**Do we live in a post-truth world?**

By Jessi Hollis McCarthy

Our information universe clearly has problems.

The recent emergence of the term “fake news” into the popular lexicon was quickly followed by a swath of articles discussing why the facts don’t change our minds, the importance of fact checking and critiques of the mainstream media.

In a period where facts can become a partisan issue, experts have started calling this the post-truth world. While they are not wrong, it raises the question: When have we ever lived in a truthful world?

A quick glance at American history shows a litany of falsehoods: Columbus “discovered” America — as if there weren’t millions of people already living here. Slavery was justified on the false claim that Black Americans were somehow “lesser” than white Americans. The limits on women’s rights were justified by pseudoscience “proving” them the weaker sex. Entire immigrant populations have been singled out on the lie of “otherness.” Disinformation targeting religions has led to persecution and hate crimes. People with Southern accents are “dumb” … and so many more.
Systems of power — people, organizations and governments — have always perpetuated the “fake news” that benefits them. Neither this nor widespread disinterest in the truth is a new problem. We also can’t tell this story without turning a critical eye on the history of the press. Look, for example, at press failures as they reported on AIDS in the 1980s and the negative impact that coverage had and continues to have on the LGBTQ+ community. Mainstream media’s general acceptance of the Bush administration’s claim of weapons of mass destruction fueled wide public acceptance of war with Iraq.
Our information universe has a problematic history, but before we descend into hopelessness, delete our social media and cancel newspaper subscriptions, there is a positive side. All of the previously mentioned falsehoods were found with a simple scroll through social media that revealed an amazing amount of fact checking. Millions of citizen creators and amplifiers are sharing innovative images and short-form lessons on America attempting to make truth louder than lies.
The argument can be made that technology has allowed us, for the first time, to call for a truthful world.
The fuel behind this work is the First Amendment. The founders wrote a law better than they were, for an America they couldn’t possibly envision. The right of free expression, unequally applied for 200 years, has found equity in the digital age. At last, the microphone is big enough for 330 million voices. There is nothing in the First Amendment that requires us to tell the truth, but inherent in its creation was the idea of an informed citizenry. People informing people.
As we head into this election, the purpose of the press and the rights of citizen advocates becomes even more critical to the democratic process. From local elections to national protests, fact checking is becoming a political tool. Election campaigns have started to call fact checking itself into question as a tactic in election advertisements. The Women’s March, for example, has taken up fact checking as a form of protest by training citizen digital defenders to combat disinformation. With misinformation confusing the voting process and the social media swirl around the candidates, the need for factual information is more critical than ever.
If the data and opinion noise is overwhelming you, here are some media literacy tips to get you started sorting fact from fiction.

* Know your rights — what do press and speech laws actually say is and is not protected?
* Be yourself but know yourself — we are most likely to fall for fake stories that confirm our own biases.
* Ask questions and compare multiple news or information sources to get the answer. Always double check the source or article type — avoid opinion pieces when searching for facts.
* The story is rarely simple. Seek complexity instead of confirmation. The facts will not and should not always support your views.
* Admit when you fall for fake news — you’re in good company. A vast number of American adults have fallen for a false story (including this author). Help others become good news consumers. A simple “You might want to double check that story; I think it might be fake” can do a world of good.

Media literacy, though, is about more than consuming what others have created. To be truly media literate, we must express ourselves about the information and content we have taken in.

The First Amendment places in the hands of the people the power to decide what to express. We have the right to lie, but we equally have the right to speak the truth. The question then becomes not do we live in a post-truth world, but do we want to live in a truthful one?

That decision is ours.