

Wading through an information desert

Brock's Banter

By Brock Weir

Let's cast our minds back for a second to 2005.

A simpler time and place, perhaps?

Well, it depends on who you ask.

Just a few years out of the tragic events of 9/11, we were, along with our allies in the heat of the Afghanistan conflict while, here at home, on both sides of the border, the debate raged on whether or not we should be there in the first place. Our biggest allies in the United States and the United Kingdom went a step further and took the fight to Iraq based on dubious evidence and, in the midst of all that chaos, and conflicting sources of information, there emerged the widespread coining of the term 'truthiness'.

Popularized by comedian and late-night host Stephen Colbert on The Colbert Report, it was a comment on the apparent prevalence of leaders peddling ideas that were essentially truth-adjacent rather than the truth itself. And while that is alarming in and of itself, it was greeted at the time with no small splash of humour.

'It used to be everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts,' Colbert told The A.V. Club at the time. 'But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It's certainty. People love [then-president George W. Bush] because he's certain of his choices as a leader, even if the facts that back him up don't seem to exist. It's the fact that he's certain that is very appealing to a certain section of the country. I really feel a dichotomy in the American populace. What is important? What you want to be true, or what is true?

'Truthiness is, 'What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.' It's not only that I FEEL it to be true, but that I feel it to be true. There's not only an emotional quality, but there's a selfish quality.'

We don't have to look very far beyond the presidency of George W. Bush, or just one side of the border, to see that the idea of 'truthiness' is not simply observational humour but something that seems to have taken very strong root in our own culture.

The last two Presidential elections in the United States have shown that the tenets of 'truthiness' have sadly become mainstream in public life. It didn't matter whether what people felt was in any way based on fact, but the fact they felt it gave it impenetrable clout. And if they needed something to back it up, why starting rumours in echo chambers seemed to do more than just the trick.

If someone said something that challenged their worldview or their gut-feeling, it, of course, was wrong, maybe seen as personal attack, and certainly not something worth a second look. The person with the different outlook was wrong, plain and simple.

We saw slightly less severe but no less worrying signs of 'truthiness' in our public discourse in our own last Federal election, so we're certainly not immune to it, but I feel a new lack of information is setting the table for a resurgence of 'truthiness'.

In my opinion, this new brand of 'truthiness' is being fostered by a concerted and unnecessary lack of information or, the very least, a torrent of information that has sadly slowed to a trickle.

As students this Friday complete their first full week back at school for in-person learning since the winter break, they and their families are doing so with a woeful lack of information. This is not a lack of information that can be laid at the foot of an educator's desk; rather it is a systemic breaking down of a previously-vital information stream.

School is currently underway without any formal public record being kept of how many cases of COVID-19 are in schools, how many students per day are exposed to the virus, how many are bringing the virus home to their families, and how many student cases will subsequently contribute to further spread.

Aside from a few bold teachers who have decided to buck the trend and share anecdotal information of what is truly going on in their classrooms, parents are essentially sending their children into the unknown each day, just hoping that the decision that was made that morning was not one that would be regretted in the evening.

They have little choice in the matter and my heart goes out to each and every person who faces this dilemma each day. Yet it doesn't have to be this way. A simple reporting of the true figures would go a long way in helping parents make the correct decision for their families.

But true numbers might belie assurances made by our leaders that schools are safe for students and teachers.

Given an apparent lack of testing resources, we're not given an accurate accounting of just how many active cases of COVID-19 there are in our communities. Instead, we're given the official numbers confirmed by local health units with the caveat that each day's release is almost certainly an undercounting of the actual numbers.

No actual numbers means the layman can't actually see trends in just how we're doing fighting the invisible enemy and now the ones we trust to give us projections are left to analyse wastewater to monitor trends.

Whether it's a lack of resources or not, it also seems like we're living in a COVID phase that is reflective of the early days of the pandemic when the number of deaths were tragically reported as mere statistics. We're told only ?X? amount of children have been hospitalized with COVID, as if one wasn't already too many; that we're seeing some positives when just under 300 people in Ontario alone lost their battle with COVID between Sunday and Sunday, and just ?X? of the people who lost the fight were under the age of ?X.?

I don't know about you, but I don't find any of those numbers comforting.

What I do find reassuring are accurate numbers and apparent trends that do not leave room for ?truthiness? to hit the comeback trail.

But, on the positive side, unlike when the Province was so intent on blocking the previous government's health curriculum they set up a snitch line for parents and students to report any teachers who dared teach it, we're not seeing a similar reporting system set up for teachers who are bold enough to give parents an accurate picture of what's going on in their classrooms.

At least not yet.