

## Truth Decay: The Media and the Pursuit of Truth

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In the lecture by John Walcott, titled “The Media and Democracy,” and in the excerpt “Table Talk” by Adolph Hitler, a resurfacing theme is the quest for truth and what the media’s role is in determining truth. Many great philosophers throughout human history have sought to determine the truth, yet even today, despite all our technology and collective wisdom, people still cannot come to a definitive conclusion about the role of the media in determining the truth. In fact, it seems that in many ways we are further from determining the truth than we were a thousand years ago. Where did we go so dreadfully wrong?

While determining truth is too vast and unconquerable a subject, examining our errors is not. Because of the way information is presented and received in modern society, people are systematically programmed not to question or to challenge, leaving truth to be determined by those who provide the information. There is no single instant when we went astray and veered off our course towards truth, but instead, on many repeated occasions we did not question what was before us, so we have lost the ability to challenge “fact” and hunt out what is real.

Walcott (2008) avers that: “We’ve all been living in a fantasy-world... Seek out the truth—not what you feel, not what you believe, not what you want to believe.” It seems that, as long as we are mostly content, we have no problem following the leader, like a flock of geese where each one follows the one before it, not thinking about what dangers may lie ahead. According to Walcott (2008), our society is in trouble right now because we have failed at the simple task of asking questions: “We failed to challenge risky business ventures; we failed to ask about the war in Iraq, and we failed to ask about our growing budget deficit.”

In “Hitler’s Table Talk,” Hitler (1942) says that people are less likely to challenge or to question anything if the person making the decisions appears confident (p. 206). Hitler (1942) even goes as far as to say that members of society will “readily forgive the mistakes... which, often as not, by the way, escape their notice” (p. 206). If the only thing it takes is a firm handshake and good posture to secure the unwavering devotion of the masses, then it is no wonder that society has been so easily led astray. After all, Germany was a perfectly civilized society before Hitler’s brutal dictatorship.

In relation to the media, both Walcott (2008) and Hitler (1942) confront society’s complacency and mindset that whatever is printed must be true. In his lecture, Walcott (2008) asked that we “beware of the sins of omission” and do not let the “political biases of the media affect [our] understanding.” On the other hand, Hitler (1942) used the power of the media and seemed to praise the procreation of propaganda: “The journalist knows that he is no mere scribbler, but a man with the sacred mission of defending the highest interests of the State” (p. 205). In that way, it seems Hitler would have had the media say whatever was necessary as long as it defended Hitler’s character and mission, even if it was untrue.

According to the communications theory known as agenda-setting, the media cannot tell the public what to think, but they can tell the public what to think about. If that claim holds water, then even if the media do not blatantly lie or mislead, simply by reporting on some things and not others, they can control the social conscience. What is worse is that we allow it. By all means, not everyone involved in media production or journalism sets out to further a bias or a particular agenda, but if just a few of them did, who would be there to stop them? The heart of the argument is this: we are so far removed from truth that we are beginning to accept what is

counterfeit. We no longer can distinguish the black from the white because everything is cloaked under the gray fog of complacency and acceptance.

In the end, the issue is not so much “what is the truth?” as it is our willingness to believe, unquestioningly, that which is presented as truth. This behavior is a travesty and flaw that is not limited to one culture or society. Gullibility affects everyone, and we are all guilty of failing to challenge what is presented as fact. It is about time that we stop taking others’ information for granted and start doing our own research.

### References

- Hitler, A. (2005). Hitler’s table talk. Excerpted in J. F. Freeman (Ed.) Lynchburg College Symposium Readings. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). *Vol. II: Freedom, Authority, and Resistance*. (pp. 205-207). Philadelphia: XLibris. (Original work written 1942.)
- Walcott, J. (2008, November 17). *The media and democracy*. Lecture at Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, VA.