



Separating science from fiction, a college's duty

UCLA leaders weigh in on disinformation and the role higher education can play in ensuring better outcomes that give the public real, accurate guidance.

By: **Chris Burt** | January 20, 2021



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The United States officially welcomes in a new president today in Joe Biden, a change that could spark unity ... or sow more divide. Overcoming the latter will be one of the administration's biggest challenges as discord and disinformation reign into 2021.

The growing embrace of “post-truth” – the belief in alternative facts, or fiction over science –threatens to not only further undercut democracy but also the future of higher education. From the acceptance of conspiracy theories to the backing of those who deliver false information, millions of Americans are choosing their own realities, while casting aside facts and relevant research.

According to Gene Block, Chancellor at UCLA, this is a crisis moment for colleges and universities.

“The very idea of facts, empirical evidence and objective truth has been undermined,” Block said during a recent webinar presented by the university. “We see attacks on professionals like scientists, journalists and civil servants who use facts to solve problems, save lives and hold institutions accountable. We see it in certain approaches to climate change, COVID-19 and other pressing issues of our time. As a university committed to the public service, it’s our duty to help restore trust, counter misinformation and build common frames of reference. This is no simple task, especially given the deepening distrust of colleges and universities themselves.”

Block pointed to a 2019 Pew Research Center study that showed half of U.S. citizens believe higher ed institutions are having a negative effect on the country’s outcomes.

With that in mind, UCLA leaders gathered for a discussion on how colleges and universities can react in this challenging time and be beacons for strong research and truth. In its session “Looking Ahead: Science, Facts and the Public Debate”, professors Ursula Heise, Gilbert Gee and Safiya Noble tackled several topics, including public health and the pandemic, climate change, racial and social equity and disinformation.

Getting out knowledge

Gee, a professor and researcher in UCLA’s Department of Community Health Sciences at the Fielding School of Public Health, said consistent messaging is an important variable in boosting trust in a university. He pointed specifically to the reaction of leaders after the pandemic struck last year.

“COVID hit us really quickly, and we knew very little about the specifics of the disease,” he said. “Everyone, including experts, were giving their best guesses. There’s a lot of expertise that we share within academics and medicine but also a lot of expertise within the community that we should listen to carefully. What we really needed was leadership that was consistent, sensible, and given the early state of knowledge, weighed the pros and cons of various responses with responsibility.”

Otherwise, without the proper guidance, individuals can be left to their own devices ... and the internet.

“When people don’t have the kinds of institutional supports that they need, they have to self-diagnose. They will use all kinds of other information resources,” said Noble, associate professor of information studies and African-American studies. “When the public is talking about being flooded with anti-vax disinformation, non-factual information, it’s important to understand them not having access to other forms of information and knowledge through trusted, reliable sources.”

Noble said individuals are thus prone to being “preyed upon”. As the co-founder of the Center of Critical Internet Inquiry, she has seen firsthand the impact of a rogue tech sector. “When you talk about profitability, disinformation is some of the most profitable kinds of content there is on the internet.”

The pandemic has provided the ultimate litmus test for the spread of disinformation during the pandemic, mask-wearing being a prime example. Though guidelines initially stated masks may not prevent COVID spread, it was clear after months that masks did help. Still, not everyone has jumped on board. That's because the time it takes to do research can be frustrating to outsiders who yearn for answers, according to Heise, a professor in the Department of English and at UCLA's Institute of the Environment and Sustainability.

"Knowledge is evolving, and science is a process for getting out knowledge," she said.

"That's something that we need to maybe emphasize more at the university. Science is working on finding facts, but it doesn't have a set of facts that once they're found, are unalterable."

Gee agreed and said universities can do more to emphasize that changes in information are natural and "a byproduct of the research that people do." Heise also said universities should be more transparent about the process, not only for public health but also environmental studies and sciences.

"That would make people trust more in science," she said.

A climate of disinformation

Chon Noriega, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center who works in the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media, said universities play a role in helping promote literacy through access to information. Its Asian American Study Centers, for example, offers a hub of resources on COVID-19 that can be translated into a number of languages.

Those types of initiatives and the outreach that go with them can help universities relay factual and timely information on a number of hot-button topics. Many of those in underserved communities, for example, are being adversely affected by the pandemic and lack the resources and truthful information necessary to make informed decisions. Accurate responses from colleges such as UCLA can help bridge gaps.

"COVID-19 has really shown us what the lack of investment in systems of care will do," Noble said. "I think our faculty at UCLA have had some really important statements about health disparity and why we need to think about improving our systems of care."

One other notable area rife with disinformation that affects those communities and others is climate change, an area of expertise for Heise. She said there is a continuous "contestation" of facts across the globe because of political and financial interests or human activities. From the fossil fuel industry spreading falsehoods to leaders simply discounting basic facts and denying climate change is happening, the amount of bad information on the environment has spread like wildfire.

“For companies, it’s their profits that go down the drain if they admit these facts,” Heise said. “Even when it is actively a case of denying scientific facts, the actual issue is livelihoods and profits. ... There’s actually very few of the climate change denialists who have actually looked in depth at climate science. The conflict is over what would happen if we did something about it. So just talking about the about communication of scientific facts in some ways misses the point. This is also about power and justice and inequality and about cultural traditions.”

A critical approach

Piggybacking on Heise’s statement, Noriega said: “That’s where the university comes into play in a very dynamic and necessary way while being primarily addressed within a medical or scientific framework. You’ve seen the different disciplines come in and put their perspective to bear,” he said. “I had colleagues in other parts of the campus beginning to look at the social disparities as well as what was happening in public health where that kind of interdisciplinary framework is kind of baked into the school.”

But Heise offered a critique of how higher education has responded to various crises and the dissemination of research to the public.

“There are lots of changes that universities need to make,” she said. “One way in which that interaction has been framed over the past decade is in the information-deficit model, the idea that the experts know what’s really going on with health and with the environment. To the extent that the public disagrees, we have to educate and inform them, and then they will change their mind. And that hasn’t worked well.

“That doesn’t mean that that knowledge deficit doesn’t exist. But emphasizing that often leaves out other rationality and knowledge. A lot of scientists and other experts who have a cultural knowledge deficit – that is they’re very well trained in the sciences – don’t understand how scientific facts are filtered, reconstructed and embedded.”

She recommends that all scientists and engineers learn at least one other language and other traditions to understand the dynamics happening within communities they are researching.

“It’s not just the people out there who need to know more, it’s also that the scientists need to know a bit more culture and history,” she said.

Gee agreed and said universities can take the lead to ensure their research and the information they are passing along are well-placed and accurate.

“We forget about the harms we’ve done in trying to do research,” he said. “We really underestimate how woefully ignorant we are about a lot of these broader issues. We need to do a better job of educating ourselves.”

Bridging the divide

With a large percentage of the public buying bad information – whether it comes from leaders or social media – UCLA leaders say universities can do their part to help.

“We see ourselves as public servants,” Noble said. “We understand when corporations cherry-pick researchers to do scientific work that’s favorable to them. ... For us, the imperatives are not profit motive. As a social scientist, it’s thinking about the people who are most likely to be harmed – people who don’t have access to all the goods and services and largess of our society.”

Noble believes the tech sector, for one, has played a huge part in the dissemination of disinformation.

“The biggest threat to democracy is the tech sector and its kind of lawlessness. Its lack of accountability to the public is profound,” she said. “I try to remind my students and people that I interact with that listen, there’s a more complex way of coming to understand the world we live in than simply tapping on a piece of glass and looking for a fact.”

Noble has urged policymakers to both regulate big tech and keep funding churning for K-12 and higher education, otherwise those checks and balances will disappear.

“If you defund universities, K-12, libraries and public media, what are the democratic institutional counterweights?” Noble asks. “Certainly the university is not a perfect place. But I think that the public should trust in people who have given their lives to caring about the public and knowledge and education more than they should trust advertising companies, who are printing trillions of dollars off of some of the most egregious atrocious kinds of information they can get their hands on.”

Heise pointed to the climate change dissenters as well, saying: “Let’s stop subsidizing the activities and the policies that are harmful. A lot of the stuff that harms us has been actively subsidized by the government. So, there’s a certain kind of weird socialism that we’ve always lived in, that is sometimes being denied.”

Noriega said a broad brush view of who and where the information is coming can help point to the truth.

“It’s really important to look behind the curtain of the facts to understand where they’re coming from, and toward what ends they’re being developed,” he said. “It’s not to say they’re all insidious or questionable, but it’s part of the process of having the literacy to make sense of them.”