International Center for Enterprise Preparedness (INTERCEP)

Truth Decay: Impacts on the Public & Private Sectors When Objective Facts and Core Institutions Are Not Believed

Web Forum

On March 29, 2018, Dr. Jennifer Kavanagh, Associate Director, Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program, at RAND Arroyo Center discussed the meaning of the term Truth Decay, and provided comparisons to other historical periods when similar trends have been observed. The presentation also included the main drivers and actors that contribute to Truth Decay and the implications for democracy. Below is a summary of the main points presented as part of the web forum.

Introduction

RAND’s mission is to use objective research to inform policy. The starting point for thinking about Truth Decay at RAND was that politics have become increasingly partisan and this has significant implications for the way policies are made. Politicians are increasingly disregarding facts in order to stick with their party or personal agenda, and this poses a threat to democracy

Truth decay can be described as four general trends:

- Increasing disagreement over facts and analytical interpretations of data
- Blurring of the line between fact and opinion
- Increasing relative volume of opinion compared to fact
- Decline in trust in formerly respected sources of factual information

An example of Truth Decay would be current discussions about vaccines. The available evidence indicates that vaccines are safe and yet the number of people that believe they are not safe and refuse to vaccinate their children is increasing.

Fact and fiction and commentary are now presented in an intermingled way which makes it difficult for people to assess what is true, and oftentimes facts get drowned out as a result.

There is also reduced trust in institutions that used to be trusted, like the media. The result of this is that people are increasingly finding it difficult to know what is true.

Is Truth Decay new?

There are previous eras where we have seen similar phenomena and evidence of some of the four trends that characterize Truth Decay. Examples include:
The **Gilded Age (1880s-1890s):** In this period there was rapid growth and urbanization and this led to a tension between agrarian life and urban life. There was a rise in populism as large numbers of people felt unrepresented by existing political parties. This period also saw the rise of mass journalism. Increased competition between these newspapers drove the use of sensationalized stories to attract readers. This yellow journalism blurred the line between fact and opinion, in a way similar to what we call “fake news” today.

The **Roaring 1920s and the Great Depression:** Similar trends were also observed during this period when tabloids and radio talk shows emerged. These were new ways to disseminate information. For example, with the rise of radio came the emergence of powerful radio hosts with large audiences that were used to spread opinions that were not fact based. Journalism was also used to entertain people rather than provide news. The Great Depression also ushered in an era of declining trust in institutions, including the banking sector and the government as a result of the economic collapse and government’s failure to provide good information and policy on the economy.

The **Vietnam Era (1960s-1970s):** In this period there were new ways to disseminate information with the rise of television and photo-journalism, both of which could be used to blur the line between fact and opinion. At the same time, there was also a decline in social consensus around issues such as the Vietnam War and this, combined with high profile incidents where the government was found to be concealing factual information, again led to a decline in trust in the government and the media institutions and their ability to provide accurate information about what was happening.

There are some differences between what was happening during these three periods and what is happening now. Most importantly, today we see increasing disagreement about objective facts and data in a way that does not seem to have occurred in the past.

**What is Truth Decay?**

Truth decay has four drivers:

**Cognitive processing:** People have a tendency to reject facts that do not agree with their pre-existing beliefs and rely on shortcuts, personal experience, and their social networks.

**Changes in information system:** The amount of information available to us has increased at a scale and scope that we’ve never seen before. The news cycle is much faster now. Social media and the Internet offer new ways to disseminate large amounts of information. These sources of information have resulted in the removal of traditional information gatekeepers and also the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation. Shrinking profit margins at media companies makes commentary a more profitable way to produce media, but commentary is not necessarily fact based and people often can’t tell the difference between commentary and facts.

**Competing demands on the education system:** Schools haven’t kept pace with increasing demand of the information environment and as a result, students don’t always have the skills needed to distinguish good information from bad information. Science and civics are being crowded out by reading and math and training for standardized tests.
Political polarization: Political, social, and economic polarization are severe and reinforce each other, creating a fragmented society that allows Truth Decay to thrive.

How is Truth Decay amplified by some actors to achieve economic and political objectives?

Four actors that influence Truth Decay are:

Academic and research organizations: We rely on these institutions to do important research and understand complex problems. But they can also contribute to Truth Decay if they produce biased or inaccurate information. Examples of ways in which these institutions can exacerbate Truth Decays include questionable funding sources for research, unintentional errors and data fabrication. Once a study based on erroneous science is published it can be retracted but it can be hard to reverse individual beliefs once they have formed. An example is a study that claimed to show a link between vaccines and autism. It was retracted but it is still used today to support the opinion that there is a link between vaccinating a child and autism.

Media organizations: Many media organizations are doing a great job at seeking out and reporting facts but some explicitly and openly walk a partisan line or use false information to increase viewership and subscription for economic purposes. There are also cases where errors are made when an organization rushes to get a story out.

Politicians: Some politicians are willing to reject facts or push them aside if they don't conform to the agenda or the story they would like to tell.

Foreign actors: Some government and foreign actors such as Russia and China can exploit social media to sway opinion in the US by increasing polarizations with bots, etc.

What are the consequences of Truth Decay?

Truth decay poses a threat to democracy. Part of the solution is getting people to understand that facts matter. Four consequences of Truth Decay include:

1. Erosion of civil discourse: We are not having debates and deliberations about hard topics because we do not agree on facts. These debates should be the foundation of democracy. A strong civil society should be able to work together and have these conversations. This erosion can undermine resilience when threats arrive.

2. Political paralysis: If policymakers don’t have shared facts it’s difficult to have discussions about policy options and to reach compromise. Stalemates and government shutdowns affect the policymaking process and the result for society is suboptimal options. These can have severe economic consequences. For example, the 2013 government shutdown had economic costs in the billions of dollars.
3. **Uncertainty**: When policymakers are unsure about facts or do not care about them they may make policy decisions without the necessary data and analysis to inform those decisions. Policies made about health care, tax policy, and climate change can be more efficiently designed if they are based on facts and data.

4. **Alienation and disengagement**: People can feel disillusioned in an environment infected with Truth Decay. Voter participation rates are low and this is also a threat to democracy. People may not have the time or energy to engage and to look for the facts when there is so much noise in the information system.

**What do we do from here?**

We can’t just sit by idly. Previous episode of Truth Decay ended because groups of people took action or because the importance of facts became more apparent, following major events like the Great Depression.

RAND research continues to assess what is needed in this area, including:

1. Further exploration of historical analogues and the ways in which Truth Decay ended in earlier periods.
2. Learning more about what is happening in other countries.
3. Collecting data and studying trends. How much disinformation is there? Is it increasing?
4. Looking more deeply into the mechanisms, processes and drivers of Truth Decay and they relate to each other.
5. Searching for solutions and responses. What can we implement in the near- and long-term to promote change and reduce Truth Decay?

In terms of solutions and responses there are economic incentives that can be put in place to ensure there is factual information in investigative journalism. Another option is to implement regulations on social media in terms of liability and accountability.

In the political sphere, voting can serve as an accountability constraint on political actors and drive them to rely on facts rather than opinions.

Social media platforms have many benefits—they can provide a platform for movements like “me too” and “time is up”. It is too early to tell, though whether this will result in meaningful policy change.

In the area of resilience planning, facts are paramount and that needs to be made blindingly clear to any constituency in order to build trust. Leaders should also be clear about what they don’t know. It is okay if there are gaps in knowledge, but that has to be communicated.
Additional Resources:

- RAND – Community Resilience: https://www.rand.org/topics/community-resilience.html