

Are we living post-truth or *peri-truths*? Challenges for information literacy in a multi-truth world

David McMenemy

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland d.mcmenemy@strath.ac.uk

This paper explores the complex nature of truth from a philosophical perspective, and considers the challenges this complexity presents in relation to information literacy instruction. We value truth because “being indifferent to truth is an undesirable or even a reprehensible characteristic” (Frankfurt, 2006, p.5). Yet, “both in lying and in telling the truth people are guided by their beliefs concerning the way things are” (Frankfurt, 2005, p.58).

From a dispositional perspective, Baggini argues that, “establishing the truth requires ‘epistemic virtues’ like modesty, scepticism, openness to other perspectives, a spirit of collective enquiry, a readiness to confront power, a desire to create better truths, a willingness to let our morals be guided by the facts” (Baggini, 2017). What if the issues at play, then, are about more than merely an adherence to defining truth or falsehood as a simple binary, but about how we attempt to navigate a world where citizens identify with multiple kinds of truth, and expect those stances to be respected? What skills and dispositions does this necessitate?

As a profession we see ourselves at the cusp of the battle of imparting the skills citizens need to enable them to understand truth from falsehood. Yet the professional discourse around truth and fake news very often belies its complexity, presenting the professional dilemma as a simple binary choice between a societal good and a societal ill. As Baggini states:

“We can’t dodge [truth’s] complexity. Truths can be and often are difficult to understand, discover, explain, verify. They are also disturbingly easy to hide, distort, abuse or twist” (Baggini, 2017).

Ten concepts of truth

Baggini presents *ten* kinds of truth, all of which human beings as rational agents can identify with in different ways. For instance, eternal truths present a range of potential ways of explaining the world, and an “overabundance of truths” about where we came from and why. Relative truths “can be relative to cultures, sub-cultures, epochs, ethnic groups, sexes, genders, social classes and even ultimately the individual” (Baggini, 2017). Additionally, how do we consider *reasoned* truths, *empirical* truths, or *creative* truths? This paper will explore Baggini’s ten concepts of truth and consider their implications for information literacy practice and pedagogy. In doing so we consider both the practicalities and the challenges in responding to users who may believe in vastly different versions of truth, and who may not wish to have the worldview critiqued. The challenges for us as a profession are also self-evident, whereby we may need to question our own versions of different truths.

As Frankfurt states, “caring about truth plays a considerably different role in our lives, and in our culture, than does caring about the accumulation of individual truths” (Frankfurt, 2006, p.96). Yet we need to practice our profession in a world where adherence to a myriad of individual truths has become the norm. The concepts presented in this paper will challenge us to consider multiple *truths*, and what living in a *peri-truth* world might mean for information literacy research and practice.

References

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