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Trump, Twitter And The So-Called Truth In An Age Of Lies

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KEVIN LAMARQUE / REUTERS

Let's give it up for truth. C'mon, a nice hand. It gave us a lot of good years. Back in the day, Truth began with a capital T, and it came straight from God. Then science had a long run with it. The Enlightenment. Good times. But modernity was no piece of cake for truth. All that everything-is-relative business was shattering. As for post-modernity, let's just say that everything-is-politics hasn't been pretty, either. In a few thousand years we've gone from Truth, to truth, to *your* truth and *my* truth, and now to the so-called truth, when everything is entertainment and the capital T goes on Twitter. No wonder truth is taking the buyout. Let's wish it all the best.

Last week, old school truth had its last hurrah – three hurrahs, actually: one in the East Room, one at Fox and one on Facebook. Each was prompted by an existential threat to truth, and all were ultimately about attention.

At the White House, the event was President Trump's 77-minute news conference. It was irresistible theater with the press providing the conflict, the technology feeding the spectacle to our screens and the infotainment industry monetizing our eyeballs.

At 20th Century Fox, the event was the viral marketing campaign for "A Cure for Wellness," a movie about a fake cure that the studio promoted by faking a fake news controversy, which became a real controversy when real news hammered the campaign as an assault on journalism.

On Facebook, the event was the release of "Building Global Community," a 5,800-word open letter from Mark Zuckerberg about the responsibility of one of the planet's largest publishers for distributing and profiting from sensational, delicious, dangerously polarizing and totally fabricated stories.

At his news conference, Trump stated yet again that his 304 Electoral College tally was the biggest win since Ronald Reagan. The reporters, many of whom had had it up to here with Trump's factual negligence, were determined to answer his attack on the media by challenging his credibility. That's what NBC's Peter Alexander did when he respectfully ripped the president a new one. He reeled off the 365 electoral votes that Obama got in 2008, and the 332 in 2012, and he mentioned the 426 that George H.W. Bush got in 1988. "Why should Americans trust you when you have accused the information they receive of being fake," Alexander asked, "when you're providing information that's fake?"

I would have loved it if Alexander had triggered a Perry Mason turn from Trump: "I admit it! I killed the truth! It had it coming!" If Alexander wasn't expecting that, perhaps he anticipated that the notoriously thin-skinned president would lash out, which he did but not until the next day, when he tweeted that the "FAKE NEWS media" – he identified them as the New York Times, NBC News, ABC, CBS and CNN – "is the enemy of the American People!"

What Alexander got from Trump in the East Room was this: "Well, I don't know. I was given that information. I was given – actually, I've seen that information around."

Throwing his staff under the bus, Trump brushed off his credibility problem by taking his own accountability off the table. You can't call him a liar for trusting those "best people" he's surrounded himself with. Worse, with five words Trump put the journalistic norms of verification and attribution in play. "I've seen that information around" amount to, "It must be true – I saw it on the Internet." It also means, "Believe me." Forget the assessment of evidence; forget weighing the independence and the track record of sources. For Trump, extreme vetting of information consists of watching Hannity and O'Reilly, reading Breitbart and InfoWars and basking in the buzz in the Mar-a-Lago dining room.

In that world, the old sorting categories are toast. Instead of true and false, there's true and alt-true; there's facts and (in Kellyanne Conway's creepy coinage) alternate facts. Fox News is good news; bad news is fake news. Trump knows that the currency of news isn't accuracy – it's attention. The more he tweets, the more the echo chamber uncritically amplifies him, and the more unearned gravitas his falsehoods acquire. Virality is the new veracity.

Which takes us to the Fox lot. The studio that marketed "A Cure for Wellness" by manufacturing fake fake news – you read that right – is part of the same corporation responsible for Fox News's "fair and balanced" fakery. (If this kinship is a coincidence, randomness has a droll sense of humor.) The movie's social media strategy was to disguise ads for the film as editorial content and post them on fabricated websites with names like the New York Morning Post and the Houston Leader.

Their scam was inspired by other scammers like the Macedonian teenagers who created NewYorkTimesPolitics.com and USAPolitics.co to propagate fake stories like "Clinton Indicted" as aggregation bait for alt-right sites, as link bait for the Facebook pages of Hillary haters and as a cash cow courtesy of Google's AdSense. Talk about meta: The movie's fake news sites carried fake stories like "Trump Orders CDC to Remove all Vaccination Related Information from Website," which included real Trump tweets drawing a fake connection between vaccinations and autism.

The New York Times – "enemy of the American People" – ran two big negative stories within two days about the Fox campaign, which was yanked. But the idea that Facebook is a breeding ground for untruths was a motive for Zuckerberg, leapfrogging over Twitter's dithering on the issue, to address a problem increasingly faced by its users: With universal access to unlimited content, how can you tell what's true?

Most of us inhabit filter bubbles. Generally we consume news whose framing and viewpoints we believe to be fair. At the same time, we're suckers for sensationalism; stories arousing emotions like fear and disgust are great at grabbing our attention. But democracy is strongest and community is most robust when we're exposed to quality information from a variety of different perspectives. To protect its users, should Facebook more aggressively screen out fake news? If "Pope Endorses Trump" gets banned, why shouldn't "Trump's Margin Biggest Since Reagan"? Even when a story is accurate, showing someone an article whose perspective is opposite their own only makes them dig their heels in deeper. Should Facebook push back against polarization?

Zuckerberg answers these questions not by calling for new codes of conduct, but by promising new software code. In a world of inconceivable diversity, algorithms are more practical than ethics. Let the platform's news feed show you a range of perspectives, not just the poles, so you can see where you fit on the spectrum. When stories spread, couple them with what fact-checking sites say about them, so text carries a context along with content. Let the analytics discover which stories are most shared without being read, most driven by attention-hijacking headlines; see if the data point to publishers who are gaming the system; and nail them.

None of this affects Facebook's raid on the struggling news business's bottom line. But what appeals to me about this approach is its reliance on intelligence more than on morality. Ever since Truth became truths, people have been searching for common values that don't depend on divine authority. "The best life is not the moral life, but the life based on the use of reason": that's Israel Drazin's gloss on Moses Maimonides. Give truth a gold watch for its long service to civilization, but don't leave the adjudicator position vacant. Education, media literacy, critical thinking, breadth of sources, caliber of intelligence, quality of craft – there's no shortcut to information you can rely on.

Thinking is hard. Truth is complicated. Focus is fragile. No question: Tweets are superb at stealing our attention. But no accident that birdbrain is not a compliment.

This is a cross-post of my cover piece in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com. Update: This number of minutes in the Trump press conferencre has been corrected.

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