

Does the Truth Matter?

What does it mean to live in a post-truth world?

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Does the truth matter to you? No one likes being lied to. But the truth is that we seem to like some lies.

I really prefer that people tell me the truth. If a student needs to turn in something late, I tend to believe the story they tell me about it. Oh, I know some of them lie to me. But I generally act as though what they've said is true, even though I generally can't verify it. So when they lie to me, I'm stuck.

As a scientist, I desperately care about truth. I need people to be honest about how they conducted their research and what they found. Science is dependent on truthfulness. Again, I generally trust my peers. I read their publications assuming that they told the truth. Luckily, with research publications there is a peer review process, a lot of information, and replications by other researchers. Science is eventually self-correcting. If someone conducts a poor experiment or if the results don't reflect the truth of reality, eventually the real state of the world becomes clear. Even if someone lies, the truth eventually comes out.

Why is the truth important? We all need to know the truth if we want to be able to behave rationally. Should I grant the student an extension on a project? I need to know if they actually had a serious conflict or if they were simply lazy. Should I use the results of someone's research to make an important argument? I need to know that the data are reliable and true. Should we continue this relationship? I need to believe that you've told me the truth about where you were last night.

Oh, but the internet and social media. Finding the truth seems impossible.

Recently some Stanford University researchers, Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, reported that students at all levels have difficulty assessing the reliability of information that they find on the internet. This really shouldn't surprise anyone. Websites from unreliable organizations aren't going to promote that they are unreliable. Those websites are going to look reliable and trustworthy. People can't tell which websites are reliable and which information is true.

Fake news has also been in the news recently. There is a lot of fake news, often promoted by well-known people. One of these stories concerned a possible case of child trafficking in a pizza shop in Washington, DC that was supposedly linked to the Clintons. This was fake news ([link is external](#)). But all sorts of people, even some associated with the Trump campaign and transition, shared and promoted the news. It was never hard to find the truth about this case. But people chose to believe and spread lies. This led someone to attack the pizza shop with a gun to try and free the children.

So yes, the truth matters. It matters for personal relationships, for science, and for public policy.

How do you judge the truth? If you're like most of us, you probably don't do the hard work. With information on the internet, the hard work really isn't so hard. You can check the sources, look at really

reliable ones (Snopes is really good about checking lots of these fake news claims). Checking these things only takes a few moments.

But none of us have the time or resources to check all of the news we confront on a daily basis. Instead we rely on other methods of assessing truth. Do we trust the source? Then we believe the message. Does it have a picture? Then we are more likely to believe it. Have we heard this before? Then it starts to feel more true. Does it fit with our pre-existing beliefs? That is the lie we want to believe. We accept truthiness instead of requiring truth.

I worry that the truth is being buried in a landslide of misrepresentations and lies. Sometimes people make honest mistakes. Other times we argue about how to interpret something. In these cases, we'll eventually understand the real state of the world.

But there is a substantially more dangerous situation. People sometimes deliberately mislead and lie. People present information they know to be false with some goal in mind. Many people come to believe various lies. And these lies seem to be impossible to correct. The pizza shop story was one such deliberate lie with the goal of influencing the election.

There are other cases of fake news. For example, a number of people believe that vaccines cause autism (link is external), even though the original 'study' that someone reported on this was a misrepresentation and has clearly been debunked. Many people prefer to believe that global warming isn't happening or that humans aren't part of the cause of warming. In another example, there was a recent study published in which some authors questioned new recommendations for lowering daily sugar intake (link is external). In these cases, the authors are misrepresenting findings and often directly lying. Most of the people involved have received compensation for their work. But the harm they've caused is hard to measure.

Truth and lies are a matter of ethics. In science there are consequences for misrepresentations and lies. Eventually science gets to the truth. In our political debates, I worry that the internet has made it substantially more difficult for people to find the truth. Too many people may have too many rewards for the lies they are telling. The rest of us are left accepting things that feel true. Making rational choices becomes impossible in such a climate.

This is what it means to live in a post-truth world with fake news. Even if we try to be rational and thoughtful, we may base our judgments on lies. We may make decisions based on things we want to be true rather than the real state of the world. When the truth is buried under a mountain of misrepresentations, we cannot make wise decisions.