

Viewpoint: Why attacks on the concept of 'objective truth' are escalating

Attacks on the concept of objective truth are not new. Left-wing attacks on objectivity date at least to the 1970s, with the rise of academic trends such as deconstructionism and postmodernism. Not long after, conservative media began attacking truth systematically, for example, through the rise of demagogues like Rush Limbaugh... The digital era raised the stakes by making misinformation easy to spread.

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For years, Americans have been targeted with epistemic warfare — that is, with attacks on the credibility of the mainstream media, academia, government agencies, and other institutions and professionals we rely on to keep us collectively moored to facts. Those doing the targeting are nameable individuals and organizations, including Trump, conservative media outlets, Republican politicians, anti-vaccine groups and Russia's Internet Research Agency.

Since epistemic warfare has proved its mettle so spectacularly in U.S. politics, it is likely here for good. Measures may allow us to fight back, such as revamping social media and teaching media literacy. But our primary means of defense is to be awake to the scope and origin of the threat. The first step toward winning the war on truth is to accept that we are in one.

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