

## Truth Decay

I recently read a definition of truth decay which described it as “a diminishing reliance on facts and analysis in public life”. I am not sure who first coined the phrase, but its rapid emergence into common usage is hardly surprising given the extent to which a social media, news outlets and a significant proportion of public figures knowingly trade in falsehoods and un-validated “factual” assertions.

Despite the protestations of “objective science” we live in a subjective world where we all have a slightly different perception of the truth in any given situation. Sometimes this is because of physiological differences in our sensory systems, and always because we are using different experiential backgrounds to interpret the sensory inputs.

“The Truth” as a singular entity is a social construct built on the shared common denominators of our individual experiences, and on the consensus arising from honest and open discussion of our individual interpretations of a given situation. Owing to the complexity of modern life we increasingly rely on experts and leaders more knowledgeable than ourselves to provide this consensus.

The extent to which a society will tolerate alternative opinions on the edge of, or beyond the scope of, this consensus is a measure of both how confident it is in the core beliefs (facts) underlying it, and also how open a society it is.

Under threat all societies become more closed. This is particularly true of scenarios involving contagious disease because we have evolved a series of responses to this risk which help us to avoid infection. Known to social psychologists as the Behavioural Immune System these responses make us “more conformist and tribalistic, and less accepting of eccentricity. Our moral judgements become harsher and our social attitudes more conservative”.<sup>i</sup>

Unfortunately truth decay has undermined the core shared values, and trusted central public figures around which this new, tighter consensus would normally be based. The increased social cohesion which has in the past been at the heart of our responses to threat has been fragmented by a growing credibility gap between institutions and the public, hence the rise of the truthers who see mendacity and conspiracy everywhere.

The problem is exacerbated by government responses to the pandemic which have provided the Truthers with a great deal of ammunition. Repeated attempts to ease the difficulties of the hospitality trade such as Eat out to Help out have been aimed at ensuring the on-going viability of town and city centre businesses which form the basis of the highly lucrative commercial property market in the UK despite the potentially damaging consequences for public health which have sadly translated into increased Covid deaths in many areas<sup>ii</sup>.

Similarly the reluctance to close borders and effectively impose quarantine rules have had a similar effect as has the reckless award of large publically financed PPE supply and Test and Trace contracts to private sector interests with little capacity and less interest in fulfilling them to the required standard. It all adds up to prioritising the economic requirements of corporate vested interests at the expense of public health.

Against this background it is hardly surprising that distrust of the vaccine programme looms large in the public domain. It does seem that, compared with the normal timescale of vaccine development, corners have been cut. What we, the end users of the vaccines do not know is why: for profit, or in the interests of public health, or a combination of both. We are also unaware of the risks implicit in these shortcuts. This lack of information in an atmosphere of distrust risks undermining the effectiveness of any vaccination programme because large numbers of people will not take part.

I am not an anti vaxxer and I am not necessarily averse to some corners being cut in developing one given the urgency of the situation but I do want to be able to make an informed judgement about it. Truth decay only makes it harder for all of us to do this. We may not take the vaccine for the wrong reasons, or we may take a poor quality medication through misplaced trust. Either way dishonesty and evasion risk lives, even if it does make a profit.

Res ipsa loquitur

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<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200401-covid-19-how-fear-of-coronavirus-is-changing-our-psychology>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/eat-out-to-help-out-second-wave-coronavirus-rishi-sunak-covid-b1446586.html>