professional level, but it's empowering different kinds of culture or critics that part of the reason I think comedians are coming to the fore and entertainers is because they're able to compete on this not strictly rational level.

Jeet: That's exactly right. In some ways, you need a Left politics that can do that. I don't necessarily think even the whole appeal to emotions is necessarily a bad thing. I think there really is no such thing as a good policy that's just good on a factual basis that anyone can agree with.

Lindsay: Sure.

Jeet: All policies have to have-

Lindsay: Sort of Hume-ean pull to make people attracted to them or repelled by them.

Jeet: Yeah. Certainly, the politicians on the Left that have been successful, it's almost blindingly clear, right? The last two Democratic presidents have been Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, who certainly have an emotional appeal, and then they've lost with Dukakis, Al Gore, John Kerry, and Hillary Clinton, which are about the four most charismatic figures in political life.

Lindsay: Justin Trudeau- has also done really well introducing an emotion in the sense of him being in touch with his feelings in Canadian politics.

Jeet: Yeah, no, I think that's true. I think that is a big part of the appeal. Again, you can sort of draw the contrast between Justin Trudeau ... Because they had several Canadian politicians that led the Liberal party before Trudeau and failed, like Michael Ignatieff, Stéphane Dion, Paul Martin, all of whom were more cerebral, intellectual, and a bit harder for the general public to relate to. Whereas, Trudeau, offering really the same policy prescriptions as his Liberal predecessors, just conveys a greater sense of caring, of concern. These issues are sort of visceral for him. He feels them, rather than just thinks them.

Lindsay: Trump’s attacks on the news media, can those be seen as an attack on the idea of intersubjectively verifiable truth itself?

Jeet: Yeah, I think that's a big part of what he is trying to do with the attacks on the media. I do think that the idea is that any criticism of Trump is coming from a place of dishonesty and to polarize a sense of who you can trust and who you can't trust. I imagine that it shields him from a lot of criticism. If a large swath of the Republican Party had trusted the mainstream media, they would have looked at the stuff about Trump and decided this guy can't be president, but they've had almost 40 years of training to think that the main media can't be trusted. Trump is always just continuing that, but he's continuing a
long-standing attempt to break down a sort of common ground of trust in media. In some ways, yeah. I think it helped elect him, and it's probably going to help shield him in any sort of scandal or controversy that comes up. If he does have an impeachment hearing, there'll be 30, 40% of the population that will just disbelief any scandalous evidence about him.

Lindsay: It's amazing how far back his attacks on object evidence go. You see his crusade against "fake news" presaged in this war that he had in Atlantic City with this casino analyst called Marvin Roffman, who was a really respected guy in the gaming industry, who pointed out, quite reasonably and what should have been obvious to anyone, was that Atlantic City wasn't a big enough or a seasonal enough market to support all of Trump's giant casinos without them cannibalizing each other. When he said that, Trump had him destroyed, essentially. He called up his bosses and got I'm fired.

Jeet: Trump's instincts on that are quite correct. The most dangerous thing for him is evidence. I think a large part of Trump's skill set is he understands media culture and he understands how to gain the system and how to get press and how to try to discredit people who go against him. I imagine that this is a lot of stuff he picked up from Roy Cohn, actually, who was kind of a mentor. A lot of it is standard McCarthyism.

Lindsay: You deny everything and assail the questioner.

Jeet: Exactly. Then, to make any critique about the person criticizing you rather than you yourself and then to create that sort of hyper-polarized environment which becomes a question of which side are you on rather than what is the truth. Then, again, I think this all indicates ... I mean, it goes back to your earlier point about is this cyclical. I think rather than think it was cyclical, I think that there's always been a strand of this in American politics. There's always been these kind of Trump-like figures like Joseph McCarthy. Nixon to a lesser extent, but still had some of these same tendencies. Going back to the '30s, Father Coughlin and Huey Long. I feel like this is always a kind of tendency within democracy, and then we kind of have to explain why, in our particular era, this tendency has taken over the presidency.

Lindsay: What do you think would happen if Trump were forced to produce his tax returns and they had incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing?

Jeet: I think, via Alex Jones or Michael Cernovich or others, just put out something as to why that can't be trusted.

Lindsay: Yeah, he'll just move the conspiracy larger and larger so that any basis of common evidence is lost eventually, because you can't trust the media, you can't trust the government, you can't trust science, you can't trust your friends.

Jeet: Yeah, exactly. I imagine it would be Obama invented those tax returns in Kenya. If you start from the premise Obama was born in Kenya or whatever, then what else can you not believe, right?
Lindsay: It's fascinating how authoritarianism and conspiratorial thinking seem to go together, too.

Jeet: I think that, in some ways, there's a kind of natural affinity, in part because the opposite is also true. I think to have democratic government, you have to have a believe that there might be a few people doing bad stuff behind the scenes, but basically, everybody's on the up-and-up. You can have debates with people that are good-faith debates. You can appeal to a common set of evidence and have different interpretations of that. Whereas, conspiratorialism makes all that impossible, so the natural solution is the authoritarian leader.

Lindsay: It's interesting where the authoritarianism reinforces the conspiratorial beliefs by its nature, because it sort of is evidence that everything is corrupt, that's it not fair, it's not a democracy, so people spin conspiracies to fill the vacuum.

Jeet: That's right, yeah All these things, always they reinforce each other. Trump has very good instincts on this. He always knows what the connections ... I think on the Russian stuff, there's a lot of Liberals who have this magic bullet faith that something will come out about Russia that will discredit Trump and he will be impeached. You can sort of already see that Trump is laying a groundwork for why any new evidence can't be trusted, like Obama was spying on Trump. It's all coming from these Obama holdovers. There can't be any incontrovertible facts, because no such facts exist in Trump's universe.

Lindsay: That's all the time we have for today. Jeet, thanks so much for coming on the program.

Jeet: Thanks for having me. This was fun.

Lindsay: Each week on The Breach, we give you a little homework to sharpen your knowledge of authoritarianism and corruption. In our very first episode, Zephyr Teachout and I focused on the foreign emoluments clause of the Constitution and how Trump's business holdings might violate it by accepting payments from foreign governments. Our first recommend reading is about a domestic emoluments clause, which prevents the president from accepting payments from the states. Julia Hart of Reuters reports that this could be a problem for Trump, because state pension funds invest in his hotel. Our next one is called The Convicted Con Artist of the Winter White House by Tarini Parti of BuzzFeed. A convicted fraudster who owes his victims hundreds of thousands of dollars is married to the woman known as the House Mother of Mar-A-Lago, and he's milking it for all it's worth. That's all for recommended reading.

The Breach is produced by Rewire Radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is Dark Alliance, performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Tweet your suggestions, comments, and questions to @Beyerstein on Twitter. See you next week.