

Truth is now enslaved to entertainment

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, December 9, 2016, p.21

Truth has been getting an unprecedented beating. It's been hijacked and treated with so little respect that it seems to have lost its identity. A stand-in quickly materialised, going by the name of post-truth. Oxford Dictionaries voted it word of the year and defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

How on earth did we get to this point? Have we developed some kind of virtual armour to shield our egos, so that when facts come shooting at us, the barbed ones – the facts we don't like – bounce right off?

I'm convinced that the current crisis was brought about in part by our insatiable appetite for entertainment. The success of radio, TV, social media – any transmitter of news or information – depends on audience size, which is measured in various ways, including clicks and likes. Fierce competition means that anything to snag the public's attention is worth trying. And as revealed by the audacity and velocity of fake 'news' circulating during (and after) the US election, people no longer think critically.

Sometimes I wonder if we really understand how complex truth is. An oft-used synonym for truth is fact, but the two weren't always interchangeable. Fact is recorded in our language in 1539. It's based on the Latin noun "factum," from "facere," to do. Early on, fact denoted an action, deed, also an evil deed or crime, a meaning that survives in the phrases after or before the fact. Towards the end of the 16th century, fact had become synonymous with reality and truth, and by 1632 it referred to something that had really occurred, which is the main sense that fact has today.

Truth (and true) originated not in Latin but in Old English dialect words for faith, loyalty, which ultimately come from the Proto-Germanic “trewaz,” also the source for the modern German word for loyal, “treu.” During the Middle English period (circa 1150-1500), truth signified a statement or belief agreeing with reality. By the second half of the 16th century, its sense had extended to accuracy, correctness, genuineness.

Another word for truth that was current in Middle English is sooth, which also denoted justice, rectitude, reality, certainty. A soothsayer was, in Middle English, a person who pretended to be able to foretell the future; by 1642, he had become a person who spoke the truth.

Related to sooth (and truth) is the verb soothe, based on the Old English verb “sothian,” to prove something to be true. At the start of the 17th century, soothe also signified to support someone’s assertion or statement. Nowadays we use soothe mainly with the meaning to calm or tranquillize someone or their feelings, or to reduce the intensity of a pain, senses it had acquired by the 18th century.

If truth and facts could be soothed (in the Old English sense), and if our smouldering critical faculties could be reignited, we might stand a chance of receding from the brink on which we now totter.