

Tell the Truth

Nobody asked but ...

Mark Twain wrote, “When in doubt, tell the truth.” That seems, on its face, to be simple enough, but what does it mean? We live in a land of lawyers, where what is the truth becomes more and more a matter for speculation. POTUS has labeled a whole genre of purported information as “Fake News.” But what does that mean? Does it mean news that he doesn’t like, or does it mean misinformation for which determinate proof of falsity exists?

I take a very clinical approach to the concept of truth. A fact is true or false. A fact not presently in evidence is speculation either as to the past or the future. Things that are speculative fall somewhere between wishful thinking and likelihood. “Is true” and “was true” or “will be true” are disjunct — only the first has truth, the latter two have only a degree of potential proof.

An example: the US may be contending that the Syrian incumbent government has used chemical weapons on people in its claimed territory. The action itself has passed, therefore we can only speculate as to the meaning of evidence that may remain. The truth of the evidence itself is dependent on sources of information. We are in the zone of hearsay. Who is passing the information? What is the content being passed? How (in what circumstances) is the information purported to have been created? When did an event happen? Where did an event happen? Why did the motivations involved produce the apparent facts involved?

The questions above are crucial to an understanding of the past as a representation of the facts at the time. But one can readily see how fragile each of the questions are in terms of answers that are objectively capable of revealing truth.

— Kilgore Forelle