

POLITICS AS USUAL: Post-Truth?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

It was recently reported that the Oxford dictionary now recognizes a new word, 'post-truth'; an adjective, '...defined as relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to personal beliefs.'

Leave it to the British to come up with a polite way of saying that we exist in an era where there are a preponderance of folks out there that are as dumb as a bag of bricks; unable to recognize when they're being gas-lit by con-artists or worse, don't care as long as it reinforces their personal worldview of their very, very small worlds.

Despite our protestations to the contrary, and the best efforts of our education system, it is an uncomfortable truth that people are inherently biased. They hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see. There's nothing new about that. But what is new is the sheer depth and breadth of opportunities people now have to be fed information that bolsters their biases as opposed to challenges them. Critical thinking, objective reasoning is now a quaint vestige of a simpler time.

Truth? Facts? How very retro.

Information comes at us at lightning speed, from all angles and avenues. Most folks are so overwhelmed by the enormous volume of data from various media that they do a sort of information triage just to keep their heads from exploding.

Rather than expand their minds, they restrict them by limiting the number of sites or even media that they go to get their news. And it is the quality of those sites that is the issue. Most rational people can discern the difference between the National Enquirer and the Washington Post, but online, those differences are less and less obvious. It comes down to how the 'news' is packaged. The old fashioned 'if it bleeds it leads' has morphed into throw a verbal bomb, a Molotov cocktail of malicious lies and step back and watch the clicks rack up.

Fake news is rampant. If reports are to be believed two unemployed men from Macedonia are responsible for literally hundreds of fake stories during the US election campaign. What's depressing is that they got paid to do it and what's frightening is how easy it all was.

I am not talking about the local crank, pining away in his dank basement, tapping out silly stories or angry screeds about 'prominent' people. Every community has one of those. But they have no influence, as they're usually purveyors of unhinged rantings that are viewed with detached bemusement at best.

Fake news is not biased reporting 'which has always existed. It is 'news' that is absolute and utter nonsense, and knowingly so, packaged as cold hard truth and then shot around the world on Facebook news feeds and twitter before anyone has the chance to assess its validity. It is clickbait, not news. And its purpose of chaos and confusion is deliberate. Dissemble to distract until people can't tell facts from fiction anymore. It's Soma for the modern age. Huxley would be proud.

There are earnest folks out there doing their darndest to keep the cancer of lies at bay. In fact, there are entire websites devoted to debunking these crazy stories (such as snopes.com) but it isn't enough.

Fact are boring. Scandalous lies are interesting.

And lies they are; pernicious lies that can and do have a serious impact on what people believe about the people who seek public office and affects how they vote and how we are all governed as a result.

What should be done about it? Well start with revamping a failing education system that no longer teaches cursive let alone critical thinking (but I digress?). But that's too late to deal with the millions upon millions who are well past school age and who, frankly, should know better but clearly don't.

The time is now for sober reflection and that introspection should start with those that provide the news 'in all its forms' examining just what, how and why they do what they do. The old paradigm doesn't work. It's time for a paradigm shift.