



CRITICAL THINKING IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

by Muktananda

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has sparked heated debate about the very nature of truth itself in light of Trump's ongoing war with the "fake news" media. His battle weapon of choice is Twitter where he counters with and often initiates arguments based on "alternative facts". Yet, Trump did not usher in the "post-truth" era. Anna Leszkiewicz, a pop culture writer at the *New Statesman*, points out that term "post-truth" was coined in 1992 to describe the Iran-Contra scandal and the Gulf War. Nevertheless, thanks mainly to Trump, the popularity of the expression has resulted in it being chosen by Oxford Dictionary as the 2016 "word of the year".

DISTINGUISHING FACTS FROM OPINIONS

Critical thinking demands that we are able to distinguish facts from opinions. To do so, I will begin by deconstructing how facts actually came to be so, and under what circumstances. Take the simple example of someone's name. Suppose you are introduced to John at a party. Most people accept without thought or question that this person is, in fact, John. But why is he called John. In most cases he is called John because his parents *declared* it so at the time of his birth. From then on everyone called him John. Therefore, your *assertion* that you met John at the party is not your opinion, it is a statement of fact. Deconstructing this simple example, we can discern that one cannot *assert* anything that has not previously been *declared*. In other words, you cannot assert that you met John at the party if John's parents had not previously declared his name as John, and the community in which John participates validated his parents declaration by calling him John from then on.

Similarly, take for example the United States Declaration of Independence. It took courage for the founding fathers to make that bold declaration. In effect, they were committing

treason as far as the British were concerned. So, even though they declared independence, that declaration was challenged by the British resulting in the American War of Independence. In other words, the declaration of independence only became *validated* when America won the war, and France subsequently became the first country to recognize the United States of America. Had America lost the war, the founding fathers would have been hanged and, perhaps to this day, the British citizens of the “new world” would all be singing *God Save the Queen* instead of the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Once the Declaration of Independence was validated, the citizens of the United States could now call themselves Americans. For them, this was now a fact, not an opinion.

If we stop and reflect, our world is constituted by declarations that at one time did not exist, but do so now because they were brought forth by person(s) deemed to have that authority to make the declaration, and which were subsequently validated by a community who committed to maintain the declaration over time. Thus, declarations only exist for those communities that continue to validate them.

We must also recognize that different communities live in worlds of declarations that are different from our own. Take religion, for example. Islam is based upon certain declarations of faith and dogma that are different from such declarations made by Hindus or Christians. Consequently, what a Muslim considers to be a statement of fact about his religion will not necessarily be considered so by a Christian. Why? Because their respective “facts” stem from different declarations, each of which continue to be validated by their respective communities, but not by other communities. In other words, what is a fact in one community, is not necessarily so in another community.

MASTERING DECLARATIONS, ASSESSMENTS AND ASSERTIONS

Opinions are interpretations or *assessments*. In essence, they are judgments people make reflecting certain concerns they have about the future. Ideally, they are based upon accepted community standards and supported with assertions or statements of fact. I call such an assessment “grounded” as distinct from “ungrounded”. Grounding simply provides a plausible story (interpretation) about the likely consequences of actions that may or may not occur now or in the future. However, just because I deem an assessment to be grounded, that does not make it the “truth” of the matter.

To ground an assessment one must (i) establish a concern for the future, (ii) restrict the assessment to a particular domain, (iii) establish standards upon which the assessment is based, (iv) provide assertions (statements of fact) from the past, (v) commit to provide evidence to support the assertions if asked, and (vi) speculate about a future course of action. For example, suppose I wish to hire a Chief Financial Officer for my aircraft parts manufacturing company. First, I must establish the *standards* the candidate must meet. These standards might specify that the candidate should be a qualified C.P.A., has worked for at least 5 years in the aviation industry in a senior management position with a company whose annual sales exceed \$50,000,000, and is an effective team player.

Given these standards, I decide to hire Ms. Jane Doe based upon her assertions that (i) she qualified as a C.P.A. from the University of Florida in 1985, (ii) she worked for Gulfstream Aerospace as its Financial Controller from 1996 to the present, and (iii) she can provide several references, all of whom will attest that she works well with her co-workers. These assertions are statements of fact for which she has provided evidence of their veracity. Given my standards and the evidence she provided, I speculate that she will make a positive contribution to the company. Thus, I claim that my assessment to hire her is grounded.

In short, (i) declarations bring forth new distinctions and/or realities that are subsequently deemed valid or invalid by the communities in which they arose, (ii) assertions are statements of fact that are either true or false based upon the evidence one is willing and able to provide, and (iii) assessments are opinions that are either grounded or ungrounded, but whether grounded or not, that does not make it the “truth” of the matter.

One may ask if intuition plays any part in this process, to which I answer -- trust your intuition if it is in a domain in which you have gained mastery. Mastery is gained over time by encountering and dealing successfully, and sometimes not so successfully, with a multitude of different situations in a specific area of expertise. In other words, your intuition is grounded when it is based upon years of experience. Without such experience, trust in the rigor of grounding your assessments rather than just going on your gut instinct or intuition.

Critical thinking entails the ability to distinguish clearly between assertions and assessments -- between facts and opinions. In our post-truth era people often make the mistake of proffering their opinions as if they were facts. For instance, I may assert that Mary has an IQ of 130. Since the average score on an IQ test is 100, I may conclude that Mary is very intelligent. That Mary has an IQ of 130 is a fact for which evidence can be provided. On the

other hand, to claim that Mary is intelligent is an assessment, not a fact. That assessment can be grounded in this case by providing facts such as her IQ score to support that assessment.

When President Trump asserted that President Obama wire tapped his phones, he stated it as a fact for which he was not willing or able to provide any evidence. In such cases, he may be justifiably accused of making a false assertion, commonly called a lie. Critical thinking may, thus, be interpreted a listening skill. When encountering a *declaration*, we know to look for the authority of the person(s) making the declaration, and whether or not it is validated by a community. When hearing an *assessment*, we know to look for the grounding provided by the person making the assessment. When hearing an *assertion*, we know to look for the evidence the person making the assertion is willing and able to provide. In no case, however, are we ever seduced into accepting as a fact, that which is clearly an assessment. In other words, we never confuse facts from opinions.

When one has mastered the ability to recognize how declarations, assessments and assertions shape the worlds in which we are immersed, we have a powerful basis for thinking critically and, thereby, moving more effectively and judiciously in our post-truth era.

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