

Facts and Alternatives to Facts

By Don Sutherland

On the January 22, 2017 edition of “[Meet The Press](#),” the show’s host Chuck Todd confronted Trump Administration Counselor Kellyanne Conway about Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s claim that the Trump Inauguration was witnessed by “the largest audience” ever to view such an event. Conway countered, responding, “You’re saying it’s a falsehood... Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that.”

Even as Ms. Conway intended to use the term “alternative facts” to shift the dynamic of a political narrative, her act was far from harmless. Allowing any substitute for the facts to prevail in the public discourse represents a grave challenge to the core of any enterprise or activity rooted in knowledge and truth. In the long-run, it also poses a mortal threat to the constitutional republic that was founded on the self-evident truths that all persons “are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

In the world in which we live, there are only facts and alternatives to facts. There are no “alternative facts.” That distinction must not be lost.

Any society that chooses not to distinguish between facts and everything else is one that does not value truth. Any society that does not value truth is one that is incapable of sustaining a republican form of government that rests on the voluntary engagement of informed citizens, advancing science that is built on accumulated empirical knowledge, or promoting prosperity that is the product of seemingly countless marketplace choices.

A post-fact world is a dark and dismal place. There, conspiracy theories carry equal weight to empirical evidence; truth is dynamic, relative, and forever out of reach; and, science is redefined as politics whenever its findings are inconvenient to those in positions of authority. In that world, information is stripped of all of its value. The vitality of knowledge creation, preservation, and dissemination ceases to exist. When those conditions are present, society’s dynamism and capacity to continually evolve in an ever-changing world are lost.

In Higher Education, academic freedom encourages the free and vigorous exchange of ideas and diverse viewpoints. However, academic freedom does not require colleges and universities to buy counterfeit (alternative) facts. Any violation of the integrity of facts is an attack on academic freedom.

Academic freedom seeks to foster free speech, but not as an end in itself. Rather, it embraces free speech as a means of pursuing the truth.

In his classic essay, “On Liberty,” John Stuart Mill wrote:

...the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the

opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

One cannot overstate the opportunity costs associated with a failure to ‘exchange error for truth.’ In his December 11, 1975 [Nobel Lecture](#), Andrei Sakharov explained:

...intellectual bondage, the power and conformism of a pitiful bureaucracy which from the very start acts as a blight on humanist fields of knowledge, literature, and art, results eventually in a general intellectual decline, bureaucratization and formalization of the entire system of education, a decline of scientific research, and the thwarting of all incentive to creative work, to stagnation, and to dissolution.

Inconvenient or unpleasant as facts might be, a post-fact world would be magnitudes of order worse. Granting even small leeway for “alternative facts” can allow what appears to be a small exception to metastasize into an enormous societal problem. Therefore, to borrow from the spirit of 20th century Protestant Pastor Martin Niemöller's memorable [poem](#), when anyone “comes for the facts,” it should be the duty of all, particularly those in Higher Education, to “speak out.” If not, there may be “no one left” when those who were permitted to sweep away facts and truth unopposed, move to complete their political or ideological projects.