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“Truthiness”

There are many ways to chronicle the passing of a year such as 2005. News organizations post their sense of the top stories, such as Hurricane Katrina, the election of Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI, the war in Iraq, Supreme Court openings, rising oil prices, and the London bombings. Some frame the year in view of those who died, such as Pope John Paul II, Simon Wiesenthal, or Rosa Parks. Others look at the top Google searches for insight, which reveal a year filled with interest in Xbox 360, American Idol, and Harry Potter.

Often overlooked are the new words a year brings, this despite Aristotle’s reminder that words are “signs of ideas.”

At the end of each year the editors of the *Oxford American Dictionary* pick their “Word of the Year,” and for 2005, it is “podcast,” which for those of you who may be Luddites, is defined as “a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player.” Runners-up for the Word of the Year included “bird flu,” “persistent vegetative state,” and “sudoku.”

In an interview on National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition*, editor in chief of the dictionary, Erin McKean, was asked about words they were watching for 2006 – words that are now bursting on to the scene and may be candidates for “Word of the Year” for 2006. One of the primary words she noted they were tracking was, to say the least, telling.

The word was “*truthiness*.”

The word is not actually new. It can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The reason it is being tracked is because of its reinsertion into our lexicon through the Comedy Central television

network, and specifically through the premiere of "The Colbert Report" with Stephen Colbert (a satirical spin-off of "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," and a purposeful spoof on Fox's Bill O'Reilly). As part of a segment titled "Tonight's Word," Colbert offered the following:

And that brings us to tonight's word: truthiness.

Now I'm sure some of the Word Police, the wordanistas over at Webster's, are gonna say, "Hey, that's not a word." Well, anybody who knows me knows that I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn't true, or what did or didn't happen. Who's Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I wanna say it happened in 1941, that's my right. I don't trust books. They're all fact, not heart.

The idea behind "truthiness" is that actual facts don't matter. What matters is how you feel, for you as an individual are the final arbiter of truth. In an interview, Colbert said, "Truthiness is sort of what you want to be true, as opposed to what the facts support. Truthiness is a truth larger than the facts that would comprise it – if you cared about facts, which you don't, if you care about truthiness."

While used by Colbert to lampoon others, the irony is how much the word typifies the wider intellectual moorings of our day. It is as if we can see the absurdity of "truthiness," were it to exist in others, but not in ourselves. But at least on the surface we can still see it as absurd, and mock it on our comedy channels. For "truthiness" is beyond the radical perspectivalism of postmodernism. It is the bald assertion that we are not only to *discern* truth for ourselves *from* the facts at hand, but *create* truth for ourselves *despite* the facts at hand.

So while we are still able to ridicule it intellectually, we are living it functionally. Which makes me wonder whether "truthiness" will carry a negative or positive connotation when the Oxford American Dictionary finally gets around to including it in its next edition.

James Emery White

Sources

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