True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society, by Farhad Manjoo. 

Reviewed by Seth Kershner

The truth that fails to persuade is a subject that receives a great deal of attention in Farhad Manjoo’s new book on media bias in a fragmented world, True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society. The focus for Manjoo, who has here written his first book since retiring from Slate, is not on the media figures themselves. That is a subject that has been mined by writers on both sides of the political spectrum who claim that media institutions and personages are themselves the perpetrators of bias. Rather, as one reviewer aptly put it, Manjoo zags while the others zig, focusing instead on those who watch the news. This approach provides a compelling counterpoint to accusers of media bias like Bernard Goldberg and Eric Alterman. In fact, the author states in the introduction to his book that he intends to write a story about the media system: namely, those who consume the media. The system works in this way: Media-consumers, being human, are endowed with the innate prejudices that make bias an unconscious reflex. What we might call the corporate media simply see a profit to be made in pandering to these biases, while providing a truthy coating of journalistic integrity in order to reassure consumers and ultimately capture a greater share of the market. Note the irony here: the media “system” is everyman. The corporate media who are normally regarded as the “system” bent on winning wars or losing wars (choose your bias) come out as merely opportunistic.

To illustrate the kinds of perceptual prejudices media consumers are prone to, Manjoo’s first chapter – “‘Reality’ is Splitting” – cites the now-famous study of football fans at Princeton and Dartmouth. After watching film of a hotly contested game between the two teams, researchers Hadley Cantril and Albert Hastorf found that fans came away with radically different impressions of what occurred on the gridiron. Princeton fans were convinced that Dartmouth footballers had deliberately injured their star running back, Dick Kazmaier. On the other side, Dartmouth students who watched the film saw a clean game and accused the Princeton supporters of too much whining. This study from 1951 is still regarded as the example par excellence of what is known in the social sciences literature as “selective perception.” This is not merely to say that people have different attitudes about the same thing. That would be a truism. The crux of Cantril and Hastorf’s conclusion almost borders on the metaphysical: “the ‘thing’ simply is not the same for different people whether the ‘thing’ is a football game, a presidential candidate, Communism, or spinach.” This conclusion
underwrites much of Manjoo’s own thesis, which is that people in the United States no longer just hold differing opinions on matters like the economy. Today, in a digital age that now more than ever is able to carve up the world into ideological niches, the citizens of this country adhere to competing “versions of reality.” A third of Americans still believe Sadaam Hussein had a hand in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Less than half believe the science linking global warming to human activities. It’s enough to make a progressive librarian dizzy. However, in his two final chapters Manjoo’s narrative takes a turn that opens up opportunities for agents of change to get to work within the library field.

Along the way, Manjoo cites more studies that highlight the human desire to “tune out” dissonant thoughts and information. Moreover, the author argues that the Web enables its users to select social groups on the basis of this “selective exposure.” In a particularly compelling chapter, entitled “The Twilight of Objectivity,” Manjoo discusses what scholars call the “hostile media phenomenon,” which is basically shorthand for the inclination among partisans to perceive even-handed treatment of an issue (by, say, a reporter) as “biased.” This tendency springs from the notion — also backed up by research in this brilliant book — that humans assume that their views are essentially objective. Therefore anyone who disagrees must be an unreasonable person. At this point in the game, the corporate media understand very well that they can turn a hefty profit by tailoring their news to a biased audience, to — as the author puts it — “satisfy audiences in a culture of niches.” In fact, one of the more interesting discussions in this book centers on CNN’s Lou Dobbs, a news anchor who has arguably been the most successful in giving his audience exactly what they want to hear.

Having limned his dim vision of Truth’s fate in the “trillion channel universe,” Manjoo turns to a different topic in the final chapter, “‘Truthiness’ Everywhere.” Here he describes the larger cultural ramifications of Truth’s dismal rating, caused — paradoxically — by greater connectivity and greater access to information. A de-centered media environment where viewers can choose between “Red news and Blue news” has engendered a most appropriate venue for the public relations industry. From pundits who shill for the Bush administration to front groups for Big Tobacco, paid propagandists have exploited the power of the internet to produce a patina of authority in order to “sell lies softly.” Manjoo demonstrates how this process works as he compares the persuasive techniques of yesteryear — heavy-handed, direct and in-your-face — to the embedded marketing and product placement of today. The forces of advertising and public relations have taken the dark art of lying underground — and practiced it all around, to the point, he says, where “one has to ask, is it really even a lie anymore?”

Librarians are those who are on the front lines in this contest for the purity of the public mind, fielding questions from users who may need help in detecting lies and covert propaganda. Those who commit to uncovering the lies that dwell within “the Twilight of Objectivity” — lies that send young men to war and elect unaccountable leaders — may do well to work with
the resources produced by the Center for Media and Democracy. This non-profit advocacy group runs a useful wiki at www.prwatch.org, where users can contribute to a common understanding of the public relations industry. This Website and the books produced by the site's founders together make an excellent starting point for patrons who ask at the reference desk, What's a video news release? By providing access to better information and alerting patrons to the "soft lies" of a certain resource, librarians can continue to – as Kathleen de la Peña McCook has put it – "offer the soil in which truth grows.""

Notes

2. Authors, respectively, of Bias: a CBS insider exposes how the media distort the news (New York: Perennial, 2003) and What Liberal Media: the truth about bias and the news (New York: Basic, 2003.)