

TRUTH STILL MATTERS

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It is commonly said we live in a “post-truth” culture. One would expect this to be rather startling. Apparent lack of concern over it seems to indicate how far we have been taken over by it. Thinking people will feel the need to challenge this development.

A typical characteristic of this culture is when someone just repeats what they want others to believe, knowing that if one says it often enough others will think it must be true – even if it isn’t. It seems incredible that people would do this to other people. But when there is political or commercial gain to be had, or an ideology to be pushed, they will, and they do.

A representative of one of the social media recently acknowledged that their decisions to publish depend not so much on whether the item is true or not, but on what you can say about people and legally get away with. This is not new. Social gossip columns in some women’s magazines were challenged over this some years ago. Their publishers attempted to justify this practice by claiming that their readers were not so much interested in whether the whole story was true, but whether it made a good story. The trouble is, it wasn’t being presented as fiction; it was presented as factual reporting.

In the USA, the post-truth culture is also known as the “post-fact” culture. Recently, a White House spokesman repeated false claims describing them as “alternative facts”. It probably wouldn’t be politically correct to say that older names for what post-truth culture endorses include deception, dishonesty, manipulation, lies, self-delusion, denial, etc.

Willingness to ignore the difference between true and untrue can take hold within a society the more easily because plain busyness, and the pressures people are under, can deprive them of opportunities for critical thinking and reflection. For those growing up in that culture, what “everybody is doing” is presumed to be ethically acceptable. Of course, before the truth, there is reason for humility for all of us: no matter how right we might be, truth is always bigger than our own perception of it. We do less than justice to ourselves and to others by forgetting that.

What are we to expect of the news media in a post-truth environment? If their job is to report only on the basis of what is “newsworthy”, without making any other kind of judgment about what they are reporting, doesn’t this effectively put political reporting, political spin, celebrity gossip and trivia, marketing half-truths, post-truth reports and “alternative facts” all on a par, - each as “worthy” as the next, and each contributing to what the public comes to regard as “news”?

We are all indebted to the media for their role in holding people to account, and for good investigative journalism. But even with programmes that are intended, with the best of intentions, to be critical and offer opportunities for critical thinking and reflection, the underlying influence of post-truth culture sneaks in. For example, to brand a political leader as “socially conservative” may well be a true description within a given culture’s understanding of what is “progressive”. Then, on that premise, to discuss how his leadership might affect his party, is also a reasonable point for discussion. But the question which this discussion passes over in silence is whether or not the views that make him “socially conservative” are actually justified and true. The same question needs to be asked of the views that are deemed to be “progressive”. But this question is not asked – because in a post-truth culture, truth amounts to no more than the individual’s opinion.

Ironically, the idea that truth is no more than personal opinion doesn't seem to deter those who espouse that position from extolling what the majority thinks, even though – using the same criteria – all they have are opinions!

Not so long ago, opponents of the porn industry were “socially conservative”. For the liberal-minded it was not a problem. Now, the addictiveness of porn, the damage it can do to relationships, its sequel sometimes in family violence, and sometimes in paedophilia, can no longer be denied. The social sciences eventually confirmed what opponents of porn had previously intuited. Truth is not just a matter of opinion.

The opting out of serious discussion regarding truth is convenient not only for those who have political or commercial agendas, but also for those whose ideologies are promoted more by slogans than by scientific facts and careful analysis. For example, headings like “women’s rights” and “reproductive health” rightly attract fair-minded people. But when they are just repeated, mantra-like and without full disclosure, people who are less given to critical reflection will unwittingly buy into the hidden agendas. They are meant to! Women’s rights are indeed to be upheld (more than they have been!). But there is no women’s right to kill, or man’s either.

So at what stage does it matter whether given opinions are actually true or not? Does it not matter that those who live in the twilight world of mere opinions are more likely to be fodder for whoever is best placed to take advantage of them? How did we ever get into a post-truth culture?

After the Enlightenment, Modernity came along with its self-assured ideas of success and progress. But two world wars led to disillusionment, and then to Post-Modernity’s various forms of skepticism and relativism. That seems to be where post-truth culture has its origins. Modernity had extolled reason and the sciences; post-Modernity is inclined towards doubt and denial. Post-truth culture seems able to disregard facts and scientific truths. For years, the tobacco industry could get away with denying the connection between their product and cancer, despite the findings of science; there are still some who deny the connection between human activity and global warming, despite the sciences; and some who act as though the child in the womb were not already a new human being, science notwithstanding. In the conduct of human life, scientific truths are not the only truths that matter, but they cannot be ignored.

Fortunately, not everyone shies away from truth, and there are many, from all walks of life and of different beliefs, who work hard to relieve the pressures that can lead to abortion, poverty, unemployment, etc. It is their acceptance of the truth leads to what they do.

Untruth makes us somehow less. We all need truth-tellers. There is a price to be paid for whatever fudges the difference between true and not true, because at times this equates with the difference between real and not real. Ultimately, it depends on what kind of world we want to live in.