

Terence Corcoran: The looming ministries of truthiness

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My past column dealt with the growing movement to use antitrust ideas to go after the free-market activities of Google and Facebook. The second aspect of the Big Tech takedown focuses on another core political target, freedom of speech.

Aspect number 2 got a major boost from U.S. President Joe Biden's much-praised inauguration speech. Even Canadians fawned, among them Gerald Butts, former chief of staff to prime minister Justin Trudeau, who wrote in Maclean's that Biden's address may well rank with the great inaugurals delivered by Lincoln, Roosevelt and Kennedy.

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Butts dodged the actual content of Biden's speech, a rambling collection of generalities and bromides. "This is a great nation and we are a good people," said Biden, a less-than-uplifting theme compared with the opening words of John F. Kennedy's 1961 effort: "We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom."

The words free and freedom appear 10 times in Kennedy's speech but only once in Biden's effort. His most frequently used word to describe American values was truth, which he mentioned five times compared with just one glancing bow to freedom on a long list of national characteristics of lesser import than truth. "Yes, the truth," said Biden. "Recent weeks and months have taught us a painful lesson. There is truth and there are lies. Lies told for power and for profit. And each of us has a duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders — leaders who have pledged to honour our Constitution and protect our nation — to defend the truth and to defeat the lies."

The truth movement has since been elevated to a new level of importance in U.S. politics and in Canada where ministers of the Crown and numerous commentators and think-tanks are agitating to turn the pursuit of Big Tech into a national campaign for truth.

U.S. Congress radical Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently called for the establishment of a "truth and reconciliation commission" to monitor the media. "We're going to have to figure out how we rein in our media environment so you can't just spew disinformation and misinformation."

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In The New York Times this week, various policy wonks were canvassed on the truth-and-lies issue, including Joan Donovan, the head of a Harvard media think-tank, who suggested Biden could set up a "truth commission." Times' writer Kevin Roose said he spoke to several experts who recommended a cross-agency U.S. task force to tackle disinformation led by something like a "reality czar."

Variations on reality czarism are being proposed for Canada. A Trudeau Liberal MP and a Rutgers University think-tanker this week called for Ottawa to create a “new weapon” to fight “disinformation.” Funded by both government and “civil society,” a new agency — a Canadian ministry of truthiness — would “report to Parliament but remain independent in its decisions and be staffed by experts with both viewpoint and cultural diversity.” It would fight disinformation “by using the tools of science, and tracking it like a disease, reporting on it with clinical objectivity like the Public Health Agency of Canada.”

According to a report from The Logic, federal Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault plans to introduce “wide-ranging legislation” to bring in such a new regulator to impose a code of conduct on Facebook and Google, including the power to order the companies to take down content that, presumably, does not meet the regulator’s definitions of truth.

Combating hate, crime, insurrectionism and terrorism are valid government activities that should be fought using direct legal and law-enforcement methods. A good example of the right way to take on bad actors and protecting rights and freedoms is the move this week by Public Safety Minister Bill Blair to list Proud Boys and 12 other organizations as terrorist groups.

Bill Blair is doing it right; Steven Guilbeault is on the wrong track.

How does that old cliché go? Don’t shoot the messenger. If genuinely vile and dangerous material is circulating, then go after the originators. As William Watson wrote on this page recently, “If the police start to go after enough originators, less and less illegal speech will show up online. If what’s posted is illegal, let the police — make the police — deal with it. If it’s not illegal, pick your poison: either jump in and condemn it or ignore it.”

TV humorist Stephen Colbert minted the word “truthiness” back in 2005 to mock politicians, activists and anyone else holding beliefs or making assertions without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examinations or facts.

Another U.S. humorist, P.J. O’Rourke, defended the long-standing right to hold unsupportable beliefs and ideas.

In a legal submission to a 2014 U.S. Supreme Court case on behalf of the Washington-based Cato Institute, O’Rourke defended the right of Americans to hold grossly inaccurate caricatures of Democrats as “pinko-communist flag-burners who want to tax churches and use the money to fund abortions” and Republicans as “hateful, assault-weapon-wielding maniacs.”

Concluded O’Rourke: “In modern times, ‘truthiness’ — a ‘truth’ asserted ‘from the gut’ or because it ‘feels right,’ without regard to evidence or logic — is also a key part of political discourse. It is difficult to imagine life without it, and our political discourse is weakened by Orwellian laws that try to prohibit it.”

It is difficult to imagine, except that today many people seem to be fine with the idea.

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