

*Can We Discipline “Alternative Facts”? Towards a New  
Critical Competence*

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Is there such a thing as „alternative facts“? It is a controversy that has been with us ever since 21 January 2017, the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, when White House press secretary Sean Spicer grossly overstated the size of the crowd attending the event as „the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe,“ and at the same time accused the media of trying to „lessen the enthusiasm of the inauguration“ by deliberately underestimating the crowd (e.g., Hirschfeld & Rosenberg, 2017; Swaine, 2017; Wikipedia, 2019/2021). One day later, this claim was the topic of a weekly TV news and interview program on NBC with Kellyanne Conway, Trump’s former campaign manager and meanwhile Senior Counselor to the President. She defended the claim by saying that the press secretary had provided „*alternative facts*,“ that is, „additional,“ if perhaps „incomplete,“ rather than false information (Wolff, 2017). Or, as she explained in a subsequent comment: „Two plus two is four. Three plus one is four. Partly cloudy, partly sunny. Glass half full, glass half empty. Those are alternative facts...additional facts and alternative information.“ (Nuzzi, 2017) However, the prevailing perception of her comments remained that „there is no such thing as alternative facts“ (Micek, 2017) or, as the NBC moderator put it, that the „facts“ in question „were just not true. Alternative facts are not facts; they’re falsehoods.“ (Meet the Press, 2017). To cite just one more typical comment: „Most people believe there is truth and there are lies. ‚Alternative facts‘ are lies.“ (Abramson, 2017). But are things that simple? Are facts indeed either true or false in such a black-and-white mode?

Of course not.

## Alternative Facts? Yes but...

The point that interests me in this reflection is why the public outcry over Conway's reference to „alternative facts“ seemed to ignore the circumstance that well-understood claims of „fact“ come in the plural mode. To be sure, with Goethe's *Tasso* (1833, p. 59 / Act II, Scene 1) „we feel the purpose, and become untun'd“ – the facts presented were all too obviously construed so as to serve the purpose. However, one need not approve of the deliberate use of disinformation and fake news to see that the facts we recognize, particularly in politics but basically in all areas of human expertise and action, have a lot to do with our intentions and perspectives and thus may differ for good reasons. Might it not be, then, that without the possibility of alternative facts, there are no sound facts at all? If one oversimplifies the concept of facts in the first place, by associating it tacitly with a storybook notion of „objective facts,“ one should not wonder that the result is an oversimplified handling of the notion of alternative facts as well.

That is what appears to be the deeper, unrecognized deficiency in the controversy over the concept of „alternative facts.“ The concept is richer than it would seem at first glance. Since the critics assumed an overly simple concept of objective facts, they missed the critical potential of alternative facts as a counter- concept. At issue is a stance that we might describe as *critical pluralism in matters of fact*: properly employed, facts indeed come in the plural mode. Where they are presented in the singular, caution is required.

## Pluralism – Not Just Opportunism – of Facts

The problem in Conway's defense of Spicer's account is not that she referred to the value of considering alternative facts. It is never a bad idea to question „the facts“ in the light of divergent information. The problem is the arbitrary and one-sided twist she gave to this basically sound insight, by putting it in the service of political opportunism rather than of knowledge and rationality. Her critics, on the other hand, appeared to altogether ignore the critical function of a well-understood pluralism of facts: it helps us see the ways we may have got our facts wrong. Facts assumed to be „objectively“ true need to be challenged, lest they be taken for granted. Facts without alternatives tend to become dogmatic, mere assertions, as well as inaccurate if not plainly wrong, as they no longer carry the burden of proof. What amounts to sufficient „proof“ is not a trivial matter, but so much is clear: „objective“ facts are not things (objects) to which we could simply point the finger and say: „See, the facts.“ Empirical observations become „facts“ – relevant circumstances to consider – by *judgment*, not by pointing the finger. They embody validity claims that need to be *argued* and defended against opposing claims, but the finger is not a good argument.

## Boundary Judgments: Facts and their Contexts

While the proponents of alternative facts in Trump's staff had a point in denying the objectively given character of „the facts,“ they seemed to ignore the epistemological consequence: „facts“ imply a *selection* of what is to count as relevant circumstances. It follows that facts come not only in the plural but also in a *normative* (value-laden) mode; they imply a claim to the right selection of the circumstances to be considered. The question is how this inevitable selectivity of facts and of related claims – for instance, to truth, relevance, improvement, and rationality – is to be handled. It's not that we ought to avoid it altogether (a mission impossible) but rather, that there is a need to handle it in transparent and non-arbitrary ways. We need a *discipline* of managing selectivity so that people – ordinary citizens and professionals alike – could learn to *systematically* review all claims of fact in the light of differing and changing contextual assumptions. My proposal to this end is *boundary critique*, a systematic process of reviewing alternative delimitations of relevant contexts.

## Boundary Critique: Critical Employment of Boundary Judgments

Boundary critique is the methodological core concept of my work on critical systems heuristics (CSH; Ulrich, e.g., 1994, 2000, 2018), a framework for reflective practice grounded in systems thinking, practical philosophy, and critical pragmatism (but I should mention that boundary critique can be understood and practiced without prior study of these philosophical underpinnings). The basic idea is that the meaning and validity of practical propositions always depend on *boundary judgments* as to what should be considered as belonging to the relevant context for assessing „facts“ and „values.“ Boundary judgments determine what facts and values matter and what others do not in dealing with a situation of concern. They are at work in our thought and action whether we are aware of them or not. There is a consequent need for handling boundary judgments carefully, for example, by laying them open to all the parties concerned and by examining how the facts (observations) and values (concerns) that we consider relevant, and the claims we associate with them, may look different in the light of differently delimited contexts. This effort matters for two elementary reasons: first, because otherwise people tend to *talk at cross-purposes* and cannot agree about their facts and values (no wonder, as they are talking about different things); and second, because in contexts of decision-making and action, selectivity tends to translate into *partiality*, in the sense of benefiting some interests more than others.

Among the contextual assumptions that often shape people's boundary judgments more or less consciously, one may think of assumed stakeholders (e.g., who is to be served and

who not?), scenarios of the future (e.g., optimist vs. pessimist) and/or agendas (e.g., what are the aims and concerns of those involved vs. those affected but not involved?), and often also simply the time horizons they consider for identifying and assessing consequences (e.g., long-term vs. short-term effects of policy decisions).

CSH condenses the multiplicity of such contextual delimitations into a manageable number of *boundary questions* that can guide systematic boundary reflection in many areas of practice, including many fields of applied science and expertise, of policy-making and everyday problem-solving. In addition to their self-reflective use, the boundary questions can also be used for critical purposes against people who may not handle their boundary judgments so critically, by demonstrating the ways their claims depend on undeclared or under-argued contextual assumptions. „Boundary critique“ is a convenient short label for both kinds of employing boundary judgments critically. Both are supported by the boundary questions of CSH.

This is not the place to introduce the boundary questions of CSH in any more detail (see references); what matters here is only their importance in relation to alternative judgments of fact. First and basically, uncovering the boundary judgments at work allows for systematic critique of their validity claims; and second, doubtful as such claims may at times be (as in the case of the Trump administration’s problematic use of alternative facts), the clash of boundary judgments may still throw new light on established facts.

Methodologically speaking, the crucial point is what CSH calls the *eternal triangle of boundary critique* (Figure 1).

If we change any of the three corners (angles) of an equilateral triangle, the other two will change as well. Similarly, in the eternal triangle of boundary critique, once we start to modify our boundary judgments, relevant facts and values are likely to change as well, and vice-versa; we are moving in an eternal circle of contexts (in CSH defined as reference systems), facts, and values.

*Thinking through the eternal triangle* means to consider each of its corners in the light of the other two. The result is an iterative process of reflection or discourse that I call *systemic triangulation* (see Ulrich, 2017). For example, What new facts move into the picture if we expand the boundaries of the reference system or modify our value judgments? How do our valuations look if we consider new facts that refer to a modified reference system? In what way may our reference system fail to do justice to the perspective of different stakeholder groups? And so on.

Any claim that does not reflect on the underpinning triangle of boundary judgments, judgments of facts, and value judgments, risks having us claim too much, by not disclosing its built-in selectivity. *We all tend to claim too much*, almost all the time – a lesson of humility

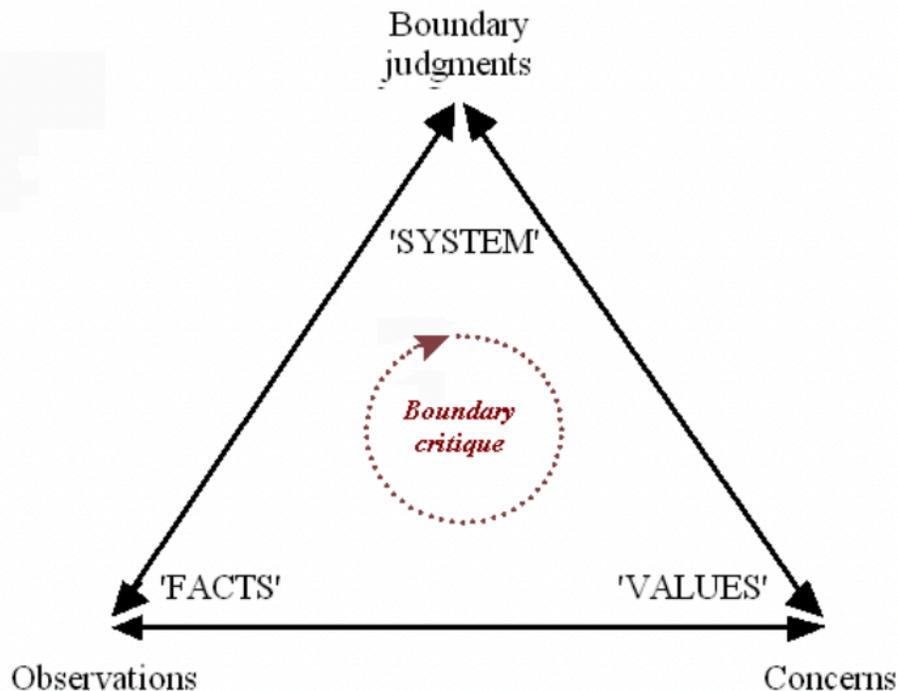


Figure 1: The „eternal triangle“ of boundary judgments, observations, and concerns or evaluations (Source: adapted from Ulrich, 2000, p. 252)

that I believe should be taught not only to all professionals before they complete their training but also to all young people before they leave school; it can provide a basis for *a new critical competence* of ordinary citizens no less than of professionals and decision-makers (see Ulrich, 2000).

## The Critical Turn

It is often recognized that „facts“ are not value-free, but why and how precisely this is so remains just as often unclear. The „eternal triangle“ makes it clear: judgments of fact and of value are connected by their shared dependence on boundary judgments. Change one type of judgments and the other two will also need to change. Such understanding paves the way towards an adequate critical handling not only of judgments of fact (including alternative facts) but also of value judgments, all of which call for systematic identification and unfolding of

the boundary judgments that condition them.

Our notions of competent inquiry and action will thus take *a critical turn*: claims to truth and rationality, or to bringing into a situation relevant expertise and resulting improvement, will be credible inasmuch as they have withstood systematic efforts of boundary critique. We will accordingly qualify and limit our claims and help others do the same. In short, we will keep in mind that without such a critical turn, we risk claiming too much; *with* it, however, we may hope to develop a new reflective and argumentative competence, a competence that in the knowledge society appears essential indeed for dealing with the ubiquitous claims to relevant knowledge and expertise, to rationality and professionalism.

Methodological openness to alternative facts – towards what they may tell us about differing contextual assumptions and value judgments, that is – has a place in such a critical turn. People are different and live in different circumstances, and accordingly see things differently; they rightly expect that good practice will consider these differences. Even so, the aim remains to reach well-informed, critically reflected, and properly argued as well as democratically legitimate agreement on what in a specific situation is to serve as the empirical and normative basis for rational decision-making and action. In an enlightened society, we need to be able to share a minimum of facts and values as grounds for collective action, which is what democratic processes of decision-making are meant to achieve. In these processes, alternative facts can and should be subject to the same standard of boundary critique as all other claims; there is then no reason to exclude them *a priori* from careful scrutiny.

## The Role of Civil Society

Readers might wonder whether such an approach does not beg the question of „what happens to a society when there is no shared reality“ (Garcia, 2021). To be sure, we cannot expect a tool for facilitating reflective practice and critical dialogue alone to bridge the gap between divergent realities of people (with accordingly clashing claims of „fact“ and „value“), no more than we can rely on the wisdom of those in power (authority) or on the expertise of professionals alone (technocracy). The only credible answer is *civil society*: boundary critique, like good practice of governance and of expertise, has to be embedded in a context of civil society.

I believe that the concept of boundary critique is understandable to many people and thus need not just assume a living civil society to exist but can actually contribute to its development. I associate with boundary critique an *emancipatory potential* that can be tapped by teaching its use in school education, professional training, civic education, and other kinds of continuing training for adults, so as to enable people to use it against claims that do not adequately consider or disclose the underlying boundary judgments (see Ulrich, 1994, ch. 5.3;

2000). I also associate with it a chance for achieving a pragmatic solution to the unsolved problem of *grounding ethical practice*, a claim that readers will find explained elsewhere (see Ulrich, 2006).

It is clear though that there is no quick fix to the challenge of cultivating reflective practice and constructive dialogue in matters of collective concern. Civil society can only grow in the way all societal progress and development comes about: through slow processes of education and learning, and by creating participative opportunities at all levels of society – local, regional and national as well as transnational and global.

## Conclusion

What is the bottom line? It is that we can and need to *develop a discipline of dealing critically and productively with alternative facts*, no less than with „facts“ and other claims in general. The answer to the title question, then, is a clear „yes.“ Boundary critique – institutionalizing systematic processes of reflection and discourse on the boundary judgments that condition people’s facts and values – might well be a core idea of such a discipline, a discipline that in turn might provide a key to promoting a living civil society.

As to the controversy on the Trump administration’s „alternative facts,“ it might soon become a minor and somewhat erratic episode in the US history. Ironically though, it might turn out to have been quite useful for advancing the emerging knowledge society and reviewing its notion of „facts,“ that is, the roles of science and expertise in it. The late US Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1983) said it well: „Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.“ In the light of the present reflection, I’d put it this way: We may well see things differently; but when it comes to resolving our differences, let’s talk about and question the same facts at a time, rather than being at cross-purposes. Boundary critique, then, is perhaps not a bad idea.

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