

# SLATE

## The Facts Are Disappearing. It's Up to You to Save Them.

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These are confusing times, and they're getting worse. On the one hand, there's tons of misinformation: Some of it is disseminated through technology, trolls, and bots; some through Trump's lies and propaganda (helped by a news cycle he drives); and some by Supreme Court cases like NIFLA v. Becerra, which ruled that anti-choice "crisis pregnancy centers"—frequently unlicensed and lacking medical providers—no longer have to disclose those facts to women who come to them for help. On the other hand, *real* information is being withheld from Americans who need it to live and make choices. Whether it's the government refusing to promote open enrollment for health care under the Affordable Care Act or the Supreme Court ruling making it legal for states to purge their voter rolls of eligible but infrequent voters, there's a double challenge facing those who value an informed public.

Compounding all this is the fact that, because this administration is so dysfunctional, we're all taking a crash course in civics we didn't sign up for—what exactly is a deputy attorney general? Is it *normal* for the EPA administrator to spend \$4.6 million taxpayer dollars on "security" for himself? Should the president call a small business he's never visited "dirty" because it didn't accommodate his press secretary? (And was it kosher for that press secretary to complain through a government Twitter account?) The need for good information has never been more dire.

### **Think of this as a small civic act of faith.**

Luckily, a lot of people are angry about all this. Also luckily, those numbers can be put to good use in what's starting to look more and more like an actual information war.

The bad news is that years of right-wing messaging—unions hurt the economy, immigrants are criminals, the rich are put-upon, the poor are lazy—have set the stage for an absolute hurricane of disinformation. The good news is that we can learn from Donald Trump's tactics. If he's taught us anything, it's that repeating the same thing over and over eventually *works*.

So adopt some facts you want to repeat. And repeat some more. If you've watched Trump tell the same lie over and over until people start parroting it, you've seen firsthand the power in repetition. The crisis in our democracy is also a crisis of information—but information is cheap if

you have numbers. Since institutions are constricting what citizens know, it's up to you to do your small part to help the facts you think are important get out there.

It's simple: Choose a few facts you think some people don't know or understand right now on issues you care about, and commit to repeating them daily. *Rain or shine. Regardless of the news cycle.*

Fact-checking, while hugely necessary, is by definition *reactive*; functionally, it's like trying to contain an oil spill. And these spills are happening all the time. What happens now is predictably asymmetrical: Trump lies, the lie gets a ton of coverage, and then fact-checkers responsibly issue a correction that no one reads. That's not working. To fix it means opting out of Trump's messaging altogether and setting the terms of what you talk about yourself. Remember: This president and those around him are very good at distracting people from their present goals. It will take willpower and discipline to stick to your message.

If Trump's lies vilifying immigrants are getting to you, pick a fact that refutes the xenophobic narrative. It can be fairly straightforward: "Immigrants commit crimes at much lower rates than Americans. Even the Koch-funded Cato Institute agrees. Great, right?" Or, if you want people to know they can now legally be purged from voter rolls, say so: "Did you know the government can now legally purge you from voter rolls even if you're registered and eligible? You can check and fix this. Here's how." (Find a local resource that lets you check—this one is Ohio's.)

It's pretty obvious why this stuff is important. It's a little harder to actually *do* the work of distributing it, but not by much. Here is a way to do your own part, in four steps (with one bonus challenge).

### **1. Pick your facts.**

Anywhere between two and five. This will be your "beat," as in drumbeat, as in the thing you repeat.

Maybe you want to talk about income disparity: "Average CEO compensation has risen 937 percent since 1978. Meanwhile, according to Harvard Business Review, typical inflation-adjusted wages 'have barely risen, growing only 0.2% per year.'" Maybe you think no one really knows what unions do anymore or why they benefit a workforce: "On average, a worker covered by a union contract earns 13.2 percent more in wages than a peer with similar education, occupation, and experience in a nonunionized workplace in the same sector." Maybe you want to talk about immigration's effects on the economy: "An internal government report commissioned by Trump found that refugees brought in \$63 billion *more* in tax revenue over the past decade than they cost the government. The administration suppressed the report." Maybe it's the racial sentencing gap: "Republican-appointed judges sentence black defendants to three more months than similar nonblacks and female defendants to two fewer months than similar males compared with Democratic-appointed judges." Maybe you resent how national security issues are being lied about to justify religious discrimination: "No national security concern justifies Trump's 'travel ban,' which is why even very conservative national security experts oppose it. Even the Republican chairman of the 9/11 Commission says it makes Americans less safe."

### **2. Post two of your facts somewhere public every day.**

Every day. (Not in meme form, please.) When you can, put it in your own words.

Everyone knows there's an information gap between the left and right, and even within specific echo chambers, so be creative. You can post to Twitter or Facebook some days—those are OK—but think of other platforms that might reach people you otherwise wouldn't. Community bulletin board? Post-It on the door of a bathroom stall?

### **3. Do one IRL broadcast a week.**

Once a week, you're going to tell one of your chosen facts to another human being. You to them. Maybe you text a friend. Or email your cousin. Or drop it in conversation really randomly. Worst case, if you're feeling *extremely* non-confrontational, write it on a postcard and send it to a random address. But do it. Communicate one-on-one with someone.

Yes, you will feel like That Person. Feel the embarrassment of that, feel it *hard*, right now, and then get over it, because feeling cool isn't a priority right now. Find a phrasing you're OK with; figure it out in advance. Even if it's just "you know what drives me up the wall is that FACT X." That's fine! You're not lying: You care. That's why you're doing this. As you get used to this, do it more.

### **4. Rinse and repeat.**

Pick your facts. Post two. Tell someone one.

If you're feeling ambitious, you can take this plan to the next level by posting one of your facts *every time you hear that Trump has said or tweeted something inflammatory or self-aggrandizing*. Always remember how Trump used repetition to propagate the "birther" conspiracy about President Obama. So if you're up for a real challenge, do your part to disrupt his message by setting your pace based on his! Every time he tweets about himself, share a fact that people need to know but without responding in any way to what he said. Deny him control of the news cycle. Things might change if every time Trump lied, the world—rather than reacting—flooded the internet with information about maternal mortality rates or the school-to-prison pipeline. At the least, it would be satisfying to see—and helpful to others.

Think of this as a small civic act of faith. We are ants here, carrying grains. You may not see results. That's OK! It's something you do because repetition works, and truth matters, and millions of people need to continually restate the truth if there's to be hope of breaking through in this incredibly toxic information environment.

That Trump shows no inclination to stop lying doesn't mean he gets to dictate what *you* talk about. Set the terms of what gets attention; you can set those terms right now. You're not reacting, you're initiating. It can be a great and empowering feeling.

*Citizens United* decided that corporate money is the same as citizen speech. The effect this money has had in politics is to silence individual voters.

But free speech remains, and it can be a firehose. Use it