

Truth, Lies, Facts and Fake News

BY LEIDA SNOW

It started at the very beginning of our nation: The Declaration of Independence flat-out stated that certain truths are self-evident. The first among them was that all men are created equal. That particular truth wasn't so evident until much later. After all, we had to fight a civil war over slavery, and are still grappling with the chasm between our aspirations and our realities of race and gender.

We live in a post-truth world. What is the lifespan of a fact? Many among us, notably most journalists, complacently believe that objective, provable facts are true, and that they must be accepted by any rational, thinking person. But that would be laughably wrong. As President Donald Trump spokesperson Kellyanne Conway so piquantly expressed it just after the inauguration, it is altogether possible to embrace alternative facts. And, as Rudolph Giuliani, one of the president's lawyers, enthused, Truth isn't truth. It's somebody's version of the truth. As he later expanded, sometimes further inquiry can reveal the truth; other times it doesn't. In a classic he-said-she-said situation, where can we find the truth?

In recent books, anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour and professors of logic Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall try to puzzle out why so many dismiss facts and embrace fake news. Turns

out the answer is enough to worry any of us who live in what a Bush administration aide called a reality-based community.

In *Down to Earth*, Latour explains, rather obviously, that reality exists whether we accept it or not, and that our ability to accept it depends on our social context. O'Connor and Weatherall, in *The Misinformation Age*, have a simpler and more frightening explanation. All that is necessary for fake news to spread, they write, is to inject doubt into the conversation.

The tobacco folks discovered that years ago. After all, the link between smoking and cancer could not be definitively, scientifically established. So, millions of people were lulled into believing there was no proven connection, even though the scientific evidence was overwhelming.

Aren't we in the same situation today? Climate change deniers are firmly convinced they are correct because, after all, no one can absolutely prove the link between human actions and glaciers melting.

In the world of journalism, dozens if not hundreds of people are frantically fact-checking Trump's false assertions, adding the nuance of context to outlandish statements, as if the huge collection of facts will stop the flood of lies. If that weren't so sad, it would be funny. In this, journalists are much like Trump. He states that a wall on the southern border will keep

the caravan of Central Americans from invading the United States. We believe the mountain of facts will keep the ocean of lies at bay.

But, truthfully, just how important is the truth anyway? How much does it matter?

A recent Broadway play tangentially reflected on current events, even as it never mentioned them. "The Lifespan of a Fact" was based on the real-world experience of an intern assigned to fact-check a published author's essay.

The dialogue supplied by playwrights Jeremy Karen, David Murrell, and Gordon Farrell was consistently interesting and often funny, but I watched in dismay as the fact-checker and the essayist wandered into the land of conflicting extremes. The intern eventually focused on whether something was eight or nine seconds long, and the author screamed that his truth was more important than any facts.

In memory, as in an essay, for example, certain facts may be muddled. In the play, the author character is firm that he is not a journalist, but an essayist. Certainly that can provide some cover: Who is to say what is right or wrong about someone's memory of an event? On the other hand, when facts are verifiable, they should be respected, even in an essay or opinion

piece. If news coverage states how a person was killed, then the writer shouldn't change that because if the reader can't trust the verifiable facts, why would he or she suspend disbelief about other aspects of the story?

What was lost, in the chaos on stage, was that facts do matter.

In the end, Lifespan set up straw men but got me thinking about our current world. If all it takes for fake news to spread is to sow doubt, then we are in deep trouble: advertisers have long been doing it, politicians are doing it, foreign adversaries are doing it.

All the fact-checking in the world won't save us.

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