



I'm not sure we can escape it. With only a handful of weeks left before the presidential election takes place, the news is bound to be filled with stories about who said what when and why they said what they said and what they should have said if they only knew what they were saying when they said it.

This past week saw Hillary Clinton getting slammed in the media for calling half of Donald Trump's supporters a "basket of deplorables." Gary Johnson got slammed last week for not knowing what Aleppo was. Donald Trump gets slammed all the time for every other speech that comes out of his mouth.

I heard an interview this week with New York Times CEO, Mark Thompson, in which he discusses what's gone wrong with the language of politics. In that interview, Thompson claimed that the rejection of expertise and the digital revolution are causing a breakdown in the way we speak in public forums. He talks about how the current campaigns of the presidential candidates have been fought less about ideas and policies, but more about language, and fought through language. The fight is less about what people do or will do, but more about what words fall from their lips, and the feelings evoked by those words.

The problem with this, as comes out in the interview, is that it results in actual truth getting devalued. A certain phrase takes on meaning—and then after many repetitions it suddenly no longer matters if that meaning is valid. It no longer matters if what is being said matches what is actually done. Along with this, the idea of “telling it like it is” or “speaking my mind” takes on greater value than careful, measured analysis and discussion of policies. The language of the educated, the language of people who have studied and researched and worked on issues for years becomes distrusted. The language of the person who just spews out whatever words happen to come to mind at the moment (whether those be exaggeration, manipulation, or alteration of the actual facts) becomes more trusted. That person is considered “authentic” and “real.” The person working for years in an area, the expert, is considered “elite” and “out of touch”—not so real.

And in an age where sound bites can travel in seconds to millions of people via the Internet, and where the bitey-ist sounds, the catchiest phrases, make the biggest impact and produce a lasting impression in so many minds, it suddenly becomes extremely important to be very careful about what you say. Or, if you are a politician, perhaps it is more important to not be careful at all, and instead to just come up with the most delicious phrase—making people hungry for more and more bites.

*As students arrive, give each of them a copy of the above article to read. Then discuss it in this way:*

**When you hear about something that everyone seems to be talking about, what is your instinct—do you immediately want to repeat the story yourself, or do you want to find out what actually happened before you repeat a word of it? Explain.**

**What do you think? Has the digital revolution had a negative effect on the way we speak?**

**Do you think people who “speak their mind” and “just say what they think” are more trustworthy than people who are more careful with their words and keep some things to themselves? Explain.**

**Words are powerful. The right words can encourage and empower. The wrong words can bring conflict and hatred. Let's look at three dangers that come from uncontrolled speech.**

