

On January 22, 2017, Kellyanne Conway – advisor to the President – ushered in the era of “alternate facts.” (JAFFE, 2017) Although photos taken of the National Mall picture the crowd at President Trump’s inauguration to be smaller than President Obama’s inauguration, Conway insisted on an “alternate fact” - that the reverse was true. The CNN and CNBC reported the “fact” that President Trump’s crowd was smaller (It took FOIA for Park Service to release photos of Obama, Trump inauguration crowd sizes, 2017), however, the FOX and Breitbart reported the “alternate fact” that President’s crowd size was not smaller. (STREET, 2017)

Ethical journalism is necessary for a free society and it “strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough.” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014) Although the need for ethical journalism is clear, today’s media is thwarted in its ability to report the news accurately. The President’s accusations of the media for allegedly reporting “fake news” undercut its legitimacy. Political polarization within the media has reached a point where “alternate facts” get reported just as much as the “facts.” Increasingly, Americans choose to view only the news that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, and economically stressed media encourages this behavior by flooding the news with biased and exaggerated stories.

The political bias in the media is real, and therefore, separating the “facts” from “alternate facts” is becoming more difficult. Anyone can be a reporter and can disseminate news through any medium, adding to the ubiquity of biased news. Consequently, there are more reports written based on faulty sources than ever before. Unfortunately, the burden rests with Americans who have to educate themselves and decipher what news is accurate and what is not.

Most Americans get their news from social media, as it is the primary distributor of news from multiple outlets. But, these outlets perform “circular reporting” – the first faulty report is cited as a source for other faulty reports. As such, obtaining news from multiple outlets is inadequate to ensure that Americans are receiving accurate facts.

The benefits derived from ethical journalism can only be realized through combined efforts of media and the people. Media companies are obligated to report accurately but Americans are only seeking politicized news that merely reinforces their biases, and economically stressed media is more than happy to capitulate to that demand with biased reporting. The slow destruction of journalism is a reality. Americans must act to reverse this trend by forgoing the comfortable path of “selecting only news that reinforces one’s pre-existing” beliefs by taking on risks inherent in engaging and learning the opposing views. Importantly, ethical journalism is expensive, and if Americans don’t want to destroy it, they must be willing to pay for it - this era of “free news” must come to an end.

The internet has brought about a profound communication revolution. Ironically, it is harder than ever for Americans to ascertain “facts.” We cherish our free society and have the duty to protect it. It is when we reach beyond our comfort zone and engage in viewpoints that are contrary to our own, we will secure our place in this free society.

Works Cited

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