

Voices: The importance of finding truth among competing claims

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Sen. [Patrick Moynihan](#) famously said, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.”

Our society today increasingly challenges that assertion with the rise of “fake news,” “clickbait” and “alternative facts.”

As a free society with democratic responsibilities, how do we navigate a highly partisan system, which includes an upcoming election, when “truth” seems to be in the eye of the beholder?

Rejecting absolutes and ascending tribalism

From the effects of postmodernism, society-at-large rejects notions of absolute truth, embracing instead the idea that truth is relative and based upon standards and understandings of individual communities. Couple this with the increased tribalism found in American politics, and we quickly discover an “ends-justify-the-means” approach to politics, which diminishes any value placed on discerning actual facts or truth in a given situation.

In *The Soul of America*, Jon Meacham writes: “There is such a thing as discernable truth. Facts, as John Adams once said, are stubborn things, and yet too many Americans are locked into their particular vision of the world, choosing this view or that perspective based not on its grounding in fact but on whether it’s a view or a perspective endorsed by the leaders one

follows.”

With the upcoming 2020 U.S. election and with various outlets of information bombarding voters every moment, how do we maintain objectivity and discern truth in the onslaught of misinformation readily shared via social media, television and print flyers?

While our society is familiar with more traditional venues of advertising, such as print and television, the ability to share online advertising and information quickly without testing the truth of the asserted claims has raised concerns for how to guard against false information that heavily influences our political processes.

Effects of tribalism on truth

Some social media platforms, such as Twitter, have banned political advertising on their sites due to lack of controls for policing what is true or false. Facebook, however, continues to accept political advertising.

[Mark Zuckerberg](#) defended his company’s decision, saying: “What I believe is that in a democracy, it’s really important that people can see for themselves what politicians are saying. ... I don’t think that a private company should be censoring politicians or news.”

However, Facebook users struggle with determining fiction from reality, as reported in a [FOXBusiness](#) story last November: “Participants in a recent study only correctly assessed whether headlines on social media were true or false 44 percent of the time. People were also more likely to believe headlines that aligned with their political beliefs.”

Tribalism plays a large role in muddying the waters of truth. In the book, *Coddling the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt assert, “In tribal mode, we seem to go blind to arguments and information that

challenge our team's narrative."

Tribalism's looseness with the truth makes civil discourse almost impossible.

Discerning truth among so many claims

How do we protect, or perhaps rescue, the Christian witness from becoming just another casualty in America's political culture war? How do we, as salt and light, discern truth in resistance to our tribalistic tendencies?

Practically speaking, we can enact numerous safeguards to protect against ingesting or sharing false information.

For starters, we must **read more than just the headline**.

Additionally, we should **be aware of the bias of the organization publishing the story**. Ad Fontes Media produces a helpful [chart on media bias](#).

Most importantly, we should **think through the "facts" presented before we share**. Are other news outlets reporting this information, or are we quickly passing along an inaccurate story that confirms our bias?

We need to value truth over propaganda, which seems simple to say but is proving hard to do with social media links easy to share.

Jesus and Pilate on truth

While pondering the concept of truth, consider the exchange between Pontius Pilate and Jesus in the Gospel of John.

On the night of his betrayal, Jesus replies to Pilate's questioning saying: "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

John records Pilate's response, "What is truth?"

What was the tone of this question? Was it sincere or mocking? Whatever his intent, Pilate did not wait for an answer and missed an opportunity to hear from Jesus. Perhaps he refused to wait for an answer because he realized the truth would only complicate the political decision he must make.

How do we relate to truth?

Do we relate to Pilate? Are we often approaching our political engagements with tribalism that either distorts or rebuffs truth from entering into our decision-making processes? Is it easier to make a decision based on whether there is a D or an R next to a candidate's name rather than to consider objectively the facts presented? Are we tempted to consume and to share information, whether credible or not, that will reinforce our tribalistic views?

For the sake of our society and Christian witness, we must break free from the temptations of tribalism that lead to distortion and misinformation. In its place, we must seek truth, regardless of how it challenges our current political leanings.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*: "There is no truth towards Jesus without truth towards man. Untruthfulness destroys fellowship, but truth cuts false fellowship to pieces and establishes genuine brotherhood. We cannot follow Christ unless we live in revealed truth before God and man."

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