



Truth and Truthiness

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Sarah Palin's speech at the Republican National Convention was the hot topic for water cooler conversations a couple weeks ago. One thing that caught my attention the days after the speech was the speed and degree of fact-checking of remarks. For example, apparently she was caught stretching the truth when she claimed to have killed the Bridge to Nowhere. Governor Palin was not being singled out by the fact-checkers. Hillary Clinton said she "ducked sniper fire" in Bosnia; the fact-checkers found out that this never happened. Mitt Romney said he saw his father marched with Martin Luther King, unfortunately that never happened either.

It is nothing new that politicians like to tell a good story about themselves, and in doing so they are sometimes caught bending, stretching, distorting, and even breaking the truth. What is new is the number of fact-checkers on the Web. As one expert notes, "[Now days] there are too many professional and amateur fact-checkers, and hundreds if not thousands of bloggers who have detailed knowledge on specialized information." There is a virtual army of fact-checkers in cyberspace. The Internet has made it nearly impossible for a prominent politician to get away with stretching the truth.

This is a positive development for our democratic society. We want leaders who are faithful to the truth and we should hold them to a high standard. However, the Internet is a double-edge sword. At the same time it provides the ability to serve truth through fact-checking and wide access to information, it has made the truth harder to detect because of the speed and quantity of information. The Internet has both the power to support the virtue of truthfulness and provide aid to vice of falseness.

In this Sunday's paper the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin discussed some of the character traits of American's great presidents. Number eight on her list is having a moral compass. Clearly, having a moral compass at least means being true to one's core convictions and being faithful to the truth. As one thinker notes, "A truthful person is one who loves the truth and consequently refuses to lie, whether by overstatement or understatement, fabrication or omission." Lying assumes that one knows the truth or believes that one knows it and deliberately says something other than that. "Fidelity to truth forbids this." If one has a moral compass that works, one refuse to lie to one self or to others. A truthful person says what they believe and believes what they say, and we admire this.

However, because modern elections are in part about building an image using the media, there is a constant temptation for politicians to bend or distort the truth to gain an advantage. There is a temptation to manipulate the media to distort the facts to conform

to the way one wishes them to be, not the way they are. This has become known as “truthiness” and is the negative side of the Internet age.

The comedian and political satirist Stephen Colbert popularized the term, truthiness a few years back. He defined “‘truthiness’ as the quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts of facts know to be true....We’re talking about something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist.” In 2006 “truthiness” beat out “goggle” for Merriam-Webster Dictionary word of the year. In giving the award, they noted that “‘Truthiness’ is a playful way for us to think about a very important issue.” The important issue at stake is a lack of fidelity to the truth. In some ways the Internet and fragmentation of the media has made it easier to get away with bending and distorting the truth to the way one wishes it to be. As some once said, "A lie can run around the world six times while the truth is still trying to put on its pants." It takes time an effort to discern the truth and the speed of the Internet gives a lie a head start.

In his famous trial the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates instructed his jury that they should “Never mind the manner [of his speech] but think only of the truth of [his] words: let the speaker speak truly and the [people] decide justly.” The truth takes someone to speak it and someone to judge it. As we all know, people can and do lie, and politicians are people. They can also be mistaken and have memory lapses and moments of weakness. The Internet has at once made our job of judging the truth easier and harder. It is not just a politician’s responsibility to speak the truth, it’s our responsibility to judge if what is say is true—to identify the truth and reject truthiness.