

Parting shot

Scholars involved in evidence-based policy research are sure to be concerned when “alternative facts” and “fake news” take over the agenda.

BY THAT, I MEAN more than just selection of the facts in a biased way. This is commonplace, and the expert’s task has always been to sift the data to correct for such biases. A more difficult problem is how to respond to alternative facts that are fabricated, although outrageously different from the truth, because that’s what their authors think *ought* to be true.

Alternative facts of the made-up kind are not new. As the economist Ed Glaeser once wrote, fabricated stories have typically spread through society in conditions of depression or defeat, when there is a popular thirst for explanation. Why has this happened and who is to blame? Foreigners, minority groups, and corporate interests can quickly become the target of “fake news” that points an accusing finger at the “enemies of the people.”

Alternative facts can emerge in any society, including liberal democracies. But the most diligent promoters of alternative facts are dictators, who are armed with the power to suppress the truth. Authoritarian rulers do this both to build support, and to expose covert resistance. Communist regimes, for example, required everyone, including experts, to salute fictitious achievements. To show scepticism or just indifference was not an option.

Exactly 80 years ago, in the spring and summer of 1937, Soviet statisticians were being arrested and imprisoned or shot because the facts they produced were in conflict with alternative facts that their rulers had authorised.

At the end of 1926, the Soviet population had been enumerated at 147 million. In the mid-1930s, to demonstrate the happy progress of Soviet society, Stalin announced an alternative fact: the population was growing every year by three million. On that basis, by the beginning



of 1937, the population should have gained around 30 million people.

The 1937 census showed only half the expected increase: 15 million were missing. Why? The regime had to choose among explanations. In secret, some experts reported that Stalin’s alternative fact was wrong. There were more deaths than Stalin projected, because millions had starved, or were shot or died in prison, or fled the country. There were also fewer births, millions fewer, as a result.

More loyal officials offered another explanation: the census did not confirm Stalin’s alternative fact because it was captured by traitors, who aimed to discredit the

party. Stalin waited a few weeks, then decided. Those who went with the facts disappeared, along with the census. Those who went with the alternative facts were promoted, and their explanation was released to the public.

This story has two messages. On the side of

pessimism, it shows that the logic of alternative facts can be self-sustaining. When experts refute the alternative facts, the believers are likely to blame them as enemies, whose aim is to confuse and undermine society.

I am also an optimist. In the age of social media no information can be suppressed for decades. Yes, tyrants and despots can exploit social media to spread lies and to identify critics. Nonetheless, more scope exists today for truth-tellers in Russia and China, let alone in the West, than there ever was under Stalin or Hitler. ◀

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