

Castles in the sand



By Nate Smelle

For most of my life I have been an advocate of free speech. While covering the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years, my personal interpretation of this ideal has been put to the test on a weekly basis. As editor, this means reading each letter and press release that lands in my inbox, or on the office doorstep. Not only must each piece of correspondence be read, they each also must be checked carefully to ensure that they are not disseminating false information that could jeopardize the public's health and welfare.

Throughout the pandemic this task has become more tedious with the massive influx of misinformation being shared for strategic purposes. Now that we are about two years into this perpetually worsening disaster, most of the time these twisted false truths can be spotted before opening an email or envelope. Since our crystal ball has been out of commission for some time now, we have come to rely on our investigative skills to solve such mysteries.

The first clue is always found in the name attached to the correspondence. Although the list of folks spreading alternatives to facts has grown along with the death toll from COVID-19, it has not become so long that one can overlook the name of a usual suspect. Still, to give everyone a fair shot at getting their work published in a big time publication like Bancroft This Week, each letter and email must be read.

If the name does not raise the red flags, the tone of the subject line also tells a story of the writer's intention. On many occasions, the misinformation is hidden strategically in the actual letter or press release though, so any flags one notices or doesn't notice are just a step in the process.

Often there are links included with the text that lead to a source. Here is where the real investigation begins, because every source of factual information, or intentional misinformation can be traced.

The process of following each of these rabbit holes to see where they go is usually a hilarious endeavour that inevitably fails to convince you that former U.S. President John F. Kennedy will rise from the grave like Charlie Brown's Great Pumpkin to reinstate another orange demon as Commander-in-Chief. As outrageously funny as such claims may be, not all the correspondence we receive is harmless.

Luckily, anyone faced with this task regularly learns to keep an eye out for the threatening letters that pop up every now and then.

Although some might consider my take on this 'free speech' to be too rigid, I stand by my decision not to knowingly pass along information that is factually incorrect or misleading.

To our advantage as a species and a society, COVID-19 has irreversibly illuminated that we are all interconnected by the air, water, and earth. And, therefore, because we share this inherent bond, we all must rely on accurate information for our survival as we navigate the challenges and crises before us.

While enjoying a little rest and relaxation over the holidays, I somehow began researching how the pandemic has further eroded our social structures. Immersed in this investigation one afternoon, I came across an interview between the world-renowned linguist, author, and political dissident Noam Chomsky and Democracy Now co-host Nermeen Shaikh that gave me deeper insight into the crossroads at which we stand. Their interview can be found online under the heading, Noam Chomsky: Corporate Patents and Rising Anti-Science Rhetoric Will Prolong Pandemic. I highly recommend anyone who is sick and tired of COVID-19 ? especially those who believe it to be a government conspiracy that is no more dangerous than the common cold ? to tune in.

During the conversation, the 93-year-old MIT Professor Emeritus explained how dangerous the anti-science rhetoric being spread under the guise of free speech truly is to our survival. Acknowledging that he understands the reason for some people's skepticism towards ?Big Pharma,? Chomsky said he considers the attitudes of skepticism about global warming to be even more perilous for the future of humanity and life on this planet.

?One shocking fact that I learned recently is that during the Trump years, among Republicans a belief that global warming is a serious problem ? not even an urgent problem, just a serious problem ? declined about 20 per cent,? said Chomsky. ?That's very serious. Here we're talking not just about the spread of a pandemic, but about marching over the precipice, and ending the prospects for sustained, organized human life. That's the kind of thing we're facing. Well, you can talk about the origins of the skepticism, but it has to be dealt with and overcome; and very decisively, and without delay. Or else the whole human species, and all the others that we are casually destroying, will be in severe danger.?

Listening to Chomsky, it is clear why each and every one of us need to do the best we can to filter out the sources of misinformation threatening our existence. Without a foundation of scientific facts, our future will become but a castle of cards built in the sand.