

5-31-2019

Truth Seeking

Suzanne SooHoo

Chapman University, soohoo@chapman.edu

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Recommended Citation

SooHoo, S. (2019). Truth seeking. *Postdigital Science Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00047-w>

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Comments

This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of commentary accepted for publication in *Postdigital Science Education* in 2019. The final publication may differ and is available at Springer via DOI: [10.1007/s42438-019-00047-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00047-w).

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Truth Seeking

Suzanne SooHoo, Chapman University, Orange, California, USA, soohoo@chapman.edu

What does it mean anymore to be an informed citizen? To know the difference between fact and fiction? To know truth – something proven by facts or sincerity, accuracy, correctness, reality, integrity, honesty. We currently find ourselves in a swamp of falsehoods, where Trump's 8,000 plus (as of February 2019) lies go unchallenged by his supporters and the ledgers of his adversaries fill volumes of fabricated truth, where blurring of fact and truth is so intense that media, universities, and science are no longer trusted sources of information, where purposeful misleading and lying becomes fashionable and 'normalized'. Truth has become an endangered species in America (Kakutani 2018).

'As the theatre of lies, insults, and childish petulance triumphs over measured arguments, a world emerges in which the only real choices are among competing fictions — a world in which nothing is true and everything begins to look like a lie.' (Giroux 2019) Giroux warns us, if the spirit and promise of a sustainable democracy is to survive, it's crucial to make truth telling virtuous again. There must be a renewed sense of social agency, and an impassioned international social movement with a vision, organization and set of strategies to challenge the dystopian nightmare engulfing the United States.

Truth seeking during Trumps' first two years in office have left us with vertigo. Trump not only stretches the truth but his lies gain traction as his supporters remarkably justify his false claims which further empowers him to fabricate more stories. These steady drumbeats of lies at first were assaultive and now are the new normal. Lying has legitimized ignorance. Ignorance now is fashionable over references to anything 'science-based' and 'evidence-based' (Kakutani 2018). Trump claims global warming is fake science. Rush Limbaugh's anti-intellectualism denounces what he calls the Four Corners of Deceit: government, academia, science, and media, once considered by most, the hallmark of reliability, as all 'frauds and paid for by the left' (Kakutani 2018).

Trump's sea of falsehoods and the Internet's tsunami of opinions overwhelm us as we attempt to discern truth. And there are consequences when we swim in an ocean of opinion that obfuscates facts. Rand's Truth Decay project (Kavanaugh and Rich 2019) claims that facts matter or when they don't, suffer the consequences: political paralysis, alienation, and disengagement due to uncertainty in national policy. Truth Decay investigates the role of facts in public life by looking at the history of truth decay, cognitive biases, the volumes of opinions which presents us from getting information directly and declining confidence of institutions as creditable sources that lead to civic disengagement.

The spread of disinformation or the orchestrated intentional destruction of truth has many examples in our history. Chomsky (Herman and Chomsky 1988) speaks to this phenomenon when he reports on the distorted news coming from government and media sources regarding the Vietnam War. Tobacco companies audaciously boasted their campaign strategy 50 years ago, 'doubt is our product', to conceal health risks of tobacco

from the public for over 50 years (Kakutani 2018). Earlier this year, Trump commissioned a counter facts committee on global warning to demonstrate his willful obstruction of truth. This counter research strategy spawned a mounting skepticism and distrust over vaccinations. And of course we all remember Trump's gas lighting about the mall attendance at his inauguration and we find now we can hire actors to act as fake protesters so even 'seeing is no longer believing.'

We are becoming a society where truth seeking is mentally exhausting. Because of the spread of disinformation on the Internet, we are compelled; to fact check our fact checking sites! One cannot distinguish between opinions and multiple truths and we slowly lose our grip on reality. The psychological fatigue spawns a growing indifference to facts, evidence, and history. Colleagues warn, 'Don't consult the Internet, it will only confuse you.' There is no sure path to truth that is not soon corrupted. Steady deception infects one's psyche like a cancer and undermines a once firm resolve to seek and defend the truth. Increasingly, it is easier to resign oneself to the takeover of truth and accept the reality – facts don't matter. It is also easier to relinquish one's post as a well-informed citizen and let others do the work. Giroux provides perspective on this social malaise:

Power is exercised by a ruling elite, and people are urged to cease narrating their own experiences. They give up their ability to govern and allow themselves to be governed. Trump offers his followers a world which is unconnected to any viable democratic reality. (Giroux 2019)

Subsequently, civic disengagement sets in and new forms of civic illiteracy become the bacteria we now breathe.

Being human means seeking truth through many portals. In this journey, Comey (2018) advises: 'You are entitled to your own opinions, but you are not entitled to your own facts.' Truth belongs to a common good and cannot be claimed by a single individual. It is something we triangulate as humans – not to give science any special privilege over other views, but rather, truth is bedrock in a democracy. We must not allow Trump's colonization of truth or weaponization of ignorance keeps us stupid, apathetic or immobilized (Giroux 2019). 'If we look back throughout history, we realize that the rich and powerful have always had an interest (and usually a means) for getting the "little people" to think what they wanted.' (McIntyre 2018)

With each iteration of lies, we need to vaccinate ourselves to boost our immune systems. Like every flu season, we need a stronger and stronger anti-biotic to build resiliency and to protect ourselves in this new post factual society. We will not allow malicious disinformation to chronically disable our minds and hearts or cripple our resolve to resist and act but rather we must treat these waves of deception as mere psychological indigestion - something simply to recover from as we build resiliency and renewed commitment to defend truth and honesty.

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