

Is the Truth Out There?

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 21 January 2020 10:48 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 January 2020 08:52



One of my more intelligent, engaged Facebook friends recently posted a meme that read: “This may not make you happy – Fox News is not an accredited news station. They have changed their accreditation to ‘entertainment.’ They legally don’t have to provide any facts in their reporting. Fox News is in the same category as Saturday Night Live, Laugh In, and Swamp People. You don’t have to believe me, look it up for yourself.”

Well, somebody did, and responded with a link to the fact-checking site Snopes.com, which rated the popular meme “false.” According to Snopes, “While the term ‘accredited news station’ may sound official, no regulatory body even exists that would accredit Fox News (or CNN, MSNBC, etc.) as a ‘news’ station. In addition, a spokesperson for Fox News said the meme’s claims were false.”

Of course, lots of folks don’t trust Snopes any more than others trust Fox News. So there’s that.

A few days later, I’m standing in line at Publix, perusing the tabloid covers while Jeff unloads our cart, and a headline catches my eye: “Shiloh Moves in With Brad and Jen.” This reminds me of another headline I saw – during last week’s grocery run – claiming that Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston were back together. Finding this news mildly interesting, I decided to follow up. I also wanted to check out the headline “Kaia: 18, Pregnant, and Eloping?” – a brash “question” in big, black Helvetica, beside the face of Cindy Crawford’s daughter, Kaia Gerber.

(Aside: I haven’t picked up a tabloid in decades and typically don’t even recognize the faces on their covers; but Brad Pitt, Jennifer Aniston and Cindy Crawford are celebrities of my era. The days of yore. I realize “nostalgia” is a lame excuse, but it’s the only one I’ve got.)

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On the way home, I do a little Googling on both these stories. Turns out there's no truth to either. None. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston are NOT back together. They did NOT kiss under the mistletoe at Jen's holiday party. (Brad did not even attend said party.) He certainly did NOT move in with her, nor did his daughter, Shiloh. As for young Kaia Gerber, she is neither pregnant nor married. These are complete fabrications. Utter fictions. Not even a kernel of truth. And yet there they were – those big, bold headlines – screaming at every line-loitering grocery shopper in the nation. *How do they get away with this stuff?!*

I'm not sure why I was so shocked by this brazen assault on the truth. Why would I expect the tabloids to uphold a standard the "respectable" media has all but forsaken... with the public's encouragement?

It's almost like we don't even *expect* the truth anymore. Like we don't even *care*. We just gobble up stories that make us feel good (Jen and Brad!) – or confirm what we already believe (Fox News bad!) – and we share them with reckless abandon, veracity be damned. If we *do* bother to check facts, to whom do we turn? Who do we trust to fact check the fact checkers?

My Facebook newsfeed has become a mind-numbing deluge of articles and images that seem designed for the sole purpose of confirming one entrenched worldview or another. The predictability is tedious. I long for somebody – anybody! – to surprise me. Inspire me. Enlighten me. I want somebody to teach me something new. Make an unexpected declaration. Reframe an old argument. Show grace to an enemy. Something. *Anything*.

But this is about more than me and my online ennui. I believe the dynamic I'm describing is a serious challenge to our social order. I wonder how long we can keep feeling – and acting – like one country while living in such wildly different media-scaped realities.

Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone* – one of the few journalistic heroes I have left – has been relentlessly attacking this problem for quite some time. In October, he wrote a scathing critique entitled "Baghdadi Story Reveals Divided – and Broken – News Media," in which he slammed the *Washington Post* for its headline: "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, austere religious scholar at helm of Islamic State, dies at 48."

"When important events take place now," writes Taibbi, "commercial news outlets instantly slice up the facts and commoditize them for consumption by their respective political demographics. We always had this process, to some degree, but it no longer takes days to sift into the op-ed pages."

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According to Taibbi, news is now packaged for Republicans or Democrats from the get-go, on the first reporting pass. Furthermore, he says, it's no longer true that Fox News is more blatant about its slant than the Democrat-friendly press. He specifically cites the NY Times, WaPo, CNN, and MSNBC, claiming that in the Trump years, those organs have become "a bullhorn for caricatured bellyaching in the same way Fox was in the Clinton years."

In fact, says Taibbi, almost all news is now manipulated in service to "the only story left that matters in the United States – who's winning Twitter at any given moment, Trumpers or anti-Trumpers? News outlets are now so committed to pushing one or the other narrative that they are falling prey to absurdities like the *Post's* 'austere cleric' headline."

"If papers are going to go this far in an obituary to avoid even the implication of a favorable Trump narrative, how are audiences supposed to trust reporting on super-charged partisan stories like impeachment?"

How, indeed? This audience member no longer does... much. So, why do I trust Matt Taibbi? Because, as an openly left-leaning journalist and harsh critic of Donald Trump, he has every reason to jump on the spin bandwagon with his fellow ideologues – but he doesn't. It's clear he loves truth more than he hates Trump. This is all I ask of a journalist.

Lately, in an effort to cleanse my mental palate, I've been hanging out in a Facebook group for fans of the new Netflix series *Messiah*. The show tells the story of a mysterious, charismatic man from the Middle East who sparks a spiritual movement – along with political unrest – and the different characters who get sucked into his orbit... including the CIA agent who's investigating him.

In this FB fan group there are thousands of people from all over the world – of different faiths, speaking different languages – and they're all obsessed with this show and its main character. (Is Al-Masih divine or merely human? Is he a prophet or a conman? Maybe he's something even worse? A terrorist leader? The Anti-Christ?) I'm right there with them. *Messiah* is endlessly fascinating to me, posing question after question – all deeply relevant to our times – but offering no clear answers. Or rather, as I'm finding in this group, the answers are different depending on who's watching. "Truth" is in the eye of the beholder. As the enigmatic Al-Masih, in episode six, tells a crowd about to witness what may – or may not – be a miracle, "What you see will be your choosing."

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It feels like the perfect show for 2020.