

Is truth dead in the information age?

An essay by Carolin Hahn

Berlin, September 2019

Department: VII
Course of studies: Optometry

Introduction: Is Truth Dead?

TIME magazine's March issue of 2017 famously caused a stir by simply asking the question "Is Truth Dead?". Why the controversy? The cover story is built on an exclusive interview with Donald Trump, exploring his point of view on truth and falsehood and how easily both seem to blur in his presidential administration.

(Mandese, 2017)



Two iconic *TIME* covers. *Is Truth Dead?* is a typographical homage to *Is God Dead?*
Source: (Pine, 2017)

To illustrate and dramatize the provocative content, the cover design was based upon one of the most iconic covers in *TIME*'s history: "Is God Dead?" from April 1966. (Pine, 2017) *TIME* editor Nancy Gibbs writes: "1966 [...] 97% of Americans [...] believed in God. Half a century later, I suspect that about as many today would say they believe in Truth, and yet we find ourselves having an intense debate over

its role and power in the face of a President who treats it like a toy." (Gibbs, 2017) She goes on with: "The old adage that "a lie gets halfway around the world before Truth has a chance to get its pants on" was true even before the invention of Twitter. But it has been given new relevance by an early-rising Chief Executive and his smartphone." (Gibbs, 2017)

Yes, information moves faster than it has done twenty or even only ten years ago: words or pictures posted right now can reach the whole world via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat etc. in seconds.

But is truth really so much more vulnerable than it has been decades or even centuries ago?

Does the ubiquity and the velocity of the internet really make such a difference?

Or is there a lot of fuss about nothing?

This essay approaches truth and the information age and discusses their assumed deadly relation in order to answer the key question:

Is truth dead in the information age?

Under Attack: Truth.

Is truth dead in the information age? deals with two “heavy” terms that need definition before one can explore and discuss their nature of relation:

truth and information age.

What is truth?

It is question generations of philosophers and philosophy students have tried to approach and solve for thousands of years.

“The problem of truth is in a way easy to state: what truths are, and what (if anything) makes them true. But this simple statement masks a great deal of controversy.” points out Michael Glanzberg. (Glanzberg, 2018)¹

What was considered true has always been a product of its time. Over centuries, truth was defined by religion and sovereigns by birth in Europe. Basically, what helped to stay powerful was true. Yes, there were shimmering exceptional phenomenon even in the *Middle Ages* and *Renaissance* like Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei or Francis Bacon confronting the superiority of church and palace by putting scientific discovery over belief. But only the joined forces of the *Enlightenment movement* of the 17th and 18th centuries gave truth a fact-based nature. State of the art knowledge and education was made widely accessible in schools, universities and libraries and shaped our contemporary understanding of truth. (Duignan, 2019)

Today, there is still no objective definition of what makes a truth a truth. Our modern societies do base truths on scientific facts but on any number of occasions truth is considered a consent by the majority. This becomes clear by reading through the four explanation approaches the prestigious *Cambridge Dictionary* gives for *truth*: “the quality of being true [...]”, “the real facts about a situation, event or person [...]”, “used to show or emphasize that something is true [...]” and “a fact or principle that is thought to be true by most people [...]”. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019)

Truth has been, is and will be a vulnerable matter that is stress tested by social, political and technological developments.

¹ Author of “Truth – The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy – a comprehensive overview of distinct truth theories.

What is the information age?

Opinion leading contemporary sociologists like Manuel Castells² define the *information age* as a historic period that started in the late 20th century and that lasts until now. It is characterized by the rapid shift from industrial industries to economies primarily based on information technology - a development that can be observed all over the world. (Castells, 2017) Some of the major cornerstones of the *information age* are the inventions of personal computing, hand-held (Smartphone) or even wearable digital devices (Smartwatches) and the internet itself. Therefore, it is also referred to as *the Computer Age, Digital Age, or New Media Age*. (Castells, 2017) Powerful forces within this era are platform providers like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp etc. as well as hard- and software developers like Apple, Microsoft etc., the media and people who have mastered those new technologies.

The information age puts truth under attack.

The 21st century just counted its 19th year, still the enormous developments in those few years fundamentally changed our societies. With the help of technical devices, mature humans get connected 24/7 to the world and to infinite knowledge. This is regarded one of the great utopias of the visionaries of the information age. "But the liberating democratization of information made possible by the internet not only spurred breathtaking innovation and entrepreneurship; it also led to a cascade of misinformation and relativism, resulting in today's fake news epidemic." (Kakutani, The death of truth, 2018)

No doubt, we face a crisis of trust in information (LSE, 2019) and see leaders return, who bend facts and truths in order to gain and abuse power. The sad climax of this progress is the campaigning of Donald Trump in 2016 and is his ongoing presidential administration. "Trump [...] lies so prolifically and with such velocity that *The Washington Post* calculated that he'd made 2,140 false or misleading claims during his first year in office – an average of 5.9 a day." (Kakutani, The death of truth, 2018) That the 45th president of the United States lies on a daily basis is already scandalous. But how sure he is about his own truths, how fast his messages spread

² Manuel Castells is a highly-regarded professor for sociology and urban development and planning at the University of California, Berkeley and the author of the three-volume work "the information age". (springer.com, 2017)

and how many people still believe in him and his “alternative facts”³ despite proven evidence is even more alarming, as this is endangering our modern societies. Trump’s administration has built a *network of fakeness* that opens doors for populist opinions and propaganda and creates a decay of truth.

“And it’s not just fake news either: it’s also fake science (manufactured by climate change deniers [...]), fake history (promoted by Holocaust revisionists [...]), fake Americans on Facebook (created by Russian trolls⁴), and fake followers and “likes” on social media (generated by bots⁵). (Kakutani, *The death of truth*, 2018)

“Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos. *The Joker in The Dark Knight*” (Kakutani, *The death of truth*, 2018)

Chaos is currently all around us.

And chaos is what makes people feel insecure, so that they close themselves up and lose trust in authorities and the truth itself.

“The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life, [...]. Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnessed to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs.” Hannah Arendt. (Kakutani, *The death of truth*, 2018)

³ Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the US president, denies Trump press secretary lied: “He offered alternative facts.” (Guardian, 2017)

⁴ Computing term for “someone who leaves an intentionally annoying or offensive message on the internet, in order to upset someone or to get attention or cause trouble” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019)

⁵ Computing term for “a computer program that works automatically, especially one that searches for and finds information on the internet.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019)

Movement. Countermovement.

“For decades now, objectivity – or even the idea that people can aspire toward ascertaining the best available truth – has been falling out of favour.” (Kakutani, theguardian.com, 2018) Conspiracy theories, populism, polarization are omnipresent and have become so big and extreme that people have a hard time agreeing with each other (Kakutani, theguardian.com, 2018)

One could be fooled into believing that never before in history, lying and manipulation of the masses had such a massive extent as today.

But is that true?

White lying was and is part of human nature. Black lying was and is power.

Indeed, so-called *white lies* – benign untruths or half-truths – are used by everyone every day to keep up a polite atmosphere or to avoid hurting somebody’s feelings. They are pro-social and therefore like a lubricant for a harmonic coexistence. Sociologists claim that people apply *white lies* between two to eighty times a day. (Tanner, 2019)

And indeed, *black lies*⁶ and manipulation have been an integral part of political strategy and part of people’s daily life for centuries. (Weinstein, 2019)

One does not even have to go far back in time:

The 1990ies: “Well I want to say one thing to the American people, [...] I did not have sexual relations with that woman. [...]” Bill Clinton, 1998

The 1960ies: “Nobody has any intention of building a wall.” Walter Ulbricht, 1961

The 1940ies: “Nazi theory indeed specifically denies the such a thing as *the truth* exists. [...] If the Leader says of such and such an event, it never happened – well, it never happened.” George Orwell (Kakutani, The death of truth, 2018)

Through centuries, people had to evaluate what they believe is true and what is not.

⁶ Black lying refers the strategic usage of lies out of self-interest, e.g. in order to defend oneself, to shine, to betray etc. (Tanner, 2019)

A fearless generation on the rise.

Today, it is so easy to access *black lie* channels and spread falsehood and propaganda within the blink of an eye. “This has been exponentially accelerated by social media, which connects users with like-minded members and supplies them with customized news feeds that reinforce their preconceptions, allowing them to live in ever narrower silos.” (Kakutani, theguardian.com, 2018)

It is not only truth-deniers who know how to use the advantages of the information age; currently we see a sixteen-year old girl, Greta Thunberg, challenging the ways how things work and changing the world.

School Strike for Climate started in 2018 as a “one girl show” in front of the parliament house in Stockholm. But transformed within months into a global movement. Millions of young people all over the world meet every



History in the making: The fist bump between Greta Thunberg and Barack Obama on the 17th September 2019 – “You and me, we’re a team.” (Obama, 2019)

Friday for *Fridays for Future*, despite the pressure of school authorities and political cynicism, in order to call attention to climate change and promote clean energy.

Everybody for Future.

But it is not only pupils and students that use the momentum and organise themselves. There is *Parents for Future*, *Grandparents for Future*, *Entrepreneurs for Future*, *Scientists for Future* etc. “I liken the attacks on science to turning of the headlights. [...] We’re driving fast and people don’t want to see what’s coming up. Scientists – we’re the headlights.” claims Mike MacFerrin. (Kakutani, *The death of truth*, 2018)

Neglected topics and facts that were known for years, like the deadly dangers of global warming, earn new attention and first effects to our daily life can be recognised.

Power to the people and investigative journalism.

A crucial role is and needs to be taken over by independent and investigative journalism. Our societies are in need of dedicated people like Austrian journalist Armin Wolf or German satirist Jan Böhmermann who will not stop bringing up painful subjects and facts.

Furthermore, the mature and media literary citizen will not remain an empty term but will become reality.

The London School of Economics and Political Science published in their 2019 report *Tackling the Information Crisis* several short-, mid- and long-term principles in order to strengthen citizens media literacy and helping people to regain trust in politics, leadership, media and society. (LSE, 2019)

The short version:

#1 Media Citizenship/Literacy:

People should be given the knowledge and tools to understand what they can trust and the power to engage with digital media as a citizen, not just a consumer.

#2 Journalism Credibility:

We must invest in a more diverse news media that gets back in touch with society and shows why it can be trusted to provide a public service.

#3 Platform Responsibility:

The digital giants who now shape the information flows and online forums for debate must be more responsible, transparent and accountable. We need ways to make the technology companies act in the public interest. We need new ways to show which information we can trust in the same ways we have nutrition labels for food. And we need an ambitious education strategy to improve our media literacy. [...]” (LSE, 2019)

A lot needs to be done and changed but truth will not die in the information era.

Conclusion.

Is truth under attack in the information age?

Yes.

Speeches, tweets and posts filled with hatred, distraction and confusion distributed by political leaders, like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini, the campaigning propaganda by right wing parties all over Europe, the fake Instagram-realities of influencers etc. are just some of the examples that jeopardise today's truths as well as the fundamentals of our democracies and our social and emotional well-being.

Former US president Barack Obama sums this up with “[...] one of the biggest challenges we have to our democracy is the degree to which we do not share a common baseline of facts; [...].” (Kakutani, *The death of truth*, 2018)

Is truth dead in the information age?

No.

There is no need to unwillingly accept that there is no other future scenario than to take the decay or even death of truth for granted. Charlie Beckett⁷ puts it like this: “Fake news is good news. It's a wake-up call to everyone to pay attention [...].” (LSE, 2019)

It is to all of us, to every citizen to gain back control and fight for truth and a healthy and democratic society by mastering the existing technologies.

It is to us, our generation and the next to make truth great again; in politics, media, economy, education and all other parts of our society.

It is not *the others* who will fight fake, it will be *us*.

⁷ Lead Commissioner of the T3 Commission, London School of Economics and Political Science

References.

- Cambridge Dictionary. (2019). *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*. Retrieved from Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/truth>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2019). *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved from Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/troll>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2019). *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved from Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bot>
- Castells, M. (2017). *Das Informationszeitalter*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Duignan, B. (2019, September 13). *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from Encyclopedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>
- Gibbs, N. (2017, April 03). When a President Can't Be Taken at His Word. *TIME*.
- Glanzberg, M. (2018). Truth. In E. N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Guardian, T. (2017, January 23). *theguardian.com*. Retrieved from theguardian.com: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/shortcuts/2017/jan/23/alternative-facts-the-greatest-strongest-facts-that-ever-existed>
- Kakutani, M. (2018). *The death of truth*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.
- Kakutani, M. (2018, July 24). *theguardian.com*. Retrieved from theguardian.com: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/14/the-death-of-truth-how-we-gave-up-on-facts-and-ended-up-with-trump>
- LSE. (2019). *Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Mandese, J. (2017, March 23). *Mediapost.com*. Retrieved from Mediapost.com: <https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/297740/cover-story-is-truth-dead.html>

Obama, B. (2019, September 17). *obama.org*. Retrieved from obama.org:
<https://www.obama.org/updates/president-obama-greta-thunberg/>

Pine, D. (2017, March 23). *Time.com*. Retrieved from Time.com:
<https://time.com/4709920/donald-trump-truth-time-cover/>

springer.com. (2017). *springer.com*. Retrieved from springer.com:
<https://www.springer.com/de/book/9783658176396#aboutAuthors>

Tanner, B. (Director). (2019). *Die Wahrheit über die Lüge* [Motion Picture].
Weinstein, L. (Director). (2019). *Propaganda – Wie man Lügen verkauft* [Motion
Picture].