

Let's Schmooze

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The Fog of Fake News

Remember the good ole days, when we were confident that the mass media was what it purported to be ~ an accurate and trustworthy reporter? News was presented as the unbiased reporting of confirmed hard fact. Editorials were presented as opinions and commentaries. Marketing was clearly presented as advertisements. Everything was clearly presented as what it actually was, without any hidden agendas.

We could be confident that we always knew the nature of what we were reading or viewing ~ what was data reporting, what was editorial opinion, and what was sales marketing.

We have come a long way from that clarity. Now we have no idea if news items are valid, or if they are just made up out of thin air in order to push a particular point of view, or to cause us to act in a certain way. The crafty infomercial, born as the marketing sponsorship of news events, has come full circle, and now we have the full-blown fake news item. Questions of bias have been replaced by questions of raw validity.

We no longer have any idea if what we are reading or viewing is really true, or who might be behind the fake news item, or what their hidden agenda might be.

We shouldn't be too surprised that we have morphed into this murky situation. It just so happens to be part of human nature. For ages, politicians have played with the facts (especially at election times), and advertisers have always wanted consumers to accept their advertising claims as the undisputed truth.

Teenagers are probably the quintessential masters of mixing up fact and fiction, especially as they develop their newly emerging sense of autonomy and independence. Try squeezing

the "truth" out of a hormone-driven youngster when they come home late at night way after curfew. The "facts" get mixed up in a flurry of explanations!

It is simply fundamental human nature for individuals to present the "facts" in the best light to themselves. The obscuration of unsavory truths is the game to be played. In today's fast moving world, everyone becomes a "spin master."

Good, old-fashioned news reporting was like being able to drive down the road and clearly see what was in front of us, and what was to the side of us. When fake news muscles into the media in a big way, it is as if a dense fog has settled down around our vehicle. We can no longer see the road, or what is coming in our direction ~ much less where we might be, and what direction we might actually be traveling in.

That's how bad accidents happen.

Administering a government is like driving down a road. We need to clearly see all that is around us. When fog creeps in, a country can end up in the ditch just as quickly as a traveling vehicle.

Fake news reporting is a deadly threat to our country and to its governance. We need to immediately get back to the good, old-fashioned valid reporting of the facts, with editorial commentary and marketing advertisements clearly marked as such. A good start would be for everyone to take what the other guy is saying with a healthy dose of salt.

The last presidential election seems to have been affected by numerous fake news items. Most observers would probably agree that all those fake news items are currently bedeviling the new administration. It will eventually lead to someone's ruin, and put the electorate in the position of not knowing who or what to trust.

That's not good.

Worried about fake news? How about fake science? Science is often presented to the public as undisputable fact.

It's the curse of the sciences ~ especially the social sciences ~ the failure of numerous research projects to replicate with other scientists. It leads to pseudo-science, where personal opinion postures behind the facade of scientific study.

One of the canons of scientific research is that ~ any scientific findings arrived at by an original researcher must be replicated by other researchers in different locations using different subjects, hopefully far removed from the original researcher.

If the original results can be replicated at a distance by others, then the original findings are considered scientifically robust and probably trustworthy. If replication by others cannot be achieved, then the original results immediately become highly questionable.

You'd be amazed by the number of so-called social science findings that fail to replicate. It leads to real-world problems.

When original findings (that later fail to replicate) are eagerly picked up by a news media desperate for things to broadcast as "breaking news," society is grossly misled.

The widespread acceptance of original social science findings that have not yet been replicated leads to situations where the broadcasted un-replicated findings are quoted in courtrooms, political arguments, and private conversations ~ and peddled as "hard scientific fact."

The actual result is that people are just throwing other people's personal, unproven opinions at each other. There is no solid scientific foundation to the conversations.

Talk about the blind leading the blind!

It's not only fake news that we need to guard against. Whenever anyone tries to bring up "scientific findings" as a buttress point in their argument, we need to immediately question whether those so-called "scientific findings" have ever been rigorously replicated.

You'd be amazed at just how many trumpeted "scientific facts" have grossly failed the test of replication. They're just personal opinions masquerading behind the veneer of modern science.

Fake news doesn't only include false news reporting. It also includes questionable scientific reporting.

There happens to be a lot of that going on. In the scientific world, there is tremendous pressure on researchers to continually come up with something new to publish in the scientific journals.

That pressure to "publish or perish" often leads to project results being published and picked up by the mainstream media long before those results have been "proven" via proper replication.

It's something to keep in mind as we continue to wrestle with "fake" reporting.

~ 'til we meet again ~