
Andrew Kaczynski

Date of birth: November 30, 1989

Occupation: Journalist

Andrew Kaczynski joined CNN as a political reporter in October 2016. Kaczynski began working for *BuzzFeed* in 2012 while he was still a college student at St. John's University in New York City. A former intern at the Republican National Committee (RNC), Kaczynski, by his own account, was drawn to political journalism after discovering a talent for rooting out old videos of politicians on the Internet. Kaczynski cut his teeth during the 2012 election, uncovering damning footage of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney contradicting himself on health care reform. But the reporter became a fixture of the field in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, researching and fact-checking claims by front-runners Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. As a reporter with CNN, Kaczynski broke several stories about Andrew Puzder, a fast-food executive who was President Trump's pick for the position of US secretary of labor in early 2017. The stories created such a cloud over Puzder that he withdrew his nomination in February.



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EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Kaczynski was raised in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. His father, Stephen J. Kaczynski, is a partner with the international law firm Jones Day, where he served as a senior litigator on the national coordinating counsel team for the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. His mother, Theresa Kaczynski, was a teacher's aide and later a stay-at-home mother. At the age of nineteen, Kaczynski was diagnosed with pancreatitis; after his bout with the illness, he neither smokes nor drinks alcohol. At the private Cleveland Benedictine High School, Kaczynski wrote for the school newspaper, the *Bennet*. He graduated in 2008 and enrolled as a student at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. He studied at Ohio University for two years before he transferred to St. John's University in the Queens borough of New York City, where he studied early American history. While he was a student there, he interned for the RNC and the offices of Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican US rep-

representative for California, and Bob Turner, a former US representative for New York who took over the seat vacated after Anthony Weiner was ousted in 2011.

Kaczynski also developed an interesting hobby. In 2011, Kaczynski unearthed an embarrassing video clip of New York Assemblyman David Weprin, Turner's Democratic opponent in the special election, dancing at a Brooklyn festival in 2009. He posted the video on his Twitter page, and it quickly went viral. The video was posted by national news outlets, including the *New York Times*, and was featured on a segment of the late-night comedy show *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. "I realized there's this space to fill for people who want to see politically related videos, whether archival or recent," he told a reporter for the St. John's University website. "They're so polished and put forth an image they want people to accept, but these videos really show how they've evolved until their current political self appears." Living in a Russian family's basement in Queens, Kaczynski spent hours searching for old video footage of politicians on the Internet between classes at St. John's, combing over a variety of sources, including Google Videos, YouTube, AOL Video, the C-SPAN archives, and local news sites. One of his first targets was Texas politician Rick Perry, who had recently entered the Republican primary race for president. Kaczynski found and posted some of Perry's earliest political advertisements. When Kaczynski found something interesting, he sent it to Ben Smith, then an editor at the political news website *Politico*. When Smith left the site to become the editor in chief at *BuzzFeed* in late 2011, he hired Kaczynski as a part-time contributor. Kaczynski was one of the first reporters in the site's news division. He officially began the job in January 2012, and he ultimately left university to work full time without completing his degree.

2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

During the 2012 election, Kaczynski found a number of compromising videos of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. "I hate to pick on Mitt Romney," he told Jason Zengerle for *New York Magazine* (11 Dec. 2011). "I think he's the most electable Republican other than [former Utah governor Jon] Huntsman." Kaczynski's interest in the candidate was twofold; people seemed to enjoy videos that reinforced Romney's socially awkward persona—in one video unearthed by Kaczynski, Romney tells a teenager at a local festival that he likes "music of almost any kind, including this"—but Kaczynski was also trying to parse Romney's hazy ideology after the candidate had been leveled with charges of flip-flopping on key positions.

Romney, a former Republican governor of Massachusetts, a strongly liberal state, gained traction during the Republican primaries by touting his conservative bona fides. He was particularly critical of President Barack Obama's health care plan, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare. Romney made repealing Obamacare the centerpiece of his campaign, but his aversion to the legislation was odd considering that he had signed into law a similar health care policy in Massachusetts in 2006. Romney repeatedly insisted that the two plans were totally different and that he had never intended for his

model to be implemented at the national level, but it did not take long for Kaczynski to challenge his claim. In March 2012, several months before Romney won the Republican nomination, Kaczynski unearthed a 2009 op-ed that Romney had written for *USA Today*, as well as three different interview clips from the same year, in which Romney urged President Obama to use the Massachusetts health care plan as a template for Obamacare. “You can find the history of everybody,” Kaczynski told Jeff Sonderman for *Poynter* (20 Mar. 2012). “The Internet is an archive in itself now, and when something gets put on YouTube, it’s there forever. You can really find anything that you need on these people.”

FEUD WITH RAND PAUL

In many ways, the campaign preparation for the 2016 presidential election began shortly after President Obama was inaugurated to his second term in 2013, and Kaczynski, and his small band of political researchers at *BuzzFeed*, known as the K-File, began digging for dirt on presidential hopefuls early on. In October 2013, MSNBC talk show host Rachel Maddow aired a segment about Rand Paul, a US senator for Kentucky, plagiarizing a *Wikipedia* entry in a speech. Shortly thereafter, Kaczynski published other examples of the senator doing the same thing. In the article “Rand Paul Has Given Speeches Plagiarized from Wikipedia Before” (29 Oct. 2013), Kaczynski noted that in a June 2013 speech, Paul had used passages from the *Wikipedia* page on the 1988 film *Stand and Deliver*. A few days later, Kaczynski found that an entire passage of Paul’s 2012 book *Government Bullies* was plagiarized from a 2003 case study from the conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation. Another passage came from a report by a senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute. Paul dismissed Kaczynski’s reporting, taking umbrage at being called “dishonest,” he said in a speech as reported by Annalisa Quinn for NPR’s *The Two-Way* (4 Nov. 2013). “If dueling were legal in Kentucky, if they keep it up, it’d be a duel challenge,” he said.

In June 2015, Kaczynski and fellow *BuzzFeed* reporter Megan Apper found that many of the quotes attributed to Founding Fathers in Paul’s books *Government Bullies* and *The Tea Party Goes to Washington* (2011) were “either fake, misquoted, or taken entirely out of context.” Fake Founding Fathers quotes are favorite niche beat for Kaczynski—he has outed a handful of politicians, including former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, for fabricating such quotes—but Paul’s missteps in that regard became an ongoing story. Kaczynski found Paul using fake historical quotes in speeches to constituents and in Congress on a number of occasions. Kaczynski and Apper published an article in the cheeky spirit of *BuzzFeed* (27 Oct. 2015) that was composed as a letter to the senator citing similar objections to a slew of false quotations in Paul’s 2015 book, *Our Presidents & Their Prayers: Proclamations of Faith by America’s Leaders*. Many of the purported quotations, the reporters wrote, were revealed to be fake after a quick Internet search.

2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Keeping politicians honest in the manner Kaczynski had practiced since 2012 became an increasingly Sisyphean task as the election wore on. Still, Kaczynski and his team managed to break a few stories that shaped election coverage. In November 2015, Kaczynski and his colleague Nathan McDermott published a 1998 video clip of Republican candidate Ben Carson giving a commencement address in which he asserts that the Egyptian pyramids were built by the biblical figure Joseph for the purpose of storing grain. (When CBS News reached out to Carson for comment in response to Kaczynski's reporting, Carson confirmed that he still held this

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view.) The same year, Kaczynski challenged former secretary of state and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's assertion that all four of her grandparents were immigrants; only one was foreign-born. They also found a 1996 video clip of Clinton referring to children in gangs as “superpredators.”

Kaczynski and McDermott broke the K-File's biggest story in the campaign in February 2016. On the campaign trail, Republican candidate Donald Trump repeatedly insisted that he had opposed the American invasion of Iraq. Kaczynski found a September 2002 clip from *The Howard Stern Show* radio program in which Trump says that he supported the invasion. Kaczynski went on to cite other sources, including Trump's 2000 book, *The American We Deserve*, and a 2003 interview with Neil Cavuto that reinforce Trump's supportive stance. Kaczynski broke other major news regarding Trump when he found evidence that former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke had urged followers to support the candidate. In the fall, Kaczynski unearthed a clip of Trump's cameo in a 2000 soft-core porn video for Playboy.

JOINING CNN

In early October 2016, one month before the election, Kaczynski and his investigative team accepted positions with the news network CNN. Andrew Morse, the executive vice president of the network and the head of CNN Digital, said that Kaczynski first caught his attention after the story about Trump's stance on the Iraq War months earlier. Morse was reportedly unhappy about losing Kaczynski and the K-File team, but he wished Kaczynski the best, telling Sridhar Pappu for the *New York Times* (16 Oct. 2016), “He's a great person, a brilliant researcher, and the ultimate one-man show—I'm sure he'll do great wherever he goes.” Kaczynski was positive about the transition. “To be at the biggest name in news for the last month of what has been the craziest election in modern history is just a great opportunity for me and everybody on our team,” he told Michael Calderone for the *Huffington Post* (3 Oct. 2016). Kaczynski explained his decision to join CNN to Pappu, stating, “When I worked at *BuzzFeed*, it was always valida-

tion for me when my stories were getting talked about on MSNBC or CNN or Fox News.”

As a reporter for CNN, Kaczynski broke several stories about Trump’s labor secretary nominee Puzder, the former chief executive of CKE Restaurants, which owns the fast food chains Hardee’s and Carl’s Jr. On January 23, 2017, Kaczynski published the transcripts of two separate 2011 speeches in which Puzder disparaged his own employees as “the best of the worst,” a characterization at odds with his public statements. About two weeks later, Kaczynski, with K-File teammate Chris Massie, published a story revealing that Puzder had previously described about 40 percent of his employees as undocumented immigrants. (Puzder had made several comments to that effect over a number of years.) This detail in particular sat uneasily with Republicans in Congress. Puzder subsequently withdrew his nomination.

PERSONAL LIFE

Kaczynski is engaged to Rachel Louise Ensign, a banking reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*. They live in Brooklyn.

SUGGESTED READING

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—Molly Hagan