

# And That's the Way It Is

By Paul Houston | Categories: Uncategorized

Those of us of a certain age remember that the late, great Walter Cronkite used to sign off his evening news report with the words, "And that's the way it is." When Cronkite anchored the *CBS Evening News* in the sixties and seventies, he was considered by many to be "the most trusted man in America." It may seem hard to believe for people who don't remember those days that a network newsperson—a member of the mainstream media—was the most trusted man in the country.

Today, many mistrust the mainstream media. People latch onto wild conspiracy theories. The age of "fake news" is in full force. The current president doesn't wait for the country to decide if what they are seeing and hearing is true or false; he declares it all false on Twitter and suggests he is the source of truth. It is never a good idea to depend on any single source for information—particularly one that seems intent on making it up. Comedian and late-night host Stephen Colbert coined the term *truthiness* a few years ago to describe the idea that whether a fact feels true is more important than if it actually is. A senior White House aide has even gone so far as to coin the term "alternative facts" to describe this.

The 2016 presidential election was overwhelmed by fake news, some created by "trolls" in other countries who invented and spread stories to a believing public. When I was growing up, trolls were small monsters who lived under bridges; today they are guys sitting at computers in Montenegro, Romania, or St. Petersburg posting fake news to the internet. We were also introduced to the concept of misinformation being spread online by "bots," which aren't even human.

The last few decades have seen the rise of conspiracy theories finding their way into mainstream consciousness: *Who really shot Kennedy? Did we really land on the moon? Was 9/11 a government action? Where was the President born? Was Sandy Hook a hoax? Did the Broward County Sheriff's Department actually commit the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School?* For every headline, there is an equal and opposite conspiracy theory.

With many Americans, particularly young Americans, getting their news from online sources, and with those sources being mostly unvetted, where are we headed as a society? What will happen to the truth? Are we condemned to live in universe of alternative facts?

As with many questions, I believe the answers lie in education, and the question we as educators should be asking ourselves is what we can do to help our children sort and sift the information they receive so they can find a way to see the way the truth?

As a former English major, I love that students are exposed to the classic writings of the geniuses of the ages. However, I think we have to find some space in the curriculum to find ways to help students interpret what they are reading and hearing about today's events. Years ago I taught an elementary class for a month using only the newspaper as my text. Further, I divided the class into four separate "newspapers" who had to cover events (skits created by the class) and report them. Imagine the students' surprise the day the four papers came out and they found that each group had covered the events very differently. None had tried to create a bias; it was inherent in their human reaction to what they had seen and heard.

We have to find ways of bringing home this kind of lesson to the children we serve. The next generation has to be better at separating

fact from fiction or our society will be in big trouble. One of the most important lessons we must teach our students is how to be reflective.

We live in a world (and work in a business) where reaction is forced from us. The world wants to know “what are we going to do about this or that?” We move directly from stimulus to response, and yet rational response can only be born from reflection. Response is the enemy of reflection. We have to learn to be more reflective, to not just answer the questions but also question the answers; then we must pass that sensibility on to our children.

We will never live in a Walter Cronkite world again, so we must find ways to help our kids be their own Uncle Walters. We have to teach them that when they get to the water, they should pause before they drink. They have to learn that stepping back is the best way of moving forward.