

Can Democracy Survive Without A General Acceptance Of Facts? (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Can democracy survive without a general acceptance of facts? Representative democracy in this country is in crisis due to a number of factors, but the factor under scrutiny in this essay is the current atmosphere that exists in the U.S. with citizens living in different worlds of information often based on very limited or no facts. This situation often leads to large numbers of people rejecting real facts that fail to match the information that they are receiving and believing.



The events and results of the 2020 Presidential Election provide good examples of this phenomenon. Although a huge amount of irrefutable facts exist that show that Joe Biden won a fair election in November 2020, a majority of registered Republicans still believe that due to voter fraud the election was "stolen," and that Trump should still be occupying the Oval Office. Americans who believe this false interpretation rather than the facts tend to look kindly on the various efforts of the Trumpites to discredit and overturn the 2020 election.

Many people's views about the January 6th Insurrection of the U.S Capitol are also colored by the same mixture of misinformation and polarized politics. Once again, a large number of white Americans who lean to the right have ignored the actual videotapes of this horrendous event and accepted the myth that it was merely a legitimate protest of a stolen election. The real test is whether the facts presented by the January 6th Congressional Committee in a series of public hearings will convince a majority of Americans that our representative democracy barely survived a violent coup. This Committee will also present solid testimony from various witnesses that January 6th was only the worst of many planned actions to prevent Biden from taking office.

How did misinformation or "alternative facts" become such a threat to our longstanding traditions of representative democracy? Although former President Trump and his cronies took the spread of misinformation to a whole new level in Washington, D.C., this practice has not diminished since Trump packed his bags for his move to Florida. The Republican Party and various white racist groups have continued the practice of "alternative facts" with a vengeance. These groups use it to continue "the big lie" about the 2020 election and the mythology about January 6th.

Besides the existence of many groups that thrive on misinformation, how have we reached the point in this country where real facts reported by newspapers and television news can be effectively countered by alternative facts. This situation has evolved over time, and the decline of journalism and the growth of social media are major factors in this story. It's a story that would upset many of our Founding Fathers.

One of the reasons that freedom of the press was included in the Constitutional Amendments included in the Bill of Rights was the fact that our early leaders believed that a free press was critical in order to keep citizens informed about the actions of their government. A diligent press

would prevent our elected leaders from overstepping their bounds. By and large, this relationship has worked well over time.

During this writer's lifetime, the press and news media in general have evolved from a high point of effectiveness and coverage to a much diminished role. In my youth, Cincinnati was home to three daily newspapers, one morning and two evening. Reduced to two dailies by my college years, The Cincinnati Post stopped publishing around 2000. Now only The Cincinnati Enquirer provides news with a smaller staff and greatly reduced coverage.

Television became an important force in terms of news coverage by the 1950s, with millions of viewers of the NBC, CBS, or ABC nightly news. That era was also the heyday of weekly news magazines, and many Americans subscribed to or purchased Time Magazine, Newsweek, or US News and World Report. Since TV news in its early years was produced by former print journalists such as Edward R. Murrow, its coverage was extensive and reliable. This type of coverage both locally and nationally insured that our economically, socially, and politically diverse population received and accepted the same facts on a daily basis. Obviously, people gave different interpretations to these facts, but at least they were basing their views on the same information.

This glut of solid journalism did not last. Over the last fifty years, the most negative change occurred in terms of the number and quality of newspapers in this country. With so many people receiving their news from television, subscriptions to daily papers dropped, and many dailies went out of business. Although Cincinnati lost two of its dailies, it still retained one paper. Many communities today have no daily paper.

The one common news source for everyone is television, but even some TV news has become watered down as many producers seek to make it more entertaining than informational. The big change in the last twenty-five years, however, has been the rise of the Internet and social



media. The arrival of Face Book and hundreds of other social media sites brought the emergence of many sources of information and information exchanges among people of similar views and backgrounds. Although some of these social media information sources provide real facts, many of them are based on mere points of view or untruths that support points of view. At worst, these sites promote racism, extreme political positions, and violent actions to achieve certain ends.

Many Americans today get all of their information about government, politics, and public issues from social media sites that offer opinions rather than facts. This emergence of different realities based on "alternative facts," comes at the same time that "real fact journalism" is in decline. As previously stated, this situation leaves many important public issues to be addressed by people who are informed by fact-based journalism and those who determine their views from social media misinformation.

This situation leads us back to this essay opening question. "Can democracy survive without a

general acceptance of facts?" Judging by our present political dilemma, the answer seems to be "barely." The next question to be asked is: What changes can be instituted to get our diverse people to again accept certain basic facts important to our daily lives? A lot of thought needs to be applied to answering this critical question.