

Truth and the Post-Truth Infosphere

Amy B. Shuffelton

Loyola University Chicago

That we are living in a “post-truth” age has become a truism. By the time Oxford Dictionaries named it their word of the year in November 2016, folks in the so-called “reality-based community” had been writing about post-truth, and its alter ego “truthiness,” for years. What seems true, what has the ring of truth and the backing of belief, can matter more than facts and whatever version of truth they support. The fact that truthiness got its moniker from a comedian whose political satire became one of the primary news sources for a generation only drives the point home.

As a straight-up articulation of the relationship between truth and power, the words of the Bush-administration aide who coined the phrase “reality-based community” as a dismissive brush-off to journalist Ron Suskind are worth revisiting. In response to the phrase, Suskind writes, “I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will— we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’”¹

In this state of political and epistemological affairs, information, misinformation, and disinformation play leading roles. The word information generally implies the honest communication of news and facts. Misinformation indicates the communication of news and facts that are other than accurate, without necessarily implying the deceptive intent conveyed by disinformation. While contemporary speakers use all three words to refer to bits of knowledge as free-standing objects, facts and factoids circulated on the internet by bots, humans, kleptocrats and their minions, the root word formation is a reminder that the words’ original resonances indicated education. Information and its untrusty sidekicks have educational relations at their core, the act of conveying knowledge to someone else.

“Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation” was the theme of the Philosophy of Education’s 2024 Annual Meeting, and it seems to have struck a chord. Many of the articles and responses presented in the first three issues of this volume take it up directly. Authors were invited to take up the role philosophers of education can play in dealing with our language, our argumentation, and also our underlying beliefs. Authors were invited to engage with questions such as: How do we know what we know and how can it be contested? What is the role of information technology and social media? Why is there widespread mistrust in science and scientific justification—and why should we trust science? How may psychologies of belief challenge epistemic justifications? How can we best equip schools, parents, and publics for the knowledge and information tasks that are part of healthy democratic societies around the world? And finally: What roles can philosophers of education play in these difficult times of persistent misinformation and disinformation? Are we destined to be left “just to study” what makers of empires have done, or is there a place as “history’s actors” for us as well?

Articles and responses in issue 1 of this volume tackle those questions head on, though the theme runs through the rest of the issues as well. As always, Philosophy of Education accepts excellent work in the field of philosophy of education on any topic, and the volume includes a wide range of inquiries, especially in issues 2, 3, and 4. As issue 1 includes a selection of the articles that were most squarely focused on the conference theme, it functions as something of a special issue, and readers interested in that theme will find much to enjoy. Readers wanting more on information, misinformation and disinformation should also look into issues 2 and 3, however, as articles addressing the theme as well had to be spread out over multiple issues simply because they couldn’t all be crammed into one. And, of course, many of the papers that address information, misinformation, and disinformation could be categorized around other themes as well: populist politics, indoctrination, artificial intelligence, media studies, and more. The ease with which readers can find interconnections and cross-conversations across the range of topics and approaches speaks to the vibrancy of the field of philosophy of education. We hope you will find in this

volume much to enjoy.

REFERENCES

1 Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” New York Times, October 17, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>.