True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society by Farhad Manjoo

Timely And Relevant

Why has punditry lately overtaken news? Why do lies seem to linger so long in the cultural subconscious even after they've been thoroughly discredited? And why, when more people than ever before are documenting the truth with laptops and digital cameras, does fact-free spin and propaganda seem to work so well? True Enough explores leading controversies of national politics, foreign affairs, science, and business, explaining how Americans have begun to organize themselves into echo chambers that harbor diametrically different facts—not merely opinions—from those of the larger culture.

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Personal Review: True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society by Farhad Manjoo

Farhad Manjoo's True Enough, Living in a Post-Fact Society is a rarity: a quest for integrity of thought, and a quest for integrity of information. Many other books (e.g. Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives, Unscientific America: How Scientific Illiteracy Threatens our Future, and The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark) have taken vigorous and often angry stabs at the topic of delusional thinking and distortion of information, but none bury the knife in the heart of the matter as competently as Manjoo's True Enough.

Manjoo's prose is lucid and fluent in the languages of science, psychology, and politics. Rejecting the cowardice of a "well, you have your opinion, and I have the right to mine" approach (or non-approach) often used to defer the pursuit of serious inquiry, Manjoo states repeatedly that the purpose of inquiry is to arrive at the best answer achievable, an approach that necessarily excludes the weaker of competing theories. Evolution by natural selection AND intelligent design can't both be right; careful examination of the facts should elevate one explanation over the other. Careful examination of the facts, and a subsequent calm and collected judgment regarding a solution to the problem at hand, how hard can that be? Very, very hard, it becomes clear as the reader turns the pages of True Enough.

Why so hard to get at the truth? The road from collecting data to coming to an accurate conclusion, Manjoo's carefully researched book points out, is serpentine and filled with many truth-swallowing potholes. First, and paradoxically, access to reliable and vetted information in the age of Google and the internet is much harder to come by now than it was a few decades ago. If a website has a title that starts with "The Truth About...", it is an almost pathonomognic indicator that a double-click will yield you entry into looneytune territory. Click on The Truth about 9/11, the Truth about the Kennedy Assassination, The Truth about Vaccines, or Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, and then stand back as the spew of creative non-thinking gushes out like pus from a lanced boil, in giga-pixel glory.

But what if we ARE able to get our hands on accurate information, are we home free? Not even close, says Manjoo. In a fascinating exploration of the way the human brain processes information, the psychological mechanisms that we use to reinforce our chosen beliefs and deny access to threatening information, and the sociological phenomena that mold our perceptions of the world in which we live, Manjoo clearly illustrates just how rocky and arduous the road to quality truth-seeking is. True Enough, however, is neither rocky nor arduous: it is both fascinating and a wonderfully enjoyable read. Nor is it pessimistic, Manjoo's enthusiasm for the pursuit of accuracy and truth is infectious.
True Enough is jam-packed with absorbing and sometimes astounding examples of our human willingness to distort or avoid the truth, with compelling analyses of the conspiracy theories that surround 9/11, the Kennedy assassination, and the mistaken left-wing theory that the 2004 election was stolen from John Kerry in Ohio.

Most disturbing to me is something not explicitly stated by Manjoo, though his book makes the conclusion unavoidable: there is a fundamental divide between those who search for the truth, and those who PROCLAIM the truth. Those who proclaim the truth work backwards: they choose a truth, then deliberately and skillfully suborn the facts to fit. Thus did the cigarette companies roll on for half a century after it became clear that their product was a killer, thus have the opponents to health care reform and the efforts to develop a rational approach to global warming proceeded.

Far from an ideological or partisan screed, True Enough is a clarion call to all persuasions and to all reaches of the political spectrum to reject what has become known as "truthiness" and to replace it with an ardent search for carefully established truths. Manjoo's integrity and impartiality give his book an uncommon dignity and gravity. The book is absent of ridicule and condescension, which is the way a book about the search for truth is best written.

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