

Can truth come from a tsunami of falsehood?

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Years ago, when I was in charge of publishing letters to the editor, I posted a quote from John Milton, a 17th century poet, author and inspiration for the Constitution's First Amendment, on the side of my computer. It said:

“And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to the worst in a free and open encounter?”

That's a foundational statement about the value of a free exchange of ideas. It presumes truth will be strong enough to rise against the competition of falsehoods, at least for most people. But it also assumes that it's wrong to suppress falsehoods. Doing so would push them into the shadows, where they might be more convincing because they haven't been exposed to the strong light of truth in a free and open exchange.

The question is, how strongly do Americans believe this today?

That quote was my guiding principle as I sometimes published letters I knew contained commonly held falsehoods, only to watch as other readers wrote in with eloquent corrections. My assumption was that a broad section of the community would be enlightened, including perhaps many who otherwise would have gone on silently believing a falsehood.

Back then, my biggest worries were about maintaining a level of decorum — no insults or bad language, please — and about something called astroturf. Editorial pages defined these as mass-produced letters written by special-interest groups, then sent to newspapers under various names purporting to be local residents. We called them astroturf because they pretended to be grassroots opinions, but they really were fake.

Ah, for such simpler times!

Today, the question confronting the country is whether truth can rise against a tsunami of outright falsehoods dressed to look authentic, designed to push the buttons of zealots, and produced at alarming speed by shadowy sources.

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Chris Krebs, director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Securing Agency, recently told “CBS This Morning” that intelligence agents continue to battle against foreign interference,

mostly Russian, in the nation's political process. They expect this to grow considerably during 2020, especially on social media.

So it was interesting, amid all this worry, to hear Facebook's head guy, Mark Zuckerberg, adopting the John Milton line this week, defending his refusal to take down political advertising containing falsehoods.

"At the end of the day," he told CBS, "I think that people should be able to judge for themselves the character of politicians."

Facebook is, of course, a private company, which means it doesn't have to worry much about the First Amendment. But the same principles apply. Twitter, another social media company, has decided not to allow any political ads at all.

Critics, such as University of Virginia professor Siva Vaidhyanathan, believe Zuckerberg has more than the First Amendment in mind. After all, the platform regularly obeys laws in other countries that suppress free speech.

Vaidhyanathan wrote in a New York Times op-ed that the real reason is Facebook can't possibly fact-check and vet every claim in every political ad in the United States and all the nations where it exists.

But this, again, reinforces Milton. Efforts to suppress falsehoods quickly land you in the mire of a tar pit.

As John Samples recently wrote for the Cato Institute, "Suppressing falsehoods in ads would produce false positives: some "lies" would turn out to be truths. Many "lies" would turn out to be contestable propositions that one side or the other deems "an obvious lie."

In today's era of "pathological politics," both sides would accuse Facebook of being in league with the other.

Even refusing to take political ads is problematic in that it can be hard to tell when something might be subtly political.

In the middle of all this wrangling, the strongest argument against suppressing speech has come unwittingly from Singapore, where the government has instituted a law against fake news.

Singapore has enforced this law twice already. If you are familiar with human nature and the tendencies of power, you won't be surprised to learn that both instances involved criticisms of Singapore's own government. One was an opinion piece taking issue with how funds and investment decisions were handled. The other was a blog from Australia claiming Singapore arrested a whistleblower who had exposed a candidate's religious affiliations.

The threat wasn't to the political process. It was to power. The First Amendment keeps power in check.

Milton knew that three centuries ago. It's up to us to decide if it survives the internet age.