

**New
internationalist**

Truth or lies? What is our democracy becoming?

New Internationalist intermediate + Ready Lesson



This lesson:

- Discussions to decide on captions for photos
- Quiz
- Reading
- Vocabulary
- Dictation
- Completion of formal letter
- Speaking tasks

In groups, think of a caption for this photo:



Quiz:

1/ What percentage of the people who voted for Trump still believe (in 2021) he won the 2020 election?

a) 24% b) 64% c) 84%

2/ How many lies did Trump tell when he was President?

a) about 10,000 b) about 20,000 c) about 30,000

3/ What was Boris Johnson's biggest lie?

a) That Brexit will happen b) that the UK sends £350 million / week to the EU c) that Trump won the US election
(now read the text to check>>)

There are reports that 64 per cent of the 74 million people who voted for Donald Trump still believe that he won the 2020 presidential election. They believe that Joe Biden, with his 81 million votes, the electoral college, and majorities in both Senate and Congress, 'stole' it. Only hours after the attack on Congress by a crowd of Trump supporters, 147 Republican Congress members refused to accept the election results. Days later, the angry supporters said that the FBI and the CIA organised the attack on the Capitol. Democracy is all about diversity, different opinions and ideas. But we must agree on some things for it to work. Without some shared truth, how can we talk to each other? How can democracy continue?

Jen Psaki is the new White House press secretary. In her first meeting with the media, she promised to bring back truth. Psaki's promise was the opposite of Kellyanne Conway's words 'alternative fact' four years earlier. As Counsellor to President Trump, she defended the lie that Trump's inauguration crowd was the biggest ever. By the end of his term in office, The Washington Post said Trump had told 30,375 lies, about 21 a day.

Trump is not the first or the last lying politician, just the biggest. The UK's Boris Johnson isn't as big a liar but there was his most famous lie that the UK was sending to the EU £350 (\$480) million a week. It was all over the side of a big red bus during the Brexit campaign. China's President Xi Jinping is telling plenty of lies about the Uyghurs – 'we are just educating them'. Vladimir Putin is so well trained in the KGB school of disinformation that he finds it very easy to lie - 'we don't poison our opponents'. Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro seems to almost enjoy blaming the Amazon's fires to clear the way for cattle ranching on 'foreigners and environmentalists'. Today in mature democracies with many parties we can hold leaders to account but lying is usually not punished. We don't seem to care.

Why do many politicians lie?

Read the text again and
find some more
examples

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In groups,
think of a
caption
for this
photo:



How true is everything on social media?

- Can you think of examples of truth ... and lies?
- Compare the different types of social media for truth: Twitter / Facebook / Instagram
- What can we do about it?

(now read the next 2 slides >>>)

People do not trust journalism and traditional media but the information source that people trust least and think is the worst for democracy is social media. Things have changed a lot. Ten years ago, in the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, people thought Twitter was positive thing. It was possible for pro-democracy activists to communicate with each other and the world. Social media could offer some protection against immediate violent clampdown. And it can still offer some protection today, for example, in pro-democracy protests in Nigeria, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Russia.

Social media made it possible to communicate in the middle of a pandemic about Black Lives Matter across the world after the killing of George Floyd. When authorities shut down the internet or block social media, it's almost impossible to know what's going on. This happened during the conflict in Ethiopia and the elections in Uganda, and it is happening in Myanmar. It is essential for human rights and democracy that everyone has digital technology.

But the negative effects of digital technology are becoming clearer. Most public and government worries are around harmful content: hate, extremism, racism, sexism, disablism, and other online violence. People are trying to get the digital companies to remove the worst forms of online harm and 'fake news'. But the problems are much deeper. Shoshana Zuboff writes that digital companies are taking away people's rights and independence. It's all to do with the business models of big companies like Facebook and Google and the way they use surveillance, data, and targeted advertising.

The research organization Ranking Digital Rights says that these business models are bad for us individually and possibly really bad for democracy. The problem is that fake news, anger, and conspiracy theories get more hits and make more money for the digital platforms. This is important to their success and their profits. They talk about defending democracy when they finally banned Trump after the Capitol riot, but Facebook and Twitter have played a big part in promoting his lies and they made money from this.

There are other ways in which the tech companies threaten our democratic and human rights as they improve surveillance technology and services that they can sell to repressive governments, and not repressive governments. Progress in biometrics and neuroscience give them ways to 'hack the human', as Yuval Noah Harari says.

'Democracy was always under threat but we are facing a threat to democracy that was never there before. Tech now makes possible totalitarian regimes, digital dictatorships. For the first time in history, it's possible to watch and monitor people all the time.'

We must regulate digital tech companies. They have too much power and go too deep into all our lives. There is a more and more agreement about this but how do we regulate them? The European Commission seems to be furthest in developing regulation. In December 2020 they published two plans for a Digital Services Act and a Digital Markets Act. They talk about rules for accountability, openness, and fines for up to 10 per cent of a company revenue. This may not be enough, and the companies are likely to fight it, but it's a start.

In groups, think of a caption for this photo:



Write a formal letter to the government:

First – a dictation.

Then complete the letter

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to complain about two things that are happening at the moment in the UK related to democracy and truth.

The first is that several politicians are telling lies, and no-one seems to care. One example is(a)..... If(b).....

My second point is that social media is spreading a lot of lies and fake news. How can this be controlled better? For example(c).....

I suggest(d).....

I am looking(e).....

Yours(f).....

.....

What can we do? First look up these phrases:

1. political cronyism
 2. unelected technocrats
 3. algorithm
 4. discontent
 5. people participation
 6. growing inequality
 7. climate emergency
 8. door-to-door canvassing
 9. hierarchy
 10. civil liberties
 11. participatory democrats
 12. egalitarian self-rule
 13. citizens assemblies
 14. referendum
- (now read the next 2 slides>>>)*

When US activist Astra Taylor was researching her book 'Democracy may not exist but we'll miss it when it's gone', she was sad about college students' low level of engagement or interest in democracy. Some said they put a higher value on social mobility and career opportunities than on their democratic rights.

Poor leadership, political cronyism, and bad handling of coronavirus have increased the interest in rule by unelected specialists and technocrats. 'We can't trust politicians. We cannot trust people to make good decisions. Better to leave it to experts, or algorithms.' But, of course, technocrats are people with political opinions and algorithms seem to support prejudices and inequalities.

A survey in early 2020 found that 'discontent with the way democracy is working' was common in 34 countries. But this may not be as negative as it sounds. Our system of democracy, with elections every four or five years, encourages very limited people participation. Today we need more active and effective people participation with the many difficult challenges - the global pandemic and its big economic and social effects, growing inequality, a truth and information crisis, and the climate emergency. The drama of the US election focused on high power, on the person with the top job in the richest country in the world. But we must remember that it was door-to-door, old-style canvassing that got the Democrat vote in swing states like Georgia. There are also the groups that have started across the world to do what the State is not doing, often supplying food and disinfectant. Many have no hierarchy and are bright lights of independent organisations in a world dark with disease.

In his book *Twenty-first Century Socialism*, British academic Jeremy Gilbert writes about a form of socialism that gives priority to the environment. It's about people controlling the economy and not the economy controlling people, giving power to workers, citizens, and communities. Astra Taylor writes that democracy can be more than things like just periodic elections, civil liberties, and legal equality. It can move into work places and schools and housing free from the pressures of speculation. She writes, 'More and more people seem to think that democracy is dying.' But the participatory democrats of Rojava in Northern Syria know all about egalitarian self-rule, and so do Zapatista communities still going strong in Chiapas, Mexico. Also there is the movement for citizens' assemblies.

'Citizens' assemblies are starting to have an effect,' says Laura Sullivan of We Move Europe. In Ireland they have had big success in opening debates on abortion, gay marriage, and climate change, leading to changes of opinions, referendums, and changes in the law. With citizens' assemblies perhaps the UK debate on leaving the EU might have been very different. Citizens' assemblies are used across the world. The most ambitious so far will be the Global Citizens' Assembly that will take place before the COP26 Climate Summit in November 2021.

Democracy may be in crisis – but it's also the beginning of possibilities.

Compare different captions for these photos and discuss how photography can create change:



Homework:

Read the original – more difficult – article:

<https://newint.org/features/2021/02/08/big-story-democracy-democracy-edge>

