

Truth, Education and email Circulation
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My friend Andrea just forwarded me one of those emails that circulate the web. You know the ones. This particular one was about McDonalds buying beef from Argentina that might be unsafe. (Turns out, they are not buying it from Argentina, but rather New Zealand which has stricter regulation and so is probably safer). I did what I usually do: I went to snopes - the urban legends web page - and looked it up. As I've already said, the email was not quite factually correct. My other friend Brian beat me to the punch on the snopes citation, and we all had a good laugh.

I am frequently (unless Brian beats me to it) the one to point out the fallacies in these emails. Indeed, I think I have even offended some, and I suspect at times my tone is one of some disdain. Why do I care? I think the reason is that I put a high value on Truth. I'm sure a lot of you immediately agree with me, "oh yes, truth is important." But I'm afraid many have gotten complacent. Some even believe that truth might depend upon your perspective. The complacency and even downright disregard for actual facts is, I think, one of the most serious problems in our society.

Jefferson pointed out that a key to successful Democracy is a well informed electorate. Indeed, he was so committed to this idea that he founded the University of Virginia. In some ways, I feel that it is my job, as member of the faculty at a Public University, to point out falsehood and partial truths. But I also think that the people have a responsibility to take the time to inform themselves.

We effect our society though the many decisions we make every day. It's not just in November, when we vote, but today when you choose whether to buy a particular product. It's tomorrow when you meet with your PTA or decide which organization to give your precious volunteer time. When we fail to seek out the truth and make decisions based not upon the relevant facts, but upon half truths and misconceptions, our society will suffer.

Economic models (you knew it had to be coming) show that the ideal of the competitive market will work to allocate resources for the good of society. But a key component of the competitive market is that the people making the decisions have full information. When we fail to be open to information, or simply take facts that support our opinions, we derail that allocation and we waste our resources. This isn't just something our politicians do - it's something we do when we make poor choices in the market place as well as in the voting booth.

Jack Madoff (ironically pronounced "made off") was able to bilk people out of their money in large part because people didn't check facts. It's quite apparent now that anyone who really looked at the situation should have been able to see that there was no way his claims were true. People who bought houses that they now can't afford didn't check their facts either. They believed - mostly because they wanted to - that they could afford a big new house. They didn't really take the time to understand the loans they were getting or the risk they were taking. Lenders wanted high return investments. They wanted to believe that these investments didn't carry risk and so they didn't check facts.

Ultimately it is our responsibility to be informed. To separate facts from opinions. To form our opinions based upon reality. I also argue that we have a responsibility to educate. Not obfuscate. Rather than passing along some claim, take the time to see if it's true. Be an educator. Because ultimately, as Jefferson knew, our democratic society will only succeed if we are educated.