

News and Tribune

Hall of mirrors

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August 13, 2020

Let's face it, 2020 has been one of the most, if not the most, difficult years of our lives and the flood gates holding back additional toxic waters will be fully opened in the next 3 months because of the November election. In October of 2019, I wrote an article stating that 2020 would be the most challenging of our lifetimes to maintain equanimity and positive mind states — and that was before we ever heard of COVID-19 or anticipated the collapse of our social order. The word media literally means to mediate and bring about agreement, compromise, peace, and removal of misunderstanding. In reality, much of our mass media could better be described as a hall of mirrors that confuses and disorients us and where it is difficult to distinguish between truth and illusion or between competing versions of reality. It seems easier to catch lightning in a bottle than to find agreement or a full understanding in the media of our most pressing issues we are facing in our society.

The Oxford Dictionary 2016 word of the year was “Post Truth,” which they defined as relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal belief. The recent 2020 American Views survey by Gallup and Knight indicates trust in media has dropped even further since 2016 with Americans rendering deeper and increasingly polarized judgement about the news media and how well it is fulfilling its role in our society. The survey further states Americans suspect inaccuracies in reporting are designed to push a specific agenda. An example of irresponsible journalism that is back in the news is the 2019 story of Nick Sandmann and his Covington High School classmates who were wrongly accused of being aggressors in an incident with a Native American elder near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Sandmann recently settled a second multi-million dollar defamation suit due to gross misrepresentation by the media and his win is a win for all of us seeking truth.

It is more difficult than ever to know whom to trust and what to believe and this distrust of the mass media has been amplified and is particularly acute because of the incredible uncertainty and multiple challenges we are facing. Most people start off in the media professions with a noble mission and intend to uphold the journalistic ethics and principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, fairness, and accountability. Like all businesses, the media professions are economically driven and competition is so keen that many times the goal is to addict their customers to their product by feeding them emotional candy and a evolutionary negativity bias to addict them like a dark narcotic. The good news is that there are many things we can do to inoculate ourselves from the constant barrage of negative and factually challenged news.

Never in the history of humankind have we had so many means of information and communication and we tend to be mesmerized by the stunning cacophony of our world. Even though the concentration of media ownership is an increasing concern, the mass media is not a monolithic single entity, but includes newspapers, magazines, social media and internet sources,

radio, and the biggest plug-in drug, television, among many other sources. Media and self-awareness are key to navigating this brave new world of mass communication in our post-truth era. Knowing the role we play, taking responsibility for our media “sensory food” consumption, increasing our media literacy, and opening ourselves fully to opposing perspectives can go a long way to overcome falling prey to disinformation.

A few years ago I started using media bias charts, available free on the internet, to rate media content on bias and reliability. Much of the media is clipped and narrowed and panders to a reactive mind, especially the opinion-driven TV shows that try to pass for legitimate news. When a major news story emerges I check out the story from a left (liberal), a right (conservative), and a perspective in the center of the bias charts. That way I can make an informed opinion on the story from every perspective to avoid getting stuck in an echo chamber of seeking out media that only reinforces existing views, which many people do. I do not participate in social media but know one pitfall is Orwellian computer-generated algorithms which use data to deliver content that can be sensationalized or misleading, and it is good to be fully aware of this.

A Cato Institute poll recently found that 62% of Americans are afraid to express their views, but it is up to us to make a major paradigm shift from being a slumbering public sedated in a desperate serenity to taking responsibility to be active participants and co-creators of information. I envision a media ecology which encourages us to actively seek opportunities for an open exchange of information—the more views the better, especially now. The News and Tribune offers an open forum for opinions for courageous individuals like L.W. Halter II, who recently submitted an excellent letter with an attitude of gratitude that is needed and appreciated. Exaggerated bad news is harmful to your mental health and it is important for you to take control and manage your media consumption and to protect our children from absorbing constant bad news. Turn off the TV and take the time to love and care for everyone and appreciate life for the miracle that it is.