

## Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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### Truth, Fake News, and the Social Construction of Reality



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Issues of truth, lying, and bias in both the political sphere and news reporting now dominate our daily lives. We are angered when public figures appear to lie, worried about biases in our news reporting, and bewildered in distinguishing between the fake and the valid in the digital world. Most unsettling, these are challenges to the foundations of trust essential for a viable society. If we cannot separate truth from falsity, bias from neutrality, and the fake from the real, then rational decisions are undone; justice becomes a farce, and suspicion abounds. Our social and political worlds turn ugly.

These realizations raise special challenges for those concerned with the social construction of reality. A key constructionist proposal is that our descriptions and explanations of the world are not required by “the way the world is.” There are many different ways to describe and explain what is taking place, and a true and unbiased account from one perspective will not be so in others. This idea has been liberating and prodigiously productive for many of us. It has meant that we are not bound by existing traditions of understanding; all are open to deliberation. And, we are invited to create new forms of understanding, along with ways of life we find more viable, harmonious, inclusive, and so on. Just such reasoning has hastened the development of appreciative inquiry, narrative and brief therapy, open dialogue, collaborative pedagogy, relational theorizing, qualitative research practices, and more.

As fruitful as this position may be, this same constructionist assumption has been strongly resisted by angry charges of relativism. “Is this to say there is no truth, that anything goes, that one person’s account of the facts is just as good as another’s?” “If there is no truth, then how can a President lie?” How is one to reply? Here it is important to point out that *within* any given tradition of understanding, there can be clear distinctions between what is true and false. Within my setting there can be very tight rules for when, where and how one uses such words and phrases “on the East side,” “railroad crossing,” “slippery when wet” and “this is poison.” To follow the rules is to speak the truth, and failing to do so may be perilous. Thus, if there are reliable conventions for counting the number of people at a rally, or reporting on the direction of a hurricane, reporting otherwise is untrue. To declare its truth is essentially to lie, and is the undoing of trust and the viability of society.

It doesn’t follow, however, that a biased report is a distortion of the truth. Within any tradition there may be multiple ways of properly describing an event, all acceptable as true. To select among them thus reflects a preference - in short, a bias. If one newscaster fastens on the shortcomings of a political decision, and another focuses on the positive outcomes, both may remain true within the conventions. Biased as well is the commentator who reports on both the positive and negatives. All commentaries - from the poetic to the scientific - are preferential. Thus to select among newscasters is not a question of which is the most objective, in this case, but represents an expression of one’s values. Whether one can privilege one set of values over another is the beginning of yet another significant discussion.