An alternative world of alternative facts

The recent comment from Kellyanne Conway, one of Trump’s leading advisors, that Press Secretary Sean Spicer had provided ‘alternative facts,’ has left many people feeling distressed that outright lying is now an acceptable practice by the government. Following its campaign based on ‘post truth’ and cries of ‘fake news,’ it’s no real surprise that this administration is now relying on ‘alternatives’ to facts to communicate its objectives and beliefs.

But maybe the term ‘alternative facts’ is actually an accurate summation of the world we now live in? An interesting piece appeared recently in The Times Magazine about the process of building a following on Instagram (*How to make 5,000 friends and influence people, 28 January 2017*). Largely, the method is to create a believable, but false, persona that appeals to peoples’ sense of idealism – an alternative reality. Using stock images, professionally set photoshoots, and paid-for followers and engagement, people can paint a picture of a perfect world beyond the one where any of us really exists.

This is nothing new; just like digital influencers, most of us ordinary folk portray a highly curated version of ourselves through our online profiles. Not seeing the full picture has become an accepted part of our daily lives; as has choosing only to see the side of a story that we agree with.

In the wakes of Brexit and the US election, people have spoken of being blindsided by the results. Beyond polls not working, (an entirely separate debate), part of the problem is the bubble we create around us, filled predominantly with thoughts and opinions similar to our own. We choose not to follow people on Twitter who bombard us with information we fundamentally disagree with. We block annoying people on Facebook with opposing views. It’s natural to surround yourself with likeminded people - that’s not a new phenomenon. But what is new is the wealth of instant, and unedited, information we can share with each other.

I often read a headline on Facebook and instantly react, before reminding myself that I should check the source before I believe it. If, as a media-savvy and inquisitive person, I find that I’m not sure what to believe anymore, what of the rest of the world? And as a strong supporter of journalism who does not believe in the recent accusations of ‘fake news’ in legitimate and respected publications, even I frequently shake my head at the clickbait-considered headlines I read online.

So, although Conway’s instance of ‘alternative fact’ giving has been proven as, *in fact*, a lie, her particular choice of words is not an altogether bad one. It reminds us that we live in a world where we should all be more diligent; about what we hear, read, see and believe. And it reminds us that as hard as the pill can be to swallow, the occasional read of an opposing view can go a long way in clearing the haze of bias. Between two highly polarised alternatives, there’s an awful lot of common ground – usually rooted in facts.