

In Pursuit of Information

Learning to recognize and evaluate the truth

by Jim Rettig

The American Dialect Society (ADS) named “truthiness” the 2005 word of the year. Truthiness, the ADS explained, “refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.” How quickly it has dropped from use.

Perhaps truthiness has lost favor because it requires effort. To establish the truthiness of the “fact” that the population of African elephants had tripled, Steven Colbert of Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report* urged his viewers to modify Wikipedia’s article on elephants. People recognized this as satire and placed no stock in the false statement about elephants’ sudden population boom. Contrast that to the ease with which millions accepted the falsehood that Barack Obama is a Muslim, or that many, including some librarians, accepted at face value the bogus claim that Sarah Palin, as mayor, tried to remove a long list of books from the Wasilla (Alaska) Public Library—even though some books on the list had not been published at the time. Has rumor displaced truthiness? Or perhaps opinion, undisturbed by fact, has replaced both truth and truthiness.

On October 2, CNN announced that 85% of the respondents in a viewer poll said that Lance Armstrong has never been involved in doping. This was presented as if the numbers reported the truth the way the final vote total in an election identifies the winner. The point of the story was that the Agence Fran-

çaise de Lutte contre le Dopage (AFLD), the French anti-doping agency, wants to retest Armstrong’s 1999 Tour de France urine samples. Apparently AFLD places more faith in science than in quick polls of CNN viewers.

In *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* (Random House, 2007), Rob Gifford describes how in Shanghai: “One shiny new office tower . . . has become a huge TV screen, with advertisements and government propaganda alternately lighting up the entire side of the building, one message replaced five seconds later by another: “Welcome to Shanghai. Tomorrow will be even more beautiful”; ‘1,746 more days until the Shanghai World Expo’; ‘Sexual equality is a basic policy of our country’; and ‘Eat Dove chocolate.’”

Even discounting a sweet tooth, the citizens of Shanghai undoubtedly place greater stock in ads for chocolate than in the ruling party’s nostrums. They have learned through experience how to judge the source of a bit of information, just as viewers of the *Colbert Report* know how to evaluate satire.

Promoting literacy

Libraries play many important roles in our communities, including helping members, such as K–12 students, citizens, and college students,



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learn to recognize the need to find and evaluate information and how to do so. ALA’s Association of College and Research Libraries and

American Association of School Librarians have definitions and standards for information literacy. School and academic librarians work with faculty to teach these concepts and competencies to students. Public librarians strive to do the same. The first step is for people to recognize that they need information.

Information literacy intersects with civic literacy. A Web search turns up myriad definitions. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills defines civic literacy, in part, as “participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes.”

In preparation for the recent national election, public and academic libraries posted information on election web pages, created book displays, and hosted public forums. Elections come and go; but issues abide, as do our roles to promote information literacy and civic literacy. These are just two of our many unheralded but essential civic and educational contributions. ■

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