

The Cone of Uncertainty

by

Scott Garber

A category “I’ll-blow-your-house-down” hurricane with the unlikely name *Irma* swirled menacingly across my TV screen, setting its sights on south Florida. This monstrous storm represented a clear and present danger to the populous peninsula—only, it wasn’t quite clear just where it would eventually present itself.

Too-dumb-to-get-out-of-the-rain news personalities tag-teamed with green-screen gurus to offer interminable slo-mo speculation about the storm’s unpredictable track. Of course, if you can *put* a handle on your ambiguity, it makes it seem as if you *have* a handle on your ambiguity. So they did, explaining that what we were dealing with here was a genuine meteorological phenomenon called “the cone of uncertainty.”

And just where did they come up with that term? A quick search of *Wikipedia*, my go-to source for uncertainty, revealed that “cone of uncertainty” has been used in project management for decades. In that context it refers to the way that uncertainty gradually diminishes over the course of an undertaking, as progress inevitably reduces the number of variables yet to be determined.

A few years ago the National Hurricane Center decided to borrow this terminology. Not insignificantly, however, they turned the cone around 180 degrees. Rather than beginning with openness and working toward closure, a hurricane’s cone of uncertainty begins with a given. They know where the storm is located at any moment. What is *uncertain* is where it will go from there, and the further out you extrapolate that uncertainty over time, the more uncertain it becomes. In fact, the eye of the storm actually goes AWOL from its cone about 1/3 of the time—an escape rate we certainly wouldn’t tolerate in ice cream cones.

The scale of this imprecision left me feeling kind of sorry for the people in hurricane zones who are facing life-altering decisions—like moving to Maine or waiting in even longer lines than usual at Home Depot. These folks could really use some hard facts about the trajectory of the oncoming storm, but instead they’re forced to live in a cone of uncertainty. Bummer.

Of course, the storm eventually passed, and Florida got back to being the Sunshine State. But I couldn’t get this crazy cone thing out of my head. Not because of its utility or futility as a storm-tracking tool—but because I saw in the cone of uncertainty a living metaphor for something even scarier than a killer hurricane.

You see, once the wall-to-wall weather coverage was over, we went back to our regularly scheduled 24/7 news cycle. Which is to say, we returned to our increasingly incomprehensible national discourse. And that’s why I couldn’t shake my ambiguous angst. We are living in a collective cone of uncertainty.

I don't mean to say that we have all been rendered agnostic about everything. Some things are still certain, at least in the mind of God. And certain individuals certainly feel certain about certain things, whether or not those certain things are actually certain or not. The cone of uncertainty that's keeping me up at night comes from the current crisis of public truth.

Public truth is a series of consensually recognized verities that allow us to chart a collective course ahead. But public truth requires more than just agreement about this or that. It also requires a means for establishing the truth, one that is not subject to the vicissitudes of competing interests. In other words, not just an agreement about what is true, but about what is truth. And that is at the epicenter of our current crisis.

We cannot, of course, hearken back to any point in our history in which Americans were all, or even nearly all, in agreement. But I can remember a time when, more or less, if it appeared in World Book Encyclopedia it was deemed to be historically or scientifically accurate. If it appeared on the evening news it was deemed to be a substantially accurate representation of current events. If it appeared in the Bible it was deemed to be morally authoritative.

Obviously, I'm generalizing. But the point is that there used to be a much smaller number of authorities through which truth was filtered to the masses. In recent decades, however, truth has become far more democratized. That doesn't mean that public truth has simply disappeared, atomized into absolute individuality. There are a finite number of more or less viable visions of social reality at any given time, and the public tends to congregate around these ideological watering holes.

Yesterday's quasi-universal authorities have been replaced by today's ideological in-groups, each allied with their own information outlets. As a result, the reinforcement of one's own ideological in-group, rather than adherence to an independently established set of facts, has now become the primary motor of certainty. And truth is increasingly defined as whatever contributes to that certainty.

Conservative Christians have long railed against moral and religious relativism, which privatized religious certainty and secularized what passes for public truth. It now seems, however, that faith-based thinking is getting its revenge—not by bringing back a greater public consensus on religion or morality, but by supporting a skeptical counter-assault on nonspiritual authorities such as science. This counter-revolution of *cognitive relativism* seeks to level the playing field by reducing certain empirically-based truth claims to more-or-less biased conjecture designed to promote a secular agenda. In this epistemological zero sum game, any perceived success in anecdotally poking holes in scientific absolutism supposedly strengthens the case for competing convictions.

Though we do still talk about facts, we are less and less frequently referring to propositions that are more or less universally recognized as true. Instead, there are my facts and your facts and now even "alternative facts." But since broadly disputed "facts" cannot be the basis of a fruitful public discourse, we necessarily end up talking at one another and sometimes past one another—but rarely with one another. As a result, subjective certainty may actually increase within

particular communities, but on a societal level these competing certainties cancel each other out, leaving us in a collective cone of uncertainty.

Even before the rise of Donald Trump, these trends were trending. Indeed, that's one of the reasons why someone who is infamously weak on facts and infamously strong on "gut" impressions and "believe me" assurances was able to become President. But Trump has taken it to a whole new level.

Back when he was just a real estate tycoon and a TV personality, Trump's influence on our public discourse was negligible (despite his well-publicized birther campaign). But then "the Donald" became a presidential candidate, and his ill-informed riffs on all things foreign and domestic, as well as his assault on the norms of public discourse (such as schoolyard name-calling), became a media obsession. Now that Donald Trump is President Trump his incessant tweets, egotistical exaggerations, self-contradictory claims, and conveniently creative take on reality are jeopardizing the whole notion of public truth.

Here's why. There are at least three ways of establishing publically recognized truth. (I'm not talking here about philosophically valid conclusions but about human behavior.) The first is correspondence. Can we connect the dots between a statement made about the world and our experience of it? If a proposed fact corresponds with what most people observe about the world, we tend to accept it as true.

The second method is coherence. Does a proposed truth sync with or contradict our current convictions? Of course, coherence doesn't necessarily *prove* that something is true, only that it's plausible. Nevertheless, incoherence can be a very effective disqualifier. If a new assertion contradicts an accepted truth, we tend to deem it false.

A third way of establishing truth is by authority. If so and so says it, then we accept it as being true, because they know more about it than we do, and we trust them. In a world in which knowledge is expanding exponentially, authorities become increasingly necessary, because a greater and greater percentage of all that is known lies beyond the personally verifiable purview of any individual. Even religious knowledge, unless wholly mystical, relies on a revealed authority.

Some combination of these three criteria are necessary to establish both individual and communal confidence that certain things are true. But in our current environment all three are taking a thumping—or perhaps better put, a Trumping. Consider the notion of correspondence and how it is being challenged by the daily barrage of Presidential mistruths.

The Washington Post reported that as of November 13, 2017 Trump had made 1,628 false or misleading claims in his first 298 days in office. That's more than five per day—and nine per day over the last 35 days of that period. We're not talking here about simple matters of opinion but about matters of fact. Granted, this 1,628 figure includes repeat offenses, and it's possible that the Post did not always give the President the benefit of the doubt about his meaning. (Decide for yourself at www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/.) But if even half of these claims are demonstrably false, that's still overwhelming.

Every administration has made assertions that were disputed by fact-checkers. Fortunately, however, these were few and far between enough to allow for media/opposition critique and correction. But now the misinformation is so fast and furious that by the time anyone can debunk it, Trump is spouting some new falsehood, and the audience has moved on. Even outrageous untruths cease to be shocking when they cease to be exceptional.

And what of coherence, the second criteria for truth? Since, by his own admission, the President isn't much of a reader, and he doesn't seem to listen very seriously, even to his own advisers, it's unclear where he would get reliable information about the outside world. It comes, then, as no surprise that someone who is constantly shooting from the hip might have a hard time keeping his story straight. And when he changes his story, as he frequently does, he rarely concedes that there was anything wrong with version 1.0.

Trump has just as much trouble agreeing with his administration as he has agreeing with himself. It's not so much that his appointees can't stay on message. They can't even keep up with the message. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, a frequent victim of Trump's mercurial pronouncements, was asked whether his boss agreed with what the Secretary had characterized as American values. His response? "The President speaks for himself." That gets my nomination for (loaded) understatement of the year.

Even when the occupant of the nation's highest office can't or won't differentiate between fact and fantasy, and even when he offers conflicting versions of whichever option appeals to him at the time, his communication cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. What Trump says matters, even if we're not sure what it means. When a President carries on a real-time, tabloid-style commentary on current events, it's almost impossible to elevate the level of public discourse or to maintain any level of public confidence in the veracity of what we hear.

This Trumpian disdain for correspondence and coherence imperils the very possibility of public truth, driving us deeper into the cone of uncertainty. But the greatest threat may come from the way Trump interfaces with authority. He has rather systematically demeaned the authority of every public institution from science, to national intelligence, to law enforcement, to the legislative branch, to the judicial branch, and especially the media. Though all of these entities warrant our scrutiny, Trump has gone beyond healthy skepticism in the direction of delegitimization, leaving only himself as the "trust me" source of direction for the country.

About the only authority Trump hasn't attacked is the conservative religious community. It doesn't seem as if he's personally guided by their truths, but he needs their support and has generally received it. Why, though, are they so attracted to Trump? Perhaps they see in him a co-belligerent against an increasingly secular establishment. And, clearly, both Trump and his faithful supporters believe in an Ultimate Arbiter of all truth. What's not so clear is that they're talking about the same person.

Let me try to sound this alarm without being overly alarmist. Our country has weathered a lot of storms, and in all likelihood, we can weather at least one term of Trump's policies (a term I use loosely). If we're really fortunate, we might even escape without him doing something

irretrievably reckless on the international front. But if his assault on public truth and his defamation of institutional authority continue for four (or more) years, how do we avoid a cynical meltdown about the very possibility of public truth? How do we put this epistemological toothpaste back in the tube?

The human soul cannot breathe in a vacuum of uncertainty. So, I don't have much doubt that once this current storm is over, we will eventually come up for air and emerge from the cone of uncertainty. But just what kind of truth will we embrace in that dystopian future?

Will we put our trust in an über-uniter, or perhaps in an even more dangerous divider, one capable of actually marginalizing or silencing those who don't accept his or her brand of truth? Will we cease to expect any sort of truth from the top, hunkering down in our ideological bunkers, vilifying our enemies, and clinging to our self-reinforced subjective certainty? From where we currently sit inside the cone of uncertainty, the manifold possibilities look like Irma's spaghetti strings fanning out across the future.

I'd like to think that my Christian faith will find a way to engage an increasingly rudderless society with a supply of certainty from outside of our own supposed exceptionalism. But it sure seems like a long way from part of the problem to part of the solution. While the current climate may seem refreshing to some, the downside of an alliance with deceit is incalculable. Sooner or later those who distort the truth will fall into disgrace, and when that happens, you don't want to be unequally yoked to them.

Is there anything, then, that we can or should do? Let me make two simple suggestions for navigating this cone of uncertainty. First, if you see something, say something. Don't be silent or cave in to peer pressure in the face of falsehood. To condone the deconstruction of truth and truthfulness in the pursuit of a social or even a spiritual agenda, is to truly lose our way.

Saying something means using your voice in the voting booth as well. Regardless of your political persuasion, look to support a candidate who will stand up to this serial disregard for the truth—as a matter of principle and not just as a matter of partisan advantage. We can disagree about the interpretation of the facts or about the best way to respond to the realities they represent, but those who are willing to pretend that the facts don't matter or that the facts can be whatever we want them to be—those public servants do a serious disservice this nation.

My second bit of advice is this: if you see something, pray something. I must confess that I find it far easier to get on my high horse than to get on my knees. But I am trying to train myself to allow that “You've got to be kidding” reflex to prompt a prayer. I can't singlehandedly change the President or the state of the nation or the fallout from falsity. But God can, and if I lose sight of that I'm operating in the wrong Kingdom.

I wish I had a magic wand or a magic formula. I don't. Just because we say something or pray something does not mean that our current crisis of truth will vanish into thin air, magically replaced by both institutional trustworthiness and public trust. But if we do at least this small something, the future will be better than it could have been, and we will be better than we have

been. Moreover, we will be better positioned to aid in the recovery effort, once this storm has passed and this nation is set to emerge from the cone of uncertainty.

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