

POLITICS AS USUAL: Fake News?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Do facts matter? I mean that in all seriousness.

I've said this before but it seems to me that objective truth is under siege these days. Misinformation, misleading statements and - at times - outright lies are proffered by the usual suspects ? advertisers, political spin masters, corporate talking heads and the like ? with reckless abandon and lightning speed. While disappointing, that isn't surprising or unusual. However, the sheer volume of lies and distortions of the truth are truly frightening.

As is its reach.

The advent of social media has magnified the speed with which ?information? flies around the globe. And that increases its impact manifold. Folks are hit by waves and waves of this stuff in their daily ? and targeted ? news feeds.

A cacophony of biased noise that they are forced to try to make sense of.

Which brings me to my concern about the ability of the general public to access objective truth on matters of public interest. Where do they get their information?

Well, they should be able to get facts about issues from the fourth estate; ostensibly apolitical organizations that provide either both sides of an issue or at least a fulsome analysis of one side.

The news media is supposed to fill that role. I'm not talking about the talk show hosts, or the shock jocks, whose sole job is to deliberately distort the truth for the purposes of generating interest and ratings. They share their opinions on issues, no matter how ill or uninformed they may be. And they do so as loudly as possible. Folks have no illusion that these talking heads are in any way unbiased.

I am talking about real journalists. They are supposed to present the news; information about issues of local, national or global importance in an unbiased or at least neutral manner. Or, at least as unbiased as possible because, let's face it, everyone has a bias and it's pretty difficult to be completely dispassionate as a consequence.

But regardless, the mainstream media is charged with the responsibility of informing the public on things that matter. So, when they fail in that job it can have serious consequences, especially in an era where the guy at the top says all news that he doesn't like is ?fake news?, you'd better be sure your reporting is fair, and accurate.

Recently, CNN, an arguably well respected news organization, pushed a story, and pushed it hard, that was at best a distortion of facts. They reported about an email that supposedly proved that the Trumps had access to the hacked Clinton emails a day before everyone else had access to those emails. Turns out they were wrong. They had the dates wrong. The Trumps did get the email about the encryption key ? but well after the emails were already public.

So, after hours of pushing this exclusive story, they had to back down and admit that after checking their sources, they made a mistake. They retracted their story and apologized. Mitigates the damage somewhat, but none the less, the reputation of CNN has taken a hit. And justifiably so.

Every media outlet in the world seems to be chasing the same story ? finding evidence that Trump colluded with the Russians. Fair enough. If true, that would be a huge story. Everyone has visions of the Pulitzer Prize for a Watergate like story.

But in the haste to chase the story, you can't overlook the facts. You have to do your job. You get a tip, and you check it, double check it, triple check it, source it and source it again, and then you run with it.

Facts matter. The truth matters.

When the supposed ?good-guy? is demonstrated to have pushed a false narrative, it loses all semblance of its hard won integrity. And that's never in the public's best interest.

The responsible, ethical and appropriate response is to retract, correct and apologize. Anything less is to do a disservice to the very public and principles they supposedly serve.

CNN has done that. Now if only other purveyors of misinformation (Fox ?news? anyone?) would do the same.