

# TRUTH

A year-long conversation about knowledge crises  
& politics from humanistic perspectives

ALICE KAPLAN INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANITIES  
Northwestern University

A Truth Dialogues Report/Reflection

*Disbelieving our eyes: How do we judge in a democracy?*

by [Adina Goldman](#)

Franke Undergraduate Fellow of the Kaplan Humanities Institute

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## **Democratic Judgment in an Age of “Alternative Facts”**

(Linda Zerilli—October 23, 2017)

There is an old joke in which a woman happens upon her husband in the act of committing adultery. He sees her, and asks, “Who are you gonna believe, me or your eyes?”

Linda Zerilli, a political philosopher at the University of Chicago, believes that this is precisely the bait-and-switch that then-press secretary Sean Spicer pulled after President Trump’s inauguration last January. At the time, Spicer stated that many more people had come to Trump’s inauguration than to Obama’s—a claim that seemed easily refutable based on photographic evidence. Spicer was asking people to disbelieve their own eyes.

In Zerilli’s “Truth Dialogue” lecture on October 23, she used this anecdote to demonstrate her concern with the workings of judgment in democratic societies. In her 2016 book, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Zerilli explores judgment in the work of many philosophers and political theorists, but especially the unfinished writings of mid-twentieth-century German-Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt.

Arendt realized that in the world in which she lived, received categories and modes of understanding had broken down. Like many of her generation, she was faced with the question,

“How can we judge without any obvious intellectual moorings on which to ground our judgments?”

But Arendt believed that this question itself was misguided. She wrote in *Introduction to Politics* that the loss of standards is “a catastrophe in the moral world only if one assumes that people are actually incapable of... making original judgments, and that the most we can demand is the correct application of familiar rules derived from already established standards.”

Since many philosophers argue that a set of external universal standards is necessary for judgment, Zerilli thinks Arendt’s contention—that we don’t need such standards—is critical given the complexities of modern democracy. In fact, she argues that it is the only tenable position.

In her book Zerilli aims to push beyond two potential pitfalls in the world of judgment: absolute realism (“there are objective truths regardless of what I think”) and absolute relativism (“truth is always situational and there is no hope for judgment”). Her central argument is that democratic judgment *is* possible, *but* it need not entail a set of universal standards against which everything should be measured. Instead, humans are opinionated creatures, and truth exists in a slippery place between the many different perspectives within a democratic citizenry. Rather than external metrics for truth value, the different perspectives ideally correct one another’s distortions.

Zerilli offered an update to Arendt’s writing with insights from social psychology. Recent research has confirmed what Arendt began to parse out in the 1970s: that people are resistant to changing their beliefs when they encounter new evidence. Instead of shaping our beliefs and identities in response to evidence, we interpret evidence through the lens of what we already hold to be true. Is democracy doomed, then? Can different perspectives actually correct one another, or are we ultimately too invested in our own views to hear reason?

Zerilli believes that democracy is not doomed. She argues that Arendt rejected the view that human perspectives are ultimately irremediable. For Zerilli, having people engage with

*evidence* that contradicts their views doesn't do much good. But hearing a different *perspective* from a living, breathing human might. According to Zerilli (following Arendt), human perspectives are the only things that can correct other partial, interested, and even wrong human perspectives.

In other words: spouting a list of facts that support your political view will probably only anger the person you are arguing with at the bar. But explaining why you believe what you do—telling the emotional story—might have the power to change someone.

Zerilli observed that Presidential Counselor Kellyanne Conway's rebranding of Spicer's inauguration statement as "alternative facts" feels Orwellian to many of us. Indeed, sales of George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* spiked dramatically in the wake of the inauguration. Zerilli explained that during that immediate political moment, she became very interested in the term "alternative facts" itself—what it connotes and what function it serves in the world.

"What is the most curious feature of 'alternative facts'?" she asked. "It is that they are world-independent. They have become untethered from real-world objects."

It is not enough to call out alternative facts as lies, Zerilli explained, as that does not get to the heart of why they are so insidious. This is because normally people take the testimony of their senses to be definitive. We typically believe our eyes. "Alternative facts" are toxic because they cause people to deny the evidence of their own eyes. Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists."

What, Zerilli wondered, are we to do when members of the government try to convince us not to believe our own eyes? How do we avoid normalizing a form of truth that lets everyone have not only their own opinions, but their own facts? "How do we avoid becoming numb to Trump's lies?" Zerilli asked.

Perhaps an answer lies in Zerilli's work itself. People will always see—literally *see*—the evidence that is before them in ways that confirm their pre-existing beliefs. This is a theme of every TV courtroom drama. But sharing different perspectives with one another—explaining *why* we see the same things differently—may have the power to change people.

If we can forge a truly lively exchange of perspectives across social and political groups, we may have a shot at identifying our blind spots *and* our insights. And then democracy can thrive.

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*The 2017-18 [TRUTH Dialogues](#) are a year-long conversation about knowledge crises and politics from humanistic perspectives, co-presented by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities in partnership with multiple Northwestern departments and programs.*

*[Franke Undergraduate Fellowships](#) are awarded to three promising seniors pursuing independent humanities research projects. Franke Fellows receive a stipend and research funds, and enrich their projects by taking part in a senior humanities seminar and interdisciplinary exchanges sponsored by the Kaplan Humanities Institute. They present their work at the annual Future Directions Forum in the spring.*