

Post-Truth Cliques

Some commentators have suggested in recent months that we are living in a 'post-truth era', in which objective facts have become less important in influencing our opinion than appeals to emotion and personal opinion.

They have a point, of course. Consider, for example, the way in which extremist organisations are using the internet to recruit young people to their cause and to fuel prejudice and hatred. When young people go onto social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, one might suppose that they are broadening their horizons, opening themselves to a wider range of viewpoints, and allowing any narrow prejudices which they might harbour to be challenged.

Unfortunately, however, it can sometimes have the reverse affect. The network of contacts which they develop are usually comprised of those who 'like' what they 'post' or 'tweet', and who are inclined therefore to share their outlook and opinions. In the case of a young person with extremist tendencies, this can result in him or her building up an unsavoury circle of 'friends' who simply reinforce and encourage their narrow, extremist ideology. The fact that some of their beliefs bear no relation whatsoever to objective reality is to their way of thinking almost irrelevant; they belong to an internet group of contacts who think and feel as they do, and that is enough to convince them that their ideas are valid.

The networks into which some people are now being drawn are disturbing. A report published by Birmingham City University analysing tweets between January 2013 and April 2014, for example, revealed how Twitter was being used to create hostility and incite violence. One particularly extreme tweet found by researchers read "I hate Pakis, I hate Muslims. Kill them all!" The internet is a wonderful invention, and when it is used wisely and responsibly, it can expand and enrich our understanding of the world in many remarkable ways. But as we have seen, it also has the potential, if we are not careful, to reinforce a narrow and distorted outlook.

All of us need to be aware of this danger. The average Facebook user, for example, apparently has 1,500 potential updates from friends and liked pages every time they log on, but because viewing these updates would be overwhelming, Facebook uses an algorithm to cut them down to just 300. This small selection is made on the basis of our apparent interests (the sites we view) and on what we and our friends 'like' or post, so whilst we may think that what we are viewing on our newsfeeds is all that there is to see, in reality we are only being fed what Facebook has decided we *want* to see.

It seems that we can be drawn into narrow, like-minded cliques not only through normal social gatherings within the community, but also through the world-wide web. Such cliques can often (unwittingly perhaps) either conceal from us truths which we need to hear, or hinder us from sharing insights with others. As servants of the God of Truth and messengers of the good news of his love in Jesus, let us be on our guard against this and do what we can to overcome it – to break free of those comfort zones in which we have become imprisoned. God will certainly be wanting us to do this. For as St Paul rightly observes, "... the word of God cannot be chained". (2 Timothy 2:9) *HB*