"When Truth Becomes a Commodity"
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"Post-truth" carries a catchy, advertising-agency ring. And that may be exactly what is wrong with it and with our times. We do not live in an era stripped of truths. We live, to the contrary, in a political-cultural moment saturated with competing claims on truth, each insisting on its veracity. We have contrived to construct an open marketplace of truths, and it is not a happy state.

If there can be said to be an era in recent American history when the essence of truth was under critical scrutiny, it was the generation after 1960. In both popular and academic culture, that was when the belief that truth lay in a sphere of certainty independent of truth’s inquirers began to fragment. Social scientists learned to grow much more self-critical about their methods. Anthropologists realized that they could not write themselves out of their ethnographies. Historians learned that archives contained fictions as well as facts. Paradigms, in Thomas Kuhn’s phrase, shaped the very worlds of assumption in which natural scientists worked. None of truth’s seekers, it was increasingly realized, could wholly escape the perspectives and experiences they carried with them. What seemed "natural" was, as often as not, not natural at all but a product of culture and unspoken assumption.

The Post-Truth Issue

"Post-truth—adjective; relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." So says Oxford Dictionaries, announcing their 2016 word of the year. If we really have entered a post-truth era, as so many have written, what does that mean for the scholar and the student? For the citizen and the state? In our special issue, we wrestle with these and other urgent questions.

"Don’t truth me and I won’t truth you," Kurt Vonnegut wrote as that era began. But although the moment for which Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and the best-seller proclamation "I’m OK, You’re OK" spoke is easy to caricature as a fit of mere relativism, that self-criticism brought enormous gains as well. The epistemological anarchists of the era never formed a very large number. For most of those who tried to think through the politics and epistemology of a world beyond certainties, truths were not dead. Truths needed to be argued out. They took shape in discourse, debate, and dialogue. They were provisional, plural, subject to amendment, to new standpoints, critiques, and re-examination. Truth-seeking demanded doubt, demanded the ability to entertain more than

one hypothesis, demanded patience. Post-positivist, post-ideological truths were formed in the act of self-critical inquiry. Whether in the laboratory, social fieldwork, or the humanities seminar, teachers taught students to search for them.

That sense of truth as the product of self-critical search and dialogue does not characterize the moment we live in now. The cultural-political air is filled with competing truth claims, shouted angrily and with barely a shred of doubt. Is global warming real, whatever the preponderance of scientific opinion might be? Has globalization fatally eroded the inner core of the U.S. economy? Is racism "over"?

Some of what fills the air — more thickly and noxiously than any democracy can ultimately stand — is lying. But lying is very old in democratic politics. Public figures lie for reasons of state (think Bay of Pigs), they lie to protect their political base (think Watergate), they lie because they inhabit a world in which postures and exaggerations have instrumental value (think Joseph McCarthy). Tabloid newspapers long made their fortunes by living just over the line of truth-telling. Half-truths mobilize political crowds, whether they be through pictures of money changers swarming through the temples or Communists lurking under every bed.

Conspiracy thinking is very old in democratic politics as well. Cold War culture was saturated with conspiratorial hypotheses. Both anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism thrived on nightmares of elaborate, subversive, underground connections. The American Revolution’s success hinged on the patriots’ growing sense that they were threatened not merely by this or that tax or regulation but by a full-blown conspiracy (as the South Carolina Constitution’s drafters put it in 1776) to "reduce them from the rank of freemen to a state of the most abject slavery."

Part of what is different about our current moment is the speed and distance across which competing truth claims can now be broadcast. The living-room gatherings of John Birch Society locals in the 1960s, like the exaggerated facts and conspiracies hatched in a neighborhood bar, were limited in their ability to gather up a critical mass of believers. The internet and smartphones have profoundly altered that. Facts generated anywhere on the planet can be consumed virtually anywhere else and then forwarded still further, almost without limit.

This is not the benign, more tightly integrated world that many techno-visionaries of the 1970s imagined. A technology that might have extended the field of dialogue, that might have brought distant cultures and persons into closer understanding, has contributed unexpectedly to their accelerated fragmentation. Years ago, Benedict Anderson wrote of the newspaper as an important technology of nationalist solidarity. The high politics of the nation, the sports news of the day, the freakish local weather all found places in its columns. A reader’s social imagination was, without any conscious intention, broadened to encompass them all.

The very overload of information in our modern environment has helped to produce the opposite effect. Because there are vastly more sources of fact than anyone can survey, one goes to the information sites one knows and trusts, the ones that cut through the general noise to get to the "truth of the matter." Audiences and the facts they share are
siloed. It is the paradox of a radically more tightly interconnected world that it tends to create clumps of information users, communities of bonded certainties that are much more widely diffused geographically and yet much more tightly knitted ideationally.

But no technology is in itself determinative. What characterizes our modern technosystem is not simply the conditions of information superfluity it inhabits but that it is, still more important, a market. This is true across much of our contemporary scene. The widely reported success of a computer-science student in the distant republic of Georgia in churning forward faked and politically slanted U.S. election news for profit is a particularly vivid example of the global market in eye-catching facts that we have unwittingly created. Ads crawl through every news flash.

Still more of the modern market in truths is driven not by revenue streams but by individual desires. Clicks are its currency. They carry everyone’s wants. They cut through the information overload to return just the facts one is looking for. All wants in this sense are satisfied. The reorganization of society and the social imagination along market lines, which has accelerated so rapidly, reaches a kind of culmination. But in this reconstitution of truths as market commodities, the invisible hand working to sort things out is nowhere to be found. There is no dialogue. There is no discourse. There is no weighing of competing hypotheses. Truths slide past one another without contact points, headed for their designated purchasers.

The very idea of politics as an act of deliberation, by which people with inevitably different desires and starting positions must work something out, must find their way to a destination that none may have imagined before, is devalued in the process. We click on truths. In the process we instantiate the figure who now commands so much of the imagination of the contemporary social sciences: the choosing self. But where truths are utterly free to be individually chosen, where the processes of inquiry are marginalized, the social disintegrates. So does truth.

Walking our way back from this condition will not be as easy as simply calling out lying when we find it. It will not be accomplished by fighting out the truth in the comments sections, where the exaggerated and polarized responses fired back may not even be generated by human actors at all. The economists’ answer to imperfectly functioning markets is to devise means to increase their transparency.

In another clamorous moment, a century ago, public and private institution builders constructed a powerful set of means to cut through the noise of claims for shoddy and better-made goods, real and useless medical elixirs, or fraudulent and better-grounded investment possibilities. Independent rating agencies, university research laboratories, and public statistics agencies were invented to provide a common set of measures and assessments. Potentially they and their modern counterparts could still stream their findings into every household and conversation. But when the credibility of university elites and government data are under severe challenge as just another biased set of facts in a marketplace of data, their ability to bring clarity into the open market in truths is crippled. Who will judge exaggerated and invented news when every umpire must fight for standing in the refereeing market?
Finding our way back to the notion of truth as the result of a public process of search and debate and deliberation will not be easy. It will take another round of market regulation and institution-building. It will take a rebirth of the kind of countermarket imagination that keeps an institution like Wikipedia standing amid the truth-as-preference clamor around it. It will take rededication to the goal of bringing the tools of inquiry, research, and collaborative discussion into every level of education, from elementary-school classrooms to graduate-student laboratories and seminars. It will take patient and humble experts, less eager themselves for a marketable sound bite.

Above all, it will require a renewed commitment to truth’s complexity and the processes by which one searches for it. As long as we can click on the truths we want, as long as truth is imagined as a desire satisfied in a politically and commercially saturated market, we will have a superabundance of facts that people hold as true. Everyone will get what he wants, and the public — and its trust in truth — will fall apart.

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