

How can we know what's real in an era of fake news?

Mark Twain once said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” In Twain’s time, that was a humorous exaggeration; but now in the information age, reality has caught up to it. In fact-free zones, such as talk radio, Facebook, and Twitter, information must compete with misinformation. Unfortunately, many people cannot tell the difference. Indeed, many prefer appealing or sensational illusions to unpleasant or dull reality. Thus, James Thurber’s playful paraphrase of Lincoln, “You can fool too many of the people too much of the time,” takes on an ominous twist.

For many people, it seems, it’s too much bother to check facts. They suppose one idea is as good as any other, so they can just make up “alternative facts” to fabricate support for their pet views.

But there is a crucial flaw in such thinking. Reality: we are all immersed in it, yet we have conflicting opinions about it. Reality itself isn’t concerned with human opinion; it just is what it is. Understanding reality—as it is, not as we’d prefer it to be—is crucial to dealing effectively with it, instead of just ranting about it. If we don’t like reality as it is, we might pray for it to change. Or lie about it and blame scapegoats. Or demand change, without pausing to consider that ill-considered change is often for the worse. Most such approaches turn out to be futile, or even counterproductive, at best yielding a temporary feel-good experience. Feel-good’s upside is its offer of free hope; its downside is an often costly shortage of positive results—for example, a needless war to destroy non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

In contrast, well thought-out solutions make the difference between simply living with our problems and actually fixing them. To cure an illness or heal an injury, we visit a doctor, not a mystic. To get out of a dead-end job, we seek training for the kind of job we want, not excuses

for our *status quo*. To learn what the weather will likely be next weekend, we consult a meteorologist, not a fortune-teller. Reliable information costs time, effort, and money (our own or someone else's), but the results eventually justify both the choice and the investment.

As to distinguishing what is true from what is not, there are many fact-checking venues, some more reputable than others. The most reliable ones base their concept of truth on the correspondence of ideas to reality. Others equate truth to correspondence to ideology; however, reliability varies inversely to how much the ideology deviates from reality. Moreover, it is now popular to accuse fact-checkers of dishonesty, though it is usually the accuser himself who is more detached from reality, thus multiplying his own embarrassment rather than reducing it.

It is in our own interest to be acquainted with the basics of any field in which we choose to intervene, and to choose our sources, not for their agreement with our beliefs, but for their consistent agreement with independently verifiable fact. This is why today's prevailing pattern is that most (though admittedly not all) successful people rely on science instead of mysticism, history instead of mythology, results instead of tradition—preferences anyone desiring lasting success ought to emulate.

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