

That Inconvenient Truth

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Mark Twain, an American writer, popularized the phrase, “There are lies, there are damn lies, and then there are statistics.” It seems to have originated in Britain; I don’t know how well it translates into other languages?

News reporters were incredulous during the last US presidential campaign when some people didn’t believe the facts being presented by media outlets. Instead, these same people responded to what politicians were telling them, even though the politicians were not necessarily speaking the truth.

Of course, this hasn’t changed in the past 15 months. One study showed that more Americans believe there are haunted houses than believe journalists are trustworthy!

There’s a host of theories as to why the U.S. public’s trust in journalists has fallen. Today I will offer a couple of reasons why people don’t trust reporters – along with responses to each of those reasons.

First, two reasons why most people don’t trust the news media:

1. Journalists are seen as “the other.”
2. Fake news is nothing new, but social media is.

In my remaining time, I’ll try to unpack each of those reasons and offer some possible responses.

1. Journalists are seen as “the other.”

In the United States, independent news organizations often operate like nonprofits or public interest organizations, and the people who work for them tend to be sympathetic to progressive causes. “Main-stream media” is stereotyped as “do-good organizations for elite-college graduates.”

There is some truth to that stereotype. As Mark Oppenheimer explained in an opinion piece he wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* last fall, young conservatives are less interested in becoming reporters because they view journalism as a profession populated by liberals and progressives. In other words, they don't know people like themselves who are reporters. Why work for an organization populated with people with whom you are going to be in conflict?

Secondly, publications doing investigative reporting tend to hire people who are interested in reporting on the marginalized and vulnerable— people who tend not to want to preserve and maintain the status quo, but believe change is good, progress is necessary. Conservatives are not keen on major disruptions and tend to find solutions to current problems in the past, or in preserving previous solutions. So it becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If I were to apply this theory to Catholic journalism in the United States, I see something of a parallel, but in a mirror. Much of our writing has become apologetics in tone, defending the faith, not interested in the reality of people's daily lives. We are dismissive of facts, such as the small number of Catholic women who use Natural Family Planning. Yes, our Catholic, conservative writers and journalists want to address people's fears and concerns for their eternal salvation and the sanctification of our Church. It is a noble effort, of course. We know artificial contraception is morally unacceptable and must be objectively proven as such. But we do not listen to – and then report on -- the rationale being used by the vast majority of Catholic women who accept artificial contraception.

Preservation of the institution, a primary concern of bishop-publishers, is presented as in tension, or perhaps even in opposition, with every day truths such as stagnating family incomes, a growing opioid crisis, and a decline in the number of marriages. So Catholics concerned with those daily matters go elsewhere not only for news, but to find ways to make sense of their lives. We find ourselves in another self-fulfilling prophecy. The [increasing number in the US of the “nones”](#) – those who have no religious affiliation – is due in part to our inability to report subjective facts on societal trends, as well as by our failure

to connect them to the great moral truths found in our faith – those moral truths which make sense of human experience.

Oppenheimer's solution to this vicious cycle for secular journalism is a renewed investment in local reporters and reporting. "Only when we know our reporters again will we begin to trust them," he said.

That could be wise advice for Catholic journalists, too. How invested are we in understanding our local faith communities' needs and hopes? Or are we more interested in trying to promote a position of the local bishop or the hierarchy – or to be a critic and point out the human faults and mistakes of that same Curia? How can our readers/listeners/viewers trust us if we don't seem to care about *them*? Or if it comes across that we see ourselves as a one-way conduit of "facts" from the Curia, or as a critic on the sideline? Are we willing to get to know both those in the pews, and those who are on the other side of the street from our churches?

I am encouraged by the Holy Father's message released yesterday, in which he challenges us Catholic journalists to remember at the heart of our work is the human person.

This does not mean we forget or cast aside objective moral truths. Quite the contrary, these human situations give us entry to tell the "rest of the story" of our human existence. Moral truths frame our behavior as humans and therefore must frame our work, including our work as journalists. We must report on the truths of mercy, justice, love, faith and hope, if we are to bring light to the darkness. Our faith should make us better communicators, instead of becoming a shield to protect us from our people.

Events such as this week's International St. Francis de Sales Days give Catholic communicators opportunities to learn from each other, to grow in their faith and to support endeavors in improving our efforts at understanding the recipients of our reporting and communicating. In his message for the 2016 World Day of Communication message, Pope Francis wrote about the need to move from a unilateral, one-way style of communicating to a more dialogical, two-way form:

Listening is never easy. Many times it is easier to play deaf. Listening means paying attention, wanting to understand, to value, to respect and to ponder what the other person says. It involves a sort of martyrdom or self-sacrifice, as we try to imitate Moses before the burning bush: we have to remove our sandals when standing on the “holy ground” of our encounter with the one who speaks to me (cf. *Ex* 3:5). Knowing how to listen is an immense grace, it is a gift which we need to ask for and then make every effort to practice.

2. This is nothing new, but social media is.

Fake news, of course, is not new. From our beginnings, we humans have told each other stories. And we’ve managed to manipulate and fabricate information, for lots of reasons – to entertain, to confuse and to persuade. Sometimes it’s called “yellow journalism,” sometimes marketing or promotion, sometimes propaganda, sometimes censorship. Just two examples from my lifetime: “The Post,” a recent film directed by Steven Spielberg, recounts how the US government provided “alternative facts” to keep the public supportive of its military actions in southeast Asia. “Spotlight” is a film that attempts to tell the complicated cooperation among the powerful members of the Boston community – both lay and clergy -- and their complicity in keeping the tragedy of sexual abuse by Catholic priests hidden.

But digital media has provided an environment for falsehoods to multiply on a quite dizzying scale. As Howard Schneider, the founder of Stony Brook University’s journalism department, wrote in 2006, “The digital revolution might bring the promise of enlightenment, but in its pathological lack of accountability might just as easily spread a virus of confusion and disinformation. The ultimate check against an inaccurate or irresponsible press never would be just better-trained journalists, or more press critics and ethical codes.”

Schneider said in the digital world it is necessary for all of us to become much more critical consumers of information. It is encouraging to read of a growing trend in universities to offer courses on media literacy. Although the Holy See’s ongoing call for media literacy expressed after the Second Vatican Council – even yesterday by the Holy Father -- has gone largely unheeded, we do have leaders in the Catholic world creating a growing clarion call

for our own catechetical endeavors in this arena. I think it should be a mandatory part of young people's education – including in their faith formation, and I encourage finding ways for us “digital immigrants” to become more skilled in media literacy.

We need to understand the difference between raw, unmediated information (sometimes outright “alternative facts”) and independent, verified reporting. We also need to accept the responsibility that comes with the ability to create our own media, using the tools on our smartphones. Mass communication allowed us to be somewhat passive recipients of information. Digital media, by its very nature, requires us to be active contributors of information. Our faith requires us to be ethical and morally sound in our contributions.

The members of SIGNIS stand on the shoulders of giants as we look to the future. Our mission --to engage media professionals and support Catholic communicators to transform our cultures in the light of the Gospel – is, at its core, about using media in finding Truth.