Liberal Read
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Defending Truth in the Twenty-First Century

BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan Rauch
The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth
**Brookings Institution Press, 2021**

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by Luke Hallam

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Defending Truth in the Twenty-First Century
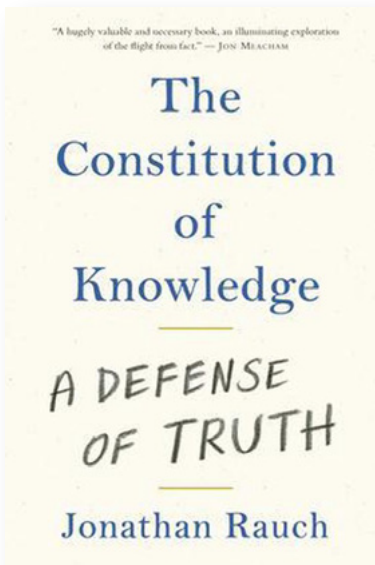
Introduction

'As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.'[1] So wrote James Madison, the father of the United States Constitution, in 1788.

Madison's spirit permeates an important new book by the journalist Jonathan Rauch that seeks to make sense of the threats facing liberal societies today – threats including the destructive convulsions of Donald Trump and his Make American Great Again movement, a global army of social media trolls, and the emboldened attacks against liberal cornerstones such as expertise, free speech, and diversity of opinion. Like Madison, Rauch is no pessimist. But he is clear-eyed about the crises we face, and *The Constitution of Knowledge* provides an authoritative and crisp account of those challenges.

Over the past five years, plenty of writers have sent up flares about our so-called post-truth age. Yet the term 'post-truth' is refreshingly absent from *The Constitution of Knowledge*. This is because Rauch's book, which is subtitled 'A Defense of Truth', is not an epigraph to something we have supposedly 'lost'. Rather, it is a call to arms. Ultimately, he argues, truth isn't lost; we have simply forgotten what it looks like, and we have permitted its enemies to exploit our confusion. The result is authoritarian politics, the erosion of democratic norms, 'cancel culture', and the depressing sense that 'truth' itself might be an illusion. But none of these problems is insurmountable.

Rauch aims to describe the contours of these threats and to motivate us to adopt realistic solutions. At its most original, his book describes how the enemies of what he calls the 'Constitution of Knowledge' systematically exploit biases and quirks in human thinking in order to disrupt our collective ability to make sense of the world. And although it deals almost exclusively with American politics and society, *The Constitution of Knowledge*: *A Defense of Truth* provides a blueprint for understanding all contemporary attacks on truth-seeking, wherever they take place.

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1   Cited in Jonathan Rauch (2021), *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth, Brookings Institution Press, p.112.*

Creating knowledge

Madison's constitution embodied political liberalism. It is predicated on a mixture of checks and balances, individual rights, and institutional accountability. Other liberal systems differ in the specifics, but they all share these basic principles. In much the same way, liberal economic systems facilitate transactions within a regulatory framework that allows millions of diverse actors to participate in the market. Each acts as a check upon the others, and each is guaranteed a certain level of protection against the predation of competitors.

Rauch's topic is a third type of liberalism: *epistemic* liberalism. This is the liberalism of knowledge-creation. Of the three (political, economic, and epistemic), the liberalism of knowledge-creation can feel like the most abstract. But without it, Rauch argues, liberal societies flounder hopelessly amid uncertainty, coercion, and manipulation, with citizens committed to incommensurable versions of reality, lacking any shared understanding of what truth and knowledge should look like. The name he gives to the system designed to overcome this is *the Constitution of Knowledge*.

Unlike the US Constitution, *the Constitution of Knowledge* transcends borders. It encompasses all manner of truth-seeking institutions: universities, news outlets, governments, courts. To participate means you have joined what Rauch calls the 'reality-based community'.[2] Anyone who has been edited, fact-checked, peer-reviewed, or audited knows what it is like to participate in the reality-based community. Its institutions 'propagate and enforce norms and rules, evaluate and certify credentials, set agendas and direct resources, enforce accountability, and train future generations to do all of those [things], and more'.[3]

At the same time, the reality-based community is supported by certain specific virtues: honesty, humility, and openness. Above all, it relies on people treating knowledge-creation as a *collective enterprise*. Whether it's checking a breaking news report against multiple sources of information before publication, or designing government policy with input from experts, the underlying principle is the same: no single individual or faction possesses the whole truth, and generating public knowledge requires the input of others.

In the real world, our institutions frequently fall short of this aspiration. Nevertheless, they have sustained themselves over the generations by refining a system that, for the most part, prevents any one faction or perspective from dominating the process of knowledge creation. Even when it fails, the system mostly permits dissenters to point out institutional blind spots, unlike authoritarian and one-party states.

Two important principles guide the reality-based community. Rauch summarises them as the principles of 'no final say' and 'no personal authority'.[4] 'No final say' means that something is only established as knowledge when it can, in principle, be debunked. As Rauch puts it: 'No ideologue, moralist, or authority can claim the last word. All anyone can do is participate in the conversation, like everyone else.'[5] 'No personal authority', meanwhile, ensures that the reality-based community only admits something as

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2   Ibid., p.4.

3   Ibid., p.16.

4   Ibid., p.15.

5   Ibid., p.89.

> Trolls out to 'own the libs' use what Rauch identifies as 'asymmetric information warfare': 'ambushes, swarms, anonymous raids, disruptive strikes', and other tactics consciously designed to spread chaos and cynicism on internet forums and social media.

knowledge when it can (again, in principle) be verified by another person. The truth of a proposition should exist independent of the existence of any given individual.

Rauch argues that this does not make claims of authority or expertise meaningless. In fact, individuals gain the rank of 'expert' precisely because they have built their reputations on work that can be independently verified. Nor does it mean you cannot 'try to understand where people are coming from': As long as propositions that rely on an individual's personal perspective do not dominate the conversation, they are admissible in the reality-based community.[6]

Together, these principles comprise the two horns of 'liberal science'.[7] And you need only look around at the world today to see the importance of liberal science as Rauch describes it: a world in which scientists shared information across continents in order to create, in a matter of months, a vaccine to protect against a frightening new virus – one with the potential to take millions more lives than it ultimately did, thanks to their quick and accountable work.

Human error

In chapters two and three of the book, Rauch explores some of the common errors in human reasoning that make *the Constitution of Knowledge* necessary in the first place.

Recall that the reality-based community assumes both fallibility (that anyone might be wrong) and empiricism (that all claims must be open to vetting by others). The problem, according to Rauch, is that human beings are not naturally open, impersonal, rational creatures. Empiricism and fallibility do not come easy. The idea that multiple perspectives should be tolerated, and that seeking truth is an impersonal and collective endeavour (the sine qua non of epistemic liberalism), is deeply counterintuitive – in fact, Rauch calls it 'the single most counterintuitive social principle in all of human history'.[8]

The reason for this lies in human evolution. Summarising findings from cognitive psychology, Rauch gives a whistle-stop tour of the various biases of human cognition that emerged during the low-information environment of early humanity, when such shortcuts and heuristics were useful for the survival of the species.

For instance, there is the availability bias: our tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events that are particularly memorable. There is also the framing effect: the fact that we

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6   Ibid., p.91.
7   Ibid., p.15.
8   Ibid., pp.18-19.

are influenced by the manner in which information is presented to us. Then there is the familiarity bias: the fact that we are more likely to believe information when it is repeated to us.[9] As Rauch notes, this last bias is exploited to great effect by master propagandists,[10] who may wish to convince wide swathes of the electorate that, for example, Joe Biden lost the 2020 US presidential election.

Human beings suffer from many other cognitive blind spots. But the most conse-quential, the ones that arguably do the most damage to our politics, are the confir-mation bias and the *conformity bias*.[11]

Confirmation bias is our tendency to seek out information that supports our point of view. This explains how so many people end up in online bubbles that systematically filter out opposing viewpoints — or at least, opposing viewpoints that don't confirm our prior opinion of our opponents' ignorance or depravity. The conformity bias, meanwhile, speaks to humanity's inherently tribal nature. Drawing on important recent research in cognitive psychology, Rauch argues that human beings are finely tuned to conform our opinions to match those of our tribe. Certain arguments, ways of reasoning, or community values become so fundamental to our sense of self, and experience such a degree of reinforce-ment when we are embedded within a social structure, that entire groups can spiral off into self-referential ideological bubbles of conspiracy quackery or radical partisanship.

Rauch does not specialise in neuroscience, and he draws heavily on the results of classic twentieth-century experiments in the field, as well as more recent breakthroughs. But *The Constitution of Knowledge* draws innovative links between the insights of academic psychology and our current truth deficit.

Take the internet. Rauch argues that the modern web – aided and abetted by our biases – is designed to perform the opposite function to *the Constitution of Knowledge*:

> Suppose some mischievous demon were to hack into the control centre [of the Constitution of Knowledge] one night and reverse the pumps and filters. Instead of straining out error, they pass it along. In fact, instead of slowing down the dissemination of false and misleading claims, they accelerate it … Instead of trafficking in communication, they traffic in display. Instead of identifying sources, they disguise them. Instead of rewarding people who persuade others, they reward those who publicize themselves.[12]

Platforms are incentivised to maximise clicks in order to increase advertising revenue. Their goal is not to facilitate the flow of truth, but simply to make information and content accessible to a passive audience.

That being said, Rauch argues that social media companies have actually done the most in recent years (compared with other institutions) to tamper the worst excesses of epistemic anarchy. Twitter has developed new community feedback tools; Facebook employs a steadily increasing number of content checkers, learning from its mistakes during the 2016 presidential election, when misleading information was permitted to circulate freely.

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9   Ibid., p.26.
10   Ibid., p.28.
11   Ibid., p.28.
12   Ibid., p.124.

A promising start. But it might be noted that creating a healthier online environment *without* sacrificing important values like freedom and privacy, while not a challenge that falls within the scope of *The Constitution of Knowledge*, is one of the most daunting tasks facing liberal democracies today.

Trolls and the threat from the right

In the second half of the book, Rauch examines the actors responsible for perpetuating our current illiberal rut. He is clear about which group has done the most damage: the illiberal right.

Europe has seen its fair share of right-wing attacks on the reality-based community in recent years. In the lead-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, Britain's Michael Gove infamously claimed that the British public had 'had enough of experts'.[13] In 2019, to list just one instance of the growing threat from Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian government passed a law to seize control of over forty scientific institutions.[14] And numerous countries continue to roll back hard-won gains: in 2021, Reporters Without Borders declared a 'press freedom state of emergency' in Poland.[15]

Yet it is hard to read *The Constitution of Knowledge* without concluding that the United States – more so than Europe – faces a truly unique set of challenges in the epistemic realm.

> The problem, according to Rauch, is that human beings are not naturally open, impersonal, rational creatures. Empiricism and fallibility do not come easy.

It began with the internet trolls of the early 2010s – hackers, baiters, and shitposters of all stripes. Rauch takes us through what he calls 'troll epistemology',[16] citing a 'style manual' created by the white supremacist website *The Daily Stormer*.[17] The manual advises prospective trolls to weaponise the addictive nature of outrage, and unleash a stream of falsehood in order to provoke their opponents. As George Orwell knew, the inability to recognise truth from falsehood – indeed, the exhaustion we feel in the face of a media environment saturated by amoral dissemblers – is a key cause of demoralisation. Trolls out to 'own the libs' use what Rauch identifies as 'asymmetric information warfare': 'ambushes, swarms, anonymous raids, disruptive strikes', and other tactics designed to spread chaos and cynicism on internet forums and social media.[18]

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13   'Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove', *Financial Times [online], June 3 2016, ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c*

14   'Hungarian government takes control of research institutes despite outcry', *Nature [online], July 8 2019, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02107-4*

15   'RSF declares "press freedom state of emergency" in Poland', *Reporters sans frontières [online], September 13 2021, https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-declares-press-freedom-state-emergency-poland*

16   Rauch (2021), *The Constitution of Knowledge, p.155.*

17   Ibid., p.158.

18   Ibid., p.185.

And because 'demoralization is demobilization', Rauch reminds us, state actors too have refined these tactics to get ahead in our nihilistic information age.[19] Russia's efforts to sow discord in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections involved not only employing troll-farms to corrupt the flow of truthful information, but also purposefully exacerbating political polarisation in America. In one bizarre instance, Russia supported both anti-Islam demonstrators and pro-Islam counter-demonstrators at a rally in Houston, Texas, in 2016.

Their activities, of course, extend well beyond American elections. The cover-up of the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Britain in 2018 involved Russian media posting numerous contradictory explanations for the poisoning on television and digital media. The goal was not to popularise a single plausible falsehood – it was to disorient international observers with so much information that they wouldn't know what to believe.

In fact, Rauch's key thesis is that Trump adopted similar disinformation tactics in his campaign against Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020. Trump has long expressed admiration for the art of the political lie: in 2004, he declared that a falsehood spread by Vice President Dick Cheney about a political opponent was 'a terrible statement … *unless he gets away with it*'.[20] Rauch takes this phrase for the title of the first chapter of *The Constitution of Knowledge*. Admittedly, all politicians lie, more or less. But Rauch emphasises just how deep Trump's mendacity ran. Trump lied pathologically, about everything from the size of the crowd at his inauguration to the trajectory of Hurricane Dorian in 2019.

Crucially, he and his acolytes deliberately employed troll tactics in order to win elections. Strategist Steve Bannon famously told a reporter in 2018: 'The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.'[21] Flooding the zone with shit – drowning out truth with a flood of information in the hopes of degrading the information environment – is what Rauch (borrowing a term from the RAND Corporation) refers to as a 'firehose of falsehood'.[22]

This is a particularly effective tactic in an age where the knowledge economy has been transformed into the marketplace of attention. Russia's Skripal cover-up is a notable example, as is Trump's legal team's attempt to saturate American courts with spurious lawsuits challenging the 2020 election result. Concerned citizens in Europe might also recognise this technique – it is commonly believed among British pundits, for example, that the UK government makes regular use of the so-called 'dead cat' strategy, a technique to minimise negative news coverage by producing a salacious or sensational non-story that distracts the attention of the press.[23]

It is far from clear that Trump always *believed* he was lying. But time and time again he deliberately attacked the reality-based community, exploiting social media and human fallibility to undermine both liberal science and liberal democracy.

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19   Ibid., p.166.

20   Ibid., p.8.

21   Ibid., p.163.

22   Ibid.

23   'Boris Johnson bets on a "dead cat" strategy to get him out of trouble', *Financial Times [online], December 8 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/12713c27-0105-4b0a-91d6-8a6f79bd572e*

Moralists and the threat from the left

Rauch argues that the threat doesn't just emanate from the political right. Some on the left are also undermining our open society and the search for truth, even as they claim to be seeking justice and equality.

Speakers are cancelled from university campuses. Social media users who post unwisely are subjected to pile-ons that can tank their entire careers, not to mention their social and family relationships. Rauch writes:

> As different as their methods and politics may be, [the right's] disinformation and [the left's] coercive conformity are both forms of information warfare. Cancelers and trolls share the goal of dominating the information space by demoralising their human targets: confusing them, isolating them, drowning them out, de-platforming them, shaming them, or overwhelming them so that they give up on pushing back.[24]

There are many notable instances of a chill being cast over free speech. In October 2021, after *The Constitution of Knowledge* was published, a prominent geophysicist was disinvited from giving a lecture at MIT about the atmospheres of far-flung planets. The reason? He had previously co-written an article criticising the diversity, equality, and inclusion policies enacted by many administrators at American universities.[25] This is just one example among many, and cancellations don't exclusively come from the left: according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 35% of attempts to get American professors fired in recent years have come from the right.[26]

That being said, Rauch is often keen to blame censoriousness on what he calls 'postmodern professors'.[27] This is understandable – postmodernism as a method in social science tends to question the idea that there can be such a thing as 'objective truth'. But, as Rauch himself notes, we don't all have to agree on whether there *is* objective truth in order to participate in the reality-based community; we simply have to agree that for the purposes of public knowledge we must adhere to certain standards of fallibility and empiricism. Postmodernists in the academy are not all in favour of cancellations and conformism. As methods among others, 'deconstructionism' or 'critical theory' (to give two broad areas of what can loosely be called academic postmodern philosophy) surely have their place within the humanities and furnish valuable and exciting insights. True, by their very nature they question key elements of liberal science. But if the reality-based community cannot accommodate methods of enquiry such as these (as long as their proponents do not promote a culture of censoriousness), arguably *The Constitution of Knowledge* is trending a little on the conservative side.

But that is a small point. Ultimately, the phenomenon Rauch describes goes well beyond firings or disinvitations, postmodernism or deconstructionism. It has taken hold of the business world as well.

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24   Rauch (2021), *The Constitution of Knowledge, pp.246-7.*

25   'UChicago Professor's MIT Lecture Canceled After DEI Opinions Spark National Controversy', *The Chicago Maroon [online], November 8 2021, https://chicagomaroon.com/article/2021/11/8/uchicago-professors-mit-lecture-canceled-dei-opinions-spark/*

26   Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, 'The Polarization Spiral', *Persuasion [online], October 29 2021, https://www.persuasion.community/p/haidt-and-lukianoff-the-polarization?s=w*

27   Rauch (2021), *The Constitution of Knowledge, p.87.*

Entire corporations have recently begun to release public statements of apology following pressure from social media, often because of the words or actions of a single employee. One early example Rauch gives is that of Brendan Eich, a chief executive at Mozilla who was fired in 2014 under pressure from activists because he had donated $1000 to a ballot initiative to overturn same-sex marriage in California in 2008. After his firing, the company released a statement saying: 'We're sorry. We must do better.'[28] Rauch, an LGBT activist who in 2004 published a well-received book advocating for same-sex marriage, criticises the company for firing someone because of 'personal political actions he took at a time when a majority of the American public shared his view'.[29] He defends the idea that in our reputation-obsessed age, we have allowed social media to enforce conformity, putting us all at the mercy of an (often anonymous) jury of outraged moralists. To be clear: it doesn't matter that Eich was *deeply wrong* to oppose same-sex marriage in 2008 – the point is that that was no reason to suddenly fire him six years later because of the caprice of a crowd.

> He defends the idea that in our reputation-obsessed age, we have allowed social media to enforce conformity, putting us all at the mercy of an (often anonymous) jury of outraged moralists.

Across numerous examples, Rauch's focus is on the United States. But his discussion of the contemporary left poses important questions for liberals across the world. If an act of speech is incorrect, unwise, or even just flippant, does that mean it must be publicly denounced? Must the speaker be fired? The likelihood that an idea will be labelled as 'dangerous' simply because it relates to diversity policy has certainly increased over the past few years – but is this a reasonable understanding of danger and harm? Meanwhile, social media encourages pile-ons and grandstanding, which activate our conformity bias – but what about the chilling effect this has on free expression and individuality? And, most worryingly of all, is it possible that liberals have been too willing to go along with these new trends, for the simple fact that we believe we too (just as much as the cancellers) seek justice and progress?

Liberals across the world are starting to reckon with this new moralism. Too often, those who fight for progress have forgotten the most counterintuitive principle of all: that it is better for society if bad opinions are permitted to circulate; that there is nothing to be gained (and much to be lost) from radicalising our definition of 'violence' to encompass what is sometimes perfectly innocuous speech; that the search for truth is threatened, not aided, by the frenzied language games being indulged in across campuses and corporations by a small but vocal group of individuals. These are just some of the questions raised by *The Constitution of Knowledge*, and they are well worth attending to.

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28   Ibid., p.209.

29   Ibid.

Defending truth

In the end, Rauch observes, decent people everywhere feel demoralised, downtrodden, and exhausted. The enemies of an open society appear 'ten feet tall',[30] with resurgent authoritarianism in Europe, the ever-present threat of trolls, increasing social media outrage, and the prospect that Trump will again run for president in 2024.

But it is equally the case that the institutions and norms that together comprise *the Constitution of Knowledge* are among the most robust social achievements in human history. They have been painstakingly erected over the course of generations, and encompass literally billions of people across all continents. Nobody who has been paying attention should expect them to fail overnight – not in the United States, not in Europe, not anywhere.

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30   Ibid., p.185.

European Liberal Forum
PAPERS

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