



# Alternative facts or alternative interpretations?

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**John Sprague** provides a TOK perspective on the furore around 'alternative facts'

The concept of 'alternative facts' was offered by Kellyanne Conway, the US president's former campaign manager. She attempted to clarify comments by Sean Spicer, the president's press secretary, about how many people attended Trump's inauguration. Spicer said, seemingly in contrast to all the available evidence, that the inauguration audience 'was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period'. Under fire soon after this, Conway suggested that Spicer had simply provided 'alternative facts'.

## TOK ambassador?

As a TOK teacher, my first reaction was so say, 'of course there are alternative facts'. The basic starting point of TOK is that different areas of knowledge (AOKs) will construct knowledge in different ways. We accept different approaches in history and psychology. The construction of ethical principles and the application of these principles can vary widely. Even in the natural sciences, TOK students learn that from time to time scientific knowledge undergoes **paradigm shifts** where new theories are developed, which ultimately say different things about the world. The mission statement of the International Baccalaureate itself suggests that 'other people, with their differences, can also be right'.

My second thought was, 'my God, what have we done?' In my experience as a TOK teacher, I've found



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that one of the first philosophical positions on truth that many students take is that there is none. Does TOK reinforce this? Is TOK a witness to truth, or have I been adding to the naive relativism already so rampant in students and, seemingly, in presidential apologists?

## Activity 1

Before reading on, think about how what you know about TOK might help to make sense of the question of what 'alternative facts' are and whether they are true. What AOK would you say would be most useful here, and how might that AOK help in an analysis?

## Fact or fiction?

So let's apply TOK thinking to this case. Spicer was describing an event which, however recent, was in the past, never to be repeated. He was therefore constructing historical knowledge, something Oxford historian R. G. Collingwood says 'stands in particular relationship to something called evidence'. Even though Collingwood also calls history a constructive reconstruction, historians must have *evidence* for their claims and enough of it if they are going to offer anything more than an imaginative fiction: 'the historian's picture is meant to be true.'

During the ensuing discussion of Spicer's facts, those loyal to President Trump suggested that nobody counted the number of people, thus suggesting that a precise measurement was impossible. This is clearly related to the **fallacy from ignorance**, which, in this case, would suggest that the fact we can't measure precisely that the audience *wasn't* the biggest is itself evidence that it was. This offers no logical weight to any 'alternative fact' Spicer wants to make up.

The *New York Times* has a good summary of how crowds are counted ([www.tinyurl.com/hybqavn](http://www.tinyurl.com/hybqavn)). After even the most cursory TOK analysis of Spicer's claim, we can see that while Spicer might *think* all sorts of things, some of them are, based on all available evidence, simply mistaken. TOK, far from giving ground to those wishing to claim the absence of 'fact', ultimately offers clarity to the discussion. Rather than saying 'alternative fact', Conway should have suggested that Spicer had offered an 'alternative interpretation of the evidence'. Had she been a TOK student, she could have added, 'which is patently false.'

## Activity 2

The media is full of worries about 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'. Choose one of the many contentious claims that have been offered in the media. Identify the AOK from which the knowledge claim arises. Consider how the scope and application and methodology of that AOK can be used to decide whether you would consider those news stories 'reliable'. Consider also the role of the ways of knowing (WOKs), background beliefs and the role of authority.

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