

The importance of countering false narratives

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This is a speech delivered by the President of Yale University to freshmen.

I felt a chill about Kitty Genovese's case, not only because she was killed, but because only one of the 38 people who witnessed it reported to the police. Are people really cold? Social psychologists wanted to find a reasonable answer to this, but there was a problem. The standard narrative version of Kitty Genovese's case is wrong on some key details. That is to say, social scientists have been retelling false stories for more than 50 years, using them as examples of bystander apathy.

We've been unconsciously telling the wrong version, or hearsay, and it's not true, but it's been going on. This wrong version has aroused public anger and even negative emotions such as excitement and anger. In some elections, there will always be those who do not keep their opponents in the lurch at all costs, spread misinformation, incite outrage and win. It's ironic, and it reminds me of Mark Twain's "running for governor." In order to win the governor's race, the candidates racked up every possible means to win the final election. Those so-called unscrupulous means, but through the media, public opinion to other candidates to discredit, causing pressure. Therefore, we should learn how to distinguish and fight against these false narratives. In many cases, many people like to listen to what is good for them. When I was in junior high school, a girl fell down and had a recurrence of a waist injury. Some onlookers naturally thought that tripping over her girls was problematic, but they did not think about the accuracy of the facts; always blindly listen to various versions. All of us are naturally inclined to accept what we already believe, to ignore or dismiss other ideas.

Millennial students are the flowers of the greenhouse, cared for and watered. Today, students who are truly innovative and courageous drop out of school to start a business, but some are still in the arms of their parents. What Yale's President wants to say is that we need a spirit of questioning, that no one is immune to prejudice, but that we have to be cautious.

Of course, in order to adapt to the world, people naturally construct favorable narratives. But when under pressure, the untrue narrative may control the public's reason, dominate social public opinion, stir up negative emotions and intensify differences. So we need to be a more prudent and critical thinker. You will learn why it often takes a lifetime of discipline, training, courage and perseverance to crack the toughest and most challenging questions of our time and build a new foundation.

As mentioned in the speech, we tend to be stirred up by the false narration and thus become not calm enough and forget to explore the more thoughtful things. Therefore, it is more important for us to understand and learn about ourselves, especially how emotions affect our thinking and behavior, before we can distinguish between untrue narratives. Above are some of my views and understanding.