

CHAPTER 3 Current Events Bulletin December 2017

“Alternative” Facts and “Fake” News: Are We Living in a Post-Fact World?

The inauguration of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States on January 20, 2017, was not nearly as well-attended as the inauguration of the forty-fourth president, Barack Obama, a fact that news organizations covering the event had noted in their reports, using a variety of pieces of evidence, especially side-by-side photographs. The Washington D.C. Metro also releases Inaugural Day ridership statistics, which showed far fewer riders for the Trump inaugural than for earlier inaugurations (including Obama’s).

Two days after Trump’s inauguration, however, White House press secretary Sean Spicer asserted that there were 100,000 more riders on the D.C. Metro on Trump’s inauguration day than on the day of Obama’s 2013 inauguration. But this was blatantly incorrect. Ridership on the day of Trump’s inauguration was 520,000. But ridership on the day of each of Obama’s inaugurations was far higher. On the day of Obama’s 2009 inauguration, it was 1.1 million, and on the day of his 2013 inauguration, 782,000.

Spicer went on to say, however, that Trump’s inauguration had the highest audience for an inaugural, ever—both in terms of attendance and global television viewership. The Nielsen company, which studies television audiences, estimated that 31 million viewers saw the Trump inauguration, far fewer than the inaugurations of Ronald Reagan in 1981 (41.8 million) or Barack Obama in 2009 (37.8 million). So, the facts would have that Sean Spicer, at best, delivered some unproven claims and, at worst, told lies.

But wait! Presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway, in an interview on *Meet the Press* on January 22, said that Spicer had offered “alternative facts.” Specifically, Conway told interviewer Chuck Todd that what he and other members of the media regarded as a falsehood was actually an “alternative fact.” The idea behind this term has caught on, so much so that some are starting to question whether plain, simple facts exist anymore. Can anyone simply construct their own version of reality and insist that it is true? In the age of social media and high levels of polarization between the political right and left, is it still possible to say that we can “know” the truth?

The presidential administration of Donald Trump has pushed another idea, that much of what appears in the media is “fake news.” When news articles appear that Trump disagrees with, he quickly labels them fake news. Combined with Conway’s idea that there can be “alternative facts,” as well as the growing divide between what newer conservative media, such as Fox News, and the traditional media are presenting to their viewers as “facts,” the question is now pressing for American society and political life. Indeed, we know that people are often prepared to believe things that are false. Neuroscientists have connected beliefs in alternative facts to a determination to believe in things that conform with other beliefs people may have (such as the belief that Donald Trump is more popular than previous presidents, therefore it makes sense that more people watched his inauguration).

In particular, the idea that there is no single truth directly challenges one of the central tenants of all scientific research: that through careful investigation, we can either uncover new

facts or get closer to the “truth” than we can through any other approach. More importantly, the idea that some ideas or statements are “wrong” in the sense of being inconsistent with scientific knowledge remains central to its entire enterprise.

The challenge for sociology and other social sciences is to help us understand that there are widely accepted ways of doing research to get the “facts” correct, not a variety of alternative facts that we can pick and choose from. Our *interpretation* of the facts may differ—multiple interpretations of the same set of scientific truths are possible—but social scientists hold that we need to systematically uncover the facts on which to base our interpretations if we are to have thoughtful conversations. Labeling facts we disagree with as “fake” or constructing our own alternative facts is to deny the very possibility of science in the first place. In this chapter we explore some of the ways that we can discover the facts on which all analysts should agree—even while recognizing that interpretation of these facts will vary.