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Learn: What is a False Narrative?

A false narrative is a commonly held belief that is based on incorrect or incomplete information. Often, false narratives refer to incorrect knowledge passed throughout a community or society. These false beliefs can be created intentionally or unintentionally by the forces that shape culture such as the K-12 education system, the media and government policy.

A false narrative differs from false news, fake news or individual lies because it typically develops over time through institutional reinforcement (e.g., K-12 education). Because of this subtle reinforcement over time, false narratives are eventually accepted as truth by large groups of people, even entire societies, and are therefore, very difficult to dismantle.

Let's look at two examples:



False Narrative 1: "Native people only existed in the past."

Native Americans are a vibrant and growing population with rich, distinct cultures and histories in the United States. However, Native peoples are invisible to most Americans. According to the Reclaiming Native Truth project, the invisibility of native peoples is all too common in America. Seventy-two (72) percent of Americans rarely come across stories about Native Americans. This invisibility and false narrative about Native peoples is often created and reinforced within our education system.

In 2016-2018, the Reclaiming Native Truth project found that:

- Eighty-seven (87) percent of state history standards do not mention Native American history after 1900; and
- Twenty-seven (27) states make no mention of a single Native American in their K-12 curriculum.

Invisibility and stereotypes about Native peoples perpetuated through K-12 education are reinforced across society, resulting in a damaging narrative regarding tribal nations and their citizens. The impact is devastating. Native Americans experience racism on a daily basis in large part because so many Americans lack the ability to fully experience and celebrate the culture, history and contributions of Native peoples.



False Narrative 2: “Illegal immigration increases crime.”

It’s a widely held belief that the violent crime rate increases along with the rise of “illegal” or undocumented immigration. This false narrative was given prominence in national media when in June 2015, then presidential candidate Donald J. Trump, launched his bid for the Republican presidential nomination with these words: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists, and some, I assume, are good people.” Statements like these made by prominent figures, and repeated in the news, fuel the false narrative that undocumented immigrants crossing the southern U.S. border were prone to commit violent crime.

Studies have shown this belief is flatly wrong. In fact, considerable amounts of research show that there’s no causal connection between immigration and crime in the United States. Even more specifically, in 2019 the Pew Research Center together with The Marshall Project combined estimates of undocumented immigrant populations sorted by metro areas with local crime rates published by the F.B.I. For the first time, there was an opportunity for a broader analysis of how undocumented immigrants might have affected crime rates since 2007. The findings showed that between 2007 and 2016, violent crime decreased slightly and similarly across most areas, regardless of whether the undocumented immigrant population rose or fell.

The impact of this false narrative reaches beyond immigrants, documented or not, to the entire Latinx community. Racist stereotypes that undocumented immigrants, specifically from countries south of the U.S. border, are dangerous has poisoned our understanding of this entire community and robbed us from appreciating the rich benefits they contribute to our society.

Dismantling False Narratives

As we’ve seen, false narratives may take years or decades to build, and therefore, it may take years to deconstruct them. Though it’s a hefty task, it’s possible to dismantle false narratives for the benefit of our entire society.

The first step in dismantling false narratives is identifying them. We start by identifying the lies that are destroying our society and prove them to be false. While proving a belief to be false may slow the spread of the information, the residual effects on our society may linger for decades. In order to reverse these effects, we have to replace false narratives with truth. Below are just a few examples that utilize the same institutions that perpetuated the false narratives discussed above to correct them.

- Correct K-12 curriculum to include Native American history that spans from pre-colonial to present day.
- Elevate Latinx journalists to tell the whole story of immigration to the United States.
- Feature Native actors in positive, leading roles.
- Elect Latinx leaders to advocate for policy that is just and protects the Latinx community.

If we are interested in advocating for a just and equitable society, we must consider the narratives that are shaping our culture, identify the lies and replace them with truth.

Reflect: How Would You Define a False Narrative?



Take five minutes to write down the top three characteristics of a false narrative.

What false narratives do you see shaping our culture, and how do you know they are false?

Take five minutes to list as many false narratives as possible. Circle the ones you can prove are false.

Is your life affected by one or more false narratives? Why or why not?

Change: Steps Toward Progress



Identify False Narratives

The hard work of dismantling false narratives must always begin with defining what those narratives are. But how do we know if a narrative is true or false? How do we determine if a belief, a story or a set of information is actually based on facts? It's important that we evaluate our sources of information.

Complete the following exercises to examine the sources of information that affect your beliefs and understanding of society. Specifically, keep in mind your understanding of history and current events as they inform your ideas on race and racism.



Educate Yourself on American History

Whether your formal education was fifty years ago or ten years ago there's probably room to brush up on your American history. American history education is notorious for being incomplete and incorrect especially as it relates to Native American history and Black history. Choose one of the resources below to learn more, and identify false narratives that might have shaped your beliefs for decades.

Read:

- "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" by Isabel Wilkerson
- "A People's History of the United States" by Howard Zinn
- "An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States" by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

Watch:

- "13th," An in-depth look at the prison system in the United States and how it reveals the nation's history of racial inequality.
- "Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock," The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in North Dakota captures world attention through their peaceful resistance against the U.S. government's plan to construct an oil pipeline through their land.
- "Immigration Nation," A documentary looking inside the world of immigration enforcement under the Trump administration.



Consider Your News Media Sources

Take five minutes and write down every source of news media you've consumed in the last week. Add up your sources and consider these next steps.

- **0 – 2 News Sources:** Consider adding one additional news source to your daily news consumption. And consider choosing a source that provides another perspective. For example, if you read the local paper and watch the local news every day, consider subscribing to a national newspaper online.
- **3 – 5 News Sources:** Consider the perspective of each of your sources. Are they all the same in political point-of-view, are they mostly white organizations, or are they all based in the U.S.? Consider balancing your news sources with one that offers a different perspective (e.g., conservative/liberal, minority-owned, international). Note: if you have five sources, consider swapping one out for a source with a different perspective.
- **6 – 10 News Sources:** Consider paring down your sources with a quality over quantity mentality. If you have ten (or more) consider cutting back to six or seven and consider the perspective of each of your sources (see above).



Consider Your Entertainment Sources

Entertainment is available to most of us immediately. We carry seemingly infinite amounts of shows, documentaries, podcasts, movies, music and more around with us, on our phones, constantly. Obviously, we have to make choices about what we consume. Consider the following criteria when selecting what you watch and listen to:

- Is there diversity in the cast or band?
- Are BIPOC represented in a positive or negative way?
- Is the story being told historically accurate?
- If the story is about a specific BIPOC community, was it written and created by the same BIPOC community?

By examining both the sources of and the media we consume, we can stop the cycle of false narratives, and furthermore, become intentional purveyors of truth.

Learn More



- “America Must Transform Her False Narrative to Tackle Racism,” https://www.ted.com/talks/olivia_o_donnell_america_must_transform_her_false_narrative_to_tackle_racism
- “Myths and Facts About Immigrants and Immigration,” Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/resources/fact-sheets/myths-and-facts-about-immigrants-and-immigration-en-espanol>
- “The spread of inaccurate political information in the era of distrusted news media,” Knight Foundation, https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/140/original/Topos_KF_White-Paper_Ladd_V1_ado.pdf
- [Illuminatives.org](https://www.illuminatives.org)

Sources:

“Becoming Visible: A Landscape Analysis of State Efforts to Provide Native American Education for All,” Illuminative, <https://illuminatives.org/wp-content/uploads/NCAI-BecomingVisibleReport-Digital.pdf>

“How Members of Anti-immigrant Extremist Groups Have Worked Closely With – And Joined – The Trump Administration,” American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/how-members-of-anti-immigrant-extremist-groups-have-worked-closely-with-and-joined-the-trump-administration>

“Illegal Immigration and Crime in Texas,” by Alex Nowrasteh, Andrew C. Forrester, and Michelangelo Landgrave, CATO Institute, <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2020-10/working-paper-60.pdf>

“Is There a Connection Between Undocumented Immigrants and Crime?” by Anna Flagg, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/upshot/illegal-immigration-crime-rates-research.html>

“Understanding How to Dismantle False Narratives,” by Leah Salgado, Illuminative, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U73YTF5Myu0>

