

Fake news fixation has the power to reshape our world

An early scene in George Orwell's legendary dystopian novel "1984" has the main character rewriting history to suit a repressive government's political agenda. What we actually have in 2016, 32 years after Orwell's fictional world, is a news environment in which private citizens and those who want to manipulate us can create, share and often believe fake news — fictions that have the power to reshape our government.

Newspapers and other "legacy" organizations don't have a monopoly on the truth. We are prone to our own biases — often a nearly unconscious belief in moderate politics and incremental change for the common good. Even so, we are traditionally reliable curators of the news, providing a record of the facts that is literally printed in black and white. Falsehoods and biases are fairly easily spotted and challenged. A newspaper that too often blatantly disregards the facts doesn't stay long in business. Those that have longevity have done so by building credibility within the communities they serve and keeping it on a daily basis by diligently working to separate fact from fiction.

Slippery do-it-yourself news of the kind so commonly found on Facebook isn't so easily policed or punished by the marketplace. It has neither cost nor consequences. In fact, as Americans increasingly seek validation rather than objective information, there are rewards for even flagrant lies online, so long as they achieve enough popularity to be shared among people with like beliefs.

"People most readily believe that which they can believe most conveniently," Cliffs Notes observes in its essay about "1984." This is almost the definition of modern U.S. politics, in which many Americans choose to believe or disbelieve stories based on complicated personal and political preconceptions.

It is a fact of modern life that more Americans get information from Facebook posts than directly from the entities that actually do the hard work of fact-gathering. If you have friends with diverse political beliefs and levels of education, you are certain to encounter Facebook posts denying climate change or

asserting the truth or falsehood of other matters. There was, for example, a posting last week that boldly asserted Donald Trump overwhelmingly won the popular vote, despite the objective fact that the opposite is true.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has struggled with a response to widespread accusations that his company aided and abetted the dispersal of falsehoods that warped the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. In essence, his problem is how to maintain Facebook as freewheeling marketplace for ideas, while somehow not allowing it to be an easily manipulated stooge that regurgitates lies that are packaged in superficially believable ways.

After initially denying it was the problem, Facebook now reportedly is looking into third-party verification services, better automated detection tools and simpler ways for users to flag suspicious content.

In a Nov. 18 column in The New York Times, John Herrman notes that these fake news items are "indefensible, easy to identify and extraordinarily viral." The bigger problem, in his opinion, is the more subtle manipulation of people through a clever blending of out-of-context "facts" that mesh with reader biases and preconceptions.

Herrman is pessimistic about Facebook actually correcting a profitable system in which its members get to decide on alternative versions of reality. "Those who expect the operator of the dominant media ecosystem of our time, in response to getting caught promoting lies, to suddenly return authority to the companies it has superseded are in for a ... surprise," he observed.

Even on Facebook, it is possible to be a sophisticated news consumer. Double check the credibility of sources and look for stories by organizations that have a direct financial and reputational stake in being reliable.

Ultimately, there actually is a true version of the facts. Any community that wants to play for real and actually succeed can best do so by embracing reality. Facts, not fantasies, are the path to success.



GUEST COMMENT

You decide: Pavement or gravel and dust

By Rep. Cliff Bentz
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

We are losing our paved streets and roads.

Between 20 and 50 percent of the streets and roads in many of our cities and counties are in "poor" or "very poor" condition. When asphalt reaches these conditions, it has to be replaced — at a cost of about \$200,000 to \$300,000 per mile, twice what it would have cost had it been appropriately cared for. Obviously, we should be preventing our roads and streets from transitioning into the "poor" category, but we are not. Instead, we are letting our good roads wear out (counties and cities are financially able to chip coat only about a third of what they should maintain each year) while we fight the losing battle of patching patches on bad roads. Where are we going to find the \$200,000 to \$300,000 per mile to replace our hundreds of miles of roads already "lost"? Or, for that matter, the \$30,000 per mile it takes, every sixth or seventh year, to chip coat and preserve our good roads?

So, should we be paying more for the use of our roads? That discussion must start with an understanding of how much the average Oregonian now pays for that use. Fortunately, most of the tax that we pay at the pump to the government is transparent. For example, the cost of state gas tax, registration fees and titles fees totals about 44.2 cents per gallon — 30 cents of which is state gas tax. The average Oregon driver

drives 10,234 miles per year, so if her car gets 20 miles per gallon, she pays about \$153.51 a year in state gas tax. If the state gas tax were to go up by one penny, she would pay about 43 cents more per month.

There are several other government organizations that raise money for roads, such as local road districts and the federal government, but the purpose of this editorial is to highlight two things: first, how much the average Oregonian pays in state gas tax, and second, despite what we are currently paying, our roads and bridges are failing.

About half of any new state gas tax is sent back to Oregon's cities and counties. The other half goes to the Oregon Department of Transportation. This money is constitutionally dedicated to roads. Not to mass transit. Not to state police. Not to any other non-road related use.

Three quarters, more or less, of the gas tax is paid by those on the west side of the state, so a large part of what is needed for maintenance of Eastern Oregon's state highways comes from the Willamette Valley. Said another way, the cost of maintaining the thousands of essential miles of state highway in Eastern Oregon vastly exceeds what we in Eastern Oregon pay in state gas tax. So, if you raise the gas tax or registration and title fees statewide, you are assuring that there will be money to bring from west to east to repair the state highways we use almost every day.

Every conversation about needing more money for road maintenance must address increases in

the cost of road repair materials. For example, the cost of oil needed for asphalt has gone up, since just 2004, by almost 270 percent. Compare this 270 percent increase to the state gas tax, which in 24 years was only raised once by 6 cents (24 percent). Not only that, the cost of labor, gravel and cement has also gone up by 50-75 percent.

As co-vice chair of the Interim Legislative Committee charged with addressing, in the 2017 legislative session set to begin in February, preservation of our road systems, what you think about these issues is important to me. If you think that we should continue to "use up" our roads and bridges, rather than paying necessary maintenance as we go, please tell me. Or, if you think that we should pay a higher gas tax, or higher registration or title fees, knowing that this money must be used for our roads and bridges, please say so. I need to hear from you.

Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario) is an assistant Republican leader in the House and has served in the Oregon Legislative Assembly since 2008. In addition to his role as vice-chair of the Joint Committee on Transportation Preservation & Modernization, he is also the vice-chair of the Revenue Committee, and sits on the Transportation & Economic Development Committee, Energy and Environment Committee, the Joint Committee on Department of Energy Oversight and the Legislative Counsel Committee, as well as on various work groups and task forces.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Abandoned dog now loved by foster family

To the Editor:

I am writing this in response to the letter submitted last week by Mya Ennis. I will echo her sentiments: It is not cool to dump your animals, and furthermore, it's not cool to have animals you are not willing to treat as members of the family and care for until their lifespan is complete, or assure they are placed in caring and loving homes if your situation changes and you are no longer able to provide care for them.

The elderly dog Mya refers to — and I believe she is the one who found her and brought her to John Day River Vet Clinic to await reuniting with her family — has not been reunited, and despite social media attempts and outreach by the wonderful volunteers of Hope 4 Paws: Grant County, no one has stepped forward. But why would they? She is past her prime and usefulness and garbage to them.

The happy news is she is in a

loving foster home, which will undoubtedly become her final home. She now has a name, a comfortable dog bed and large yard to explore, regardless of her failing eyesight, hearing and stiff limbs. She is loved and valued as a member of the family, and that is cool.

Jan Keil
Mt. Vernon

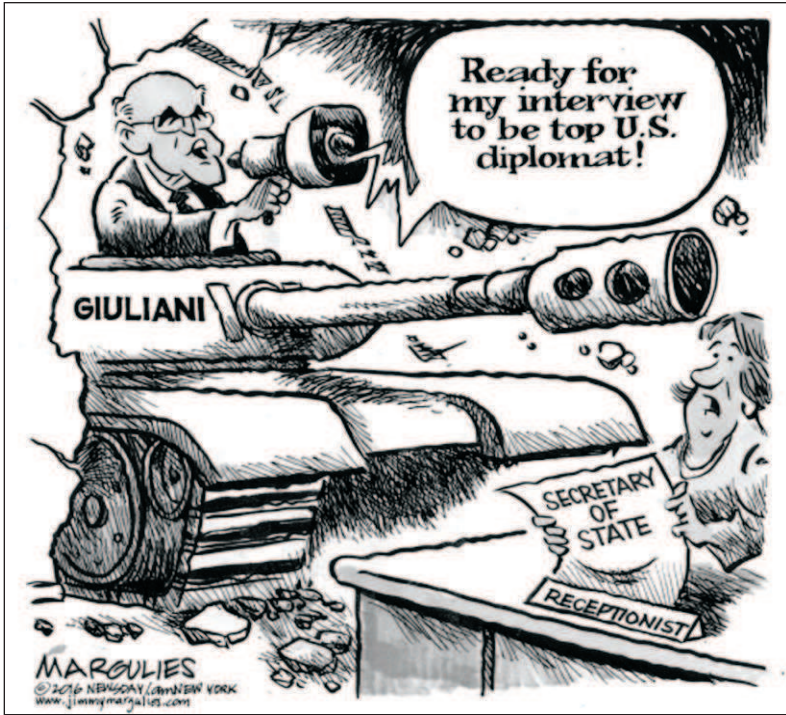
Volunteers set positive example for all of us

To the Editor:

As divisive rhetoric continues to permeate life in Grant County, I find it refreshing that two young ladies have seen fit to work for the betterment of our communities. Both of these women have consistently taken the high road and used their talents to volunteer for various causes and programs over the years. Joan Bowling and Helen Bogart are indeed diamonds in the ruff. Over the years, Joan has been actively involved in the Scouting program, earning Scouting's highest honor, the Silver Beaver. Joan has been the

face of Red Cross blood drives and the local Disaster Assistance Team, recently being recognized by President Obama. These programs are and continue to be an integral part of Grant County. Helen and her late husband, Ken, were instrumental in starting the local credit union, to helping establish the People Mover and Air Life of Oregon. Over the years, I have had the privilege and honor to work with these women. They have shown that dedicated individuals, working with others, can make positive contributions to Grant County. We should all applaud their efforts and encourage others to get involved in our local communities. Instead of working to be a divisive factor, let us all try and work to solve the issues facing Grant County now and in the future. By taking a positive attitude and a respectful manner, both Joan and Helen have shown us all what dedicated time and efforts can accomplish. You both are what makes Grant County a special place to call home.

Chris Labhart
Grant County Commissioner
John Day



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