

Back in 2005, CNN aired a piece on Lou Dobbs Tonight reporting that the US. had 7,000 new cases of leprosy in the previous three years because of unscreened illegal immigrants

That figure was completely false.

Back then, the official leprosy statistics showed about 7,000 cases of leprosy over the last 30 years, not the last three. But to Dobbs, who was my colleague at the time, a lie was a more convenient way to advance his agenda of demonizing undocumented immigrants.

“If we reported it, it’s a fact,” Dobbs said as Lesley Stahl eviscerated him for lying on 60 Minutes.

Much to the horror of his colleagues, this so-called mainstream journalist with a prime time show got away with lying, and even prospered. CBS executive Steve Friedman, who had named Dobbs a commentator on the CBS Early Show, said: “What makes Lou stand out is that he’s not afraid to tackle the hot topics.” He celebrated Dobbs, as well as the 60 Minutes report that debunked Dobb’s fiction as “provocative.”

His work was not provocative. It was a lie given legitimacy by my own network which emboldened Dobbs and so many other racist provocateurs while sidelining critical reporting. To those of us at CNN reporting on the communities he demonized, it was disheartening and insulting. What we didn’t know was that this was just the beginning.

I have been a journalist for more than 30 years, reporting and anchoring for local TV, network news and cable -- places like NBC, WBZ-TV and CNN. I anchor and co-produce, along with Hearst, a weekly political magazine show syndicated in 93% of the country called Matter of Fact. I do a twice weekly podcast for Quake Media and am a correspondent for HBO’s ‘Real Sports’, in addition to producing series and documentaries through my production company, Soledad O’Brien Productions.

My point is, I have both feet planted firmly on the media landscape -- and this is what that landscape looks like.

Media disguised as journalism has been spreading lies for years, elevating liars, and using the ensuing slugfest to chase ratings, hits, subscriptions and advertisers. Period. Fullstop.

In fact, the elevation of liars has accelerated, with radio, broadcast and cable TV in particular, repeating and reenergizing lies that harm all of us. The bombast that accompanies these lies, has also set the stage for an alarmingly xenophobic and racist narrative that has taken hold in this country.

So how did we get here?

Michael Rich, CEO of Rand Corporation, where I am honored to serve as a member of the board, defines what happened as “Truth Decay,” “the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life” -- in important conversations about policy issues, policy decisions, and elections.

Truth Decay, Rand research shows, is characterized by four trends:

- Increasing disagreement about facts**
- A blurring of the line between opinion and fact - The rising influence and quantity of opinion over facts.**
- Declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts, like conventional media which has suffered from the rise of social media.**

I believe this area of Truth Decay began when local newspapers were badly, even mortally, wounded by the emergence of free social media and the decline of advertising dollars, like classified ads. Local news is the heartbeat of American journalism where your town board gets the scrutiny it deserves. Losing local coverage meant fewer facts, the glue of civic participation. It also meant a decline in voter participation. A 2014 Study from George Washington University and American University researchers concluded that "Citizens exposed to a lower volume of coverage are ...less likely to vote ... regardless of levels of political awareness, indicating that the deleterious consequences of a decline in local coverage are widespread, not restricted to the least attentive citizens."

The decline in local coverage has even affected bond ratings. Paul Gao, a professor of finance at the University of Notre Dame, who studied the decline of local news, found that in the three years following a newspaper closure, the costs for municipal bonds and revenue bonds increased, likely because no watch dogs were reporting on the machinations of government and how the money is spent.

A report from the University of North Carolina Huffman School of Journalism found that the United States has lost almost 2,100 papers since 2004, including 70 dailies and more than 2,000 weeklies or nondailies. About half of the remaining 6,700 plus papers in the country – roughly 1,250 dailies and 5,500 weeklies – are

located in small and rural communities. The average circulation of weeklies – which number around 5,500 – is 8,000. An estimated 1,800 communities which had a local news outlet in 2004 were without one at the beginning of 2020.

Today the residents of these towns and cities have no place to find basic reporting, on their planning boards, their schools, their police. That has left an enormous void of information with the possible exception of social media, which is too often an unfiltered, unverified caldron of presumed fact and opinion. In the absence of many sources for basic reporting, the public turned on their TVs, particularly in search of political reporting.

“While local news shrinks, national news coverage by cable television like Fox and MSNBC is growing and our understanding of news grows politicized and polarized, pulling us apart,” has written Charles Sennott, founder of the Ground Truth Project.

As of 2019, some form of TV is the go-to source for 45 percent of Americans seeking political coverage, a key to assessing policy, choosing candidates, and scrutinizing how decisions are made. In fact, the public looks to TV news as a *trusted* source for politics. Pew Research Center in 2019 found that 65 percent of news consumers trusted CNN, Fox News, the three networks and PBS and NPR depending on which way they leaned politically.

Here is the problem. TV hasn’t filled the void of in-depth reporting on America’s communities by producing stories about policies that affect regular people, like local taxes, climate change, quality education or infrastructure. Instead, it’s become a place where facts go to die. TV, cable news in particular, relies on the cheap and easy booking of talking heads who exchange colorful barbs, entertaining outbursts and sometimes peddle outright fiction.

According to the Pew Research Center, between 2007 and 2012, the percent of CNN evening programming filled with interviews jumped from 30% to 57%. Airtime for edited packages (taped produced stories) dropped from 50% to 24% during the same time period. In December 2012, 90% of MSNBC primetime coverage came in the form of opinion or commentary. Daytime news was no better. Live Breaking News was cut in half from 10% in 2007 to 5% in 2012 (across Fox, MSNBC, CNN). Reporters going live dropped from 23% to 18%. Interviews increased from 39% to 51%.

From there, it only got worse. Former Senator Rick Santorum, who once said legalizing same sex marriage was tantamount to the legalization of incest, became a prime time pundit. Kellyanne Conway, senior counselor to President Donald Trump, introduced the media to the notion of “alternative facts” during an airing of NBC’s Meet the Press. Conventional reporters and anchors, the so-called

professionals, started to behave like conspiracy theorists and entertainers. Rachel Maddow of MSNBC speculated that former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson might be a crony of Russian President Vladimir Putin, as Lawrence O'Donnell advanced the conspiracy that Russia orchestrated a chemical attack in Syria to help Trump. They chased ratings and tossed aside objectivity to divide us into these false categories of left and right, manipulating facts and using guests to pique the interest of partisan viewers. Then they would break into tears or slam their fists on their anchor desks as they debate the liars they booked for their very own shows. Viewers, who come looking for information, instead get enraging contradictory facts to support a bias to the left or right.

The migration from reporter to entertainer is so complete that even the courts have recognized it. In 2020, Fox defeated a defamation case by claiming that viewers should know enough to consider anything Tucker Carlson reports with skepticism based on his reputation. From the judge's opinion:

"Fox persuasively argues...that given Mr. Carlson's reputation, any reasonable viewer 'arrive[s] with an appropriate amount of skepticism' about the statements he makes....Whether the Court frames Mr. Carlson's statements as "exaggeration," "non-literal commentary," or simply bloviating for his audience, the conclusion remains the same—the statements are not actionable."

The harm being done is profound. "If everyone is entitled to their own facts you can no longer have reasoned disagreements and productive compromise."says Yochai Benkler, co-director of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

Moreover, the talking heads are not in the least representative of the public. On Meet the Press, Face the Nation, and This Week in 2015, according to Harvard's Shorenstein Center, 80% of guests were White, 12% were women (2% were women of color) and 41% were Republicans, 22% Democrats.

The media isn't diverse either, distorting the realities of American life even more. Big media is isolated in coastal cities, disconnected from poor and working class people of all colors, hosting newsrooms with scant diversity of anything -- race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, anything. About three-quarters of newsroom employees are non-Hispanic white, compared with about two-thirds of all U.S. workers, according to a 2018 analysis from the Pew Research Center. About half of newsroom staff are white men, compared with about a third of the overall workforce. It's no wonder the media expressed shock when videos unveiled police brutality, a phenomenon that is well known to communities of color.

All of this has eroded public trust. Seventy-two percent of Americans trusted the media in 1976. By 2020 that number had fallen to 40%, according to Gallup. So why did the media march down this road? Money. News organizations need cheap ways to draw big ratings. Big ratings mean more ad dollars. It's really that simple. Leslie Moonves meant it when he said of the media's coverage of Trump, "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS" and "the money's rolling in, and this is fun ... It's a terrible thing to say. But bring it on, Donald. Keep going."

That's precisely what the media did more and more, as viewership -- and advertising money -- increased after they presented the 2015/16 primaries as entertainment. TV went big with Donald Trump, a 9th-place candidate, who the polls showed with 5% of GOP support. Racist Birtherism and Lies? It was all part of the news-entertainment complex. Knowing he would be entertaining, they went wall-to-wall when he launched his campaign with another lie -- that Mexicans were drug dealers and rapists. In his first nine months of campaigning, Donald Trump earned nearly \$1.9 billion worth of free media attention from TV, print, and social media. Trumps' GOP opponents collectively received \$1.159 billion in free media coverage. Hillary Clinton earned \$746 million in free media coverage. Four years later, TV's spotlight on lying has become even more dangerous. Lies about the recent election propelled a swarm of rioters, some carrying Blue Lives Matter flags, to attack those same blue lives as they tried to stop the electoral vote count.

When news organizations make decisions based on ratings rather than responsible reporting, disinformation flourishes. Important conversations are clouded, scrutiny is reduced, and trust in our institutions erodes. The result is less civic engagement and voting, and that exacerbates the damage already done by the decline of your local paper.

Examples abound of the consequences of misinformation, like the debate over the need to wear masks when a highly contagious virus is spreading; the erroneous speculations from both left and right surrounding intelligence about Russian interference in the elections or whether immigrants are fueling a leprosy comeback.

According to an IPSOS poll released on December 30, 2020, popular misinformation campaigns like QANON have too often gone mainstream. Thirty-seven percent of Americans aren't sure about whether "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media." Thirty percent of the country does not accept the result of the 2020 election.

On April 25, 2019 the CDC reported 695 cases of the measles in the United States, the highest number of cases reported since eliminating the disease. Why? Because disinformation about the safety of vaccines had spread widely across social media and been elevated as vaccine deniers get airtime. The Annenberg Public Policy Center found that up to 20% of US adults were at least somewhat misinformed about vaccines. Imagine what will be the impact if vaccine panic grows now that COVID-19 vaccination is underway.

So what to do about all this?

Let me be clear. Congress can't, and shouldn't, regulate journalism in defiance of the First Amendment. It's enough that Congress underfunds and politicizes public media even as it strives to bring basic news to scores of communities big and small. What Congress can do is shed light on how irresponsible media contributes to disinformation in ways that have consequences for democracy. You can speak up, like I am today, and encourage education that helps the public discern between fact and fiction, opinion and reporting. The public can also speak up and look to educate themselves on disinformation. And, me and my colleagues can also be proactive

Here are some examples of what we in the media can and should do:

- **Don't book liars or advance lies. Sure, cover the fact that lies and propaganda are being disseminated but don't book people to lie on your show because it elevates them and presents them as another "side."**
- **Get out of the office and interview people all over the country of all different backgrounds. Cable TV, in particular, infuriates Americans with elitist and tone-deaf coverage that often ignores the plight of regular people.**
- **Stop posing every story as having two sides when some stories have many sides and are more complicated. Take the time to unravel and report and give history and context.**
- **Every perspective doesn't deserve a platform. Media thrives on the open exchange of ideas but that doesn't mean you have to book a Neo-Nazi every time you book someone who is Jewish. Balance does not mean giving voice to liars, bigots and kooks.**
- **Stop saying you want a diverse staff and go hire one -- fast. A diversity of staff is not just fair, but it helps you reach into different communities and tell an accurate story of America. The public will trust you again if you tell the truth of who lives in this country and report accurately on communities.**

- **Make sure that reporting and anchoring staff adheres to professional standards by consistently speaking in a fair, accurate and balanced reportorial voice that is absent opinion. People who traffic in opinion should do only that and be labeled as that.**
- **Recognize that objectivity means having an open mind, not a lack of judgment. If you don't call a lie a lie or racism, racism, you empower the liar or the racist.**

Reject the majority rule mentality in journalism. Just because a lot of people believe something doesn't make it real, true or reasonable.

Support efforts to challenge media who disseminate misinformation, particularly in vulnerable communities. Answering hard questions just makes us stronger. Voto Latino and Media Matters for America on Thursday just launched the Latino Anti-Disinformation Lab with \$22 million of funding.

We in TV news need to get better because things are getting worse, as the events of January 6 have foreshadowed. The American public has been fed lies, enabled by too many in the media and elevated by some of the very reporters who are supposed to support a facts based environment.

Most importantly, support local journalism, the place where major networks and cable news gets a lot of its best stories. The slow ascendance of non-profit independent media like Report for America, Chalkbeat, ProPublica, Hechinger Report and Marshall Project is a good thing for the public because it supports traditional newsgathering, gritty watchdog reporting of facts and information that help guide our conversations and inform decision making.

Meanwhile, Local newspapers are declining even more rapidly as coronavirus cripples the economy. At least 30 newspapers closed or merged in April and May 2020, and thousands of journalists at legacy and digital news operations have been furloughed or laid off, says a report by Penny Abernathy, Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at UNC. That leaves those of us on TV. America trusts us to deliver accurate, unbiased information, the grist of democracy, the stuff that enables us to have intelligent and accurate conversations with our neighbors, to cast an informed vote, and to make thoughtful decisions about everything, from the products we buy to whether we should vaccinate our children against a deadly plague. Bad information, wrong information, racist and crazy and cruel information hurts and even kills. But only if we let it.