Impossible Days and Simple Texts

ROBERT E. PROBST

If I had known what lay ahead, I might have titled it “You Ain’t Seen Nuthin’ Yet.”

At the time, “Difficult Days and Difficult Texts” seemed like the right title. September 11, 2001, had been an extremely difficult day, and it led to many more. The difficult days became difficult weeks, then months, then years, and the traumatic events seemed to have no end. And all of those events came to most of us through texts of one sort or another—articles, essays, speeches, reports, photographs, videos. Only a few of us were there to witness the planes hitting the towers and the Pentagon or the bombs falling on Baghdad in retaliation. Whatever we learned of those troublesome times we learned through texts, some of them difficult to read and difficult to interpret.

Those were difficult texts in part because they dealt with such troubling events—mass murder and misdirected revenge—but perhaps also because they caused us to lose control over the process of reading. Rage exerted a grip on us when we needed reason; anger supplanted analysis. Loyalties and antipathies gripped us more tightly than evidence and logic. Thus our political leaders sent troops and bombs to a country that apparently had little or nothing to do with the attacks. The countries from which the attackers had come either had no good targets or had close political and economic affiliations with the United States. We were so outraged that we had to strike someone, anyone.

We probably didn’t read—or listen, or watch—with the disciplined attention to reason and evidence that we might have hoped for and that good teachers work for. Our anger and lack of discipline were understandable, if not admirable, and forgivable in all except those who might have chosen to ride the wave of sentiment for their own personal or political gain rather than redirect that energy into thoughtful examination of both the events and the texts that presented them. A great many teachers worked during that period to help their students read those texts responsibly.

It wasn’t easy to do. Some of the texts, especially the videos, looked so much more like the special effects of well-crafted Hollywood films than like documentary footage of actual events that it was hard for some children to see them as anything but scenes from another disaster movie. They may have watched the videos of the planes hitting the towers in New York just as they watched the fictional disasters in Armageddon or Independence Day. For other viewers, the same video records evoked such intense fearful or angry responses that it was almost impossible to think rationally about them. They were difficult texts, and the distinctions we might have tried to make between fiction and nonfiction, between opinion and reportage, between emotional reaction and thoughtful reflection, may not have helped enough.

Those texts seemed to offer as much difficulty for adults as they did for our young students. Some adults, even some adults in positions of power and responsibility, seemed content to be ruled by outrage and guided by political expediency, rather than make any attempt to reason about the events at hand. But most of us, we had to think, were working to understand. Most of us were asking, “What happened?” “What caused it?” “What do we do about it?” Many of the texts—some, at least, as I remember them—were either straightforward reports about what happened or honest efforts to understand. Some, of course, were politically motivated efforts to curry favor with an outraged constituency or to otherwise project the appearance deemed necessary by the speaker or writer. But some accepted the invitation texts offer to sit quietly, reflect on what is said, and bring reason to bear on the events recounted.

Few of us, I would like to think, could look forward to the sorts of texts we have to deal with today. In the days following 9/11 we had to be skeptical about text, assessing as carefully as we could the motivations of writers and the logic of their arguments. We even had to be willing to dismiss some of those texts and their authors as self-aggrandizing or dishonest, and we probably did so with some pain and regret. But I think we knew how to deal with such texts and how to teach our students to...
deal with them. There was, after all, something normal about texts that somewhat distorted the truth in order to persuade readers. We could teach students the sorts of questions that would enable them to deal with those texts:

> What might the author’s purpose be in saying what he is saying?
> What evidence does the author offer to support what she says?
> What confirmation of these ideas do I find in other responsible sources?
> Given the answers to those questions, what judgments can I make about the author’s motivations, evidence, and reasoning?

The reader’s world may have grown slightly more complicated and confusing in the past several years, and those questions, alone, may no longer be adequate. The teacher’s job, consequently, may have grown more difficult. What are some of our problems now?

Curiously, one of the problems is that the difficulties the reader faces may have grown less subtle than they were before. For example, readers always had to be alert to the subtle intrusion of bias, the concealed motivations of the author, and the omissions or distortions that might shape the casual and careless reader’s reactions to a text. All of these are now, in some texts at least, more obvious.

There is, for example, “the obvious groundless assertion.” What should readers do if they hear, within mere hours of the tragedy, a statement like, *We are 100% certain the airliner was brought down by terrorists*? If such a statement were to be made before the investigation had even begun, we could dismiss it as lunatic raving. When the possibilities are still open—a fuel leak, an electrical problem, a fight between the pilots in the cockpit, sabotage by an unhappy airline employee, a freak weather disturbance, the failure of a defective bolt unnoticed by inspectors, a terrorist’s bomb, or a collision with a high-flying penguin, to name a few—to assert that you are “100% certain” that it is one rather than another is simply to announce your idiocy to the world.

And yet it has grown possible that such an assertion might be made. And that it would be allowed to stand, without apology. And—worse—readers and listeners who might be made. And that it would be allowed to stand, is simply to announce your idiocy to the world.

There is also, closely related to the first, “the obvious absence of evidence.” It is conceivable, for example, that someone might claim that he had been the victim of illegal wiretapping. Such a statement is not obviously groundless—after all, we would expect that such a claim would only be made if the person responsible for it is aware of evidence that sustains it. A rational reader or listener would ask the obvious question—What’s your evidence for that assertion?—and would expect the speaker or writer to provide the evidence, tell us where it might be found, or retract and apologize for the claim.

But what are we to do if the speaker persists in the lie, refusing either to retract the statement or to offer the evidence? Such a response is, of course, inconceivable, or should be. And yet, in the past several years the inconceivable has become not only conceivable but actual. Individuals have, in public, without apparent shame, made claims like the outrageous example offered here and have then ignored the requests that they say something, anything, about the evidence upon which it is based.

And then there is what might be called “false labeling.” Perhaps it is little more than name-calling. Over the past several years an industry has emerged devoted to the invention of fictitious nonfiction—invented stories posing as news but designed to make money by attracting viewers and catering to their ignorance and bias. These stories are subtle and persuasive enough to draw in the careless reader. Sadly, too many of our readers are careless. Instead of reading this “fake news” and laughing, they read it and take it seriously. They allow it to inform them about the world, and, consequently, what they “know” about the world is largely wrong.

Unfortunately, readers gullible and lazy enough to be taken in by fake news are also vulnerable to the relabeling of real news as “fake.” We would expect readers, upon discovering that something they had read was invention posing as reporting, to reject the source of that misinformation or at least to grow cautious and skeptical of what they find there. We would expect graduates of one of our schools to become slightly suspicious of anything that confirmed too easily what they already believed or that contradicted too radically what they thought to be true. We may have taught our youngest readers to extract information from texts, but surely, as they matured, moving into middle and high school, we exposed them to less trustworthy texts.
and taught them to approach such texts cautiously, questioningly, willing to be persuaded if the evidence was strong but willing to reject the text if it did nothing but appeal to prejudice or emotion. If they have slipped through, however, still willing to be misled by fake news, then they are likely to be equally misled by the false labeling of real news as fake.

So it is conceivable that an unethical politician might simply seize upon the term “fake news” and paste that label on legitimate news sources. Unethical and immoral as that would be, it might prove to be effective, at least with those readers who have managed to preserve their naïveté and gullibility.

The problem teachers have in the current climate, it seems to me, is that the most important teaching they have to do has political overtones and thus makes those teachers vulnerable. If there actually were a political figure capable of making such outrageous statements as I have suggested here, any attention to the lack of evidence, to the failures of reasoning, to the appeals to political loyalty, or to the other intellectual and ethical failings might be seen as taking a political stance rather than simply as an investigation of language and how it functions.

More than ever before we have to acknowledge that there may be political implications in the study of language. That has probably always been obvious, but I suspect that we’ve kept quiet about it. We’ve taught our students to provide evidence for their assertions and to examine evidence offered in the claims of others, but our examples in the past were probably less sensitive or inflammatory. Today, it is virtually impossible to think about the issue of evidence without having contemporary political events and figures leap to mind. We’ve considered honesty and distortion in writing, but the unreliable narrator in a work of fiction is a less touchy topic than a dishonest political figure in high office. And, again, it is virtually impossible to think about the unreliable narrator without having real, living, public figures leap at us from the front pages of the newspapers and the broadcasts of the television news programs.

I don’t know if the days, the texts, and the teaching have become more difficult or not. In some ways, our job may have grown easier. Suitable examples of language use and abuse are certainly available in a profusion we have seldom witnessed. The examples of distortion and outright lying are glaringly obvious and thus easy to point out and analyze. But there are sensitivities and political dimensions that we probably have yet to figure out. That may be our challenge for the years to come.

2017 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE’s 2017 elections, College Section member Leah Zuidema, Dordt College, Sioux Center, IA, was chosen Vice President. Elected to a two-year term as Middle Level Representative-at-Large was Aurelia Davila de Silva, SAWP Community Center, San Antonio, TX.

The Middle Level Section also elected new members. Elected to a four-year term on the Steering Committee were Kate Roberts, Brooklyn, NY, and Zanetta Robinson, Thurgood Marshall Fundamental Middle School, St. Petersburg, FL. Elected to the 2017–18 Nominating Committee were Chad Everett, Horn Lake Middle School, MS, chair; Jill Adams, Metropolitan State University, Denver, CO; and Sarah Bonner, Heyworth Jr/Sr High School, Heyworth, IL.

See additional 2017 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2018 elections on the NCTE website (http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections).