

America's Debate on Bias and Subjectivity: There Really Are "Alternative Facts"

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Global Research, February 04, 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Except for certain constants in physics, chemistry and some other sciences there really are alternative facts for myriad answers to questions. The recent brouhaha over the use of the term alternative facts by a Trump White House staffer reveals more than media bias. It reveals utter stupidity.

As someone with a doctorate in science and engineering, a former full professor of engineering at a major university, the author of five nonfiction books and hundreds of articles, as well as a former senior official at the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment and the National Governors Association, I have seen countless cases of legitimate alternative facts. All kinds of professionals exercise considerable discretion at best and major bias and subjectivity at worst when selecting pieces of data for an analysis or to support a conclusion. Nor do they necessarily describe the limits and uncertainties of the data used.

Here is a relevant contemporary example. President Trump just issued an executive order to greatly limit new federal hires. In an [article in The Washington Post](#) the following appeared: "Depending on how the exemptions are interpreted, according to New York University public service professor Paul Light, the freeze might affect fewer than 800,000 employees, or more than one-fifth of the overall federal workforce."

That one fifth would correspond to 4 million federal employees. Is that figure too high or too low? Is it universally used?

Apparently not. Days later [another article in The Washington Post](#) cited 2.8 million current federal employees. This civilian workforce in the Executive Branch was shown to have been stable for some years. Yet it is fairly common to see the 4 million figure in various places.

I did an Internet search for the number of federal employees. I was not surprised to find a number of alternative facts about a parameter that one might think is not open to much interpretation. If your eyes are glazing over, it gets worse.

An [official federal government website](#) offered the following data for 2014. The total number is 4,185, 000. But this is comprised of 2,776,000 for the Executive Branch, 1,602,000 for the military, and 64,000 for the legislative and judicial areas.

One [website](#) says there are "1.8 million civilian employees, excluding postal service, according to the Department. of Labor." Another [site](#) says: "There are currently 1.9 million people employed by the federal government (without counting postal workers or military members)."

The [Postal Service website](#) says there are 625,000 employees. Subtract this from the 2.8 million figure and you get 2.18 million civilian workers, more than the 1.8 million or 1.9 million figures.

Nevertheless, these figures indicate that the above number of either 2.776 million or 2.8 million for the Executive Branch includes postal workers. But is it realistic to consider this number relevant to discussions of a hiring freeze, imposed by President Trump, which is what is done in the recent Washington Post article? Not likely.

They also suggest that the 800,000 figure in the WaPost article represents a much larger fraction of civilian federal workers, excluding postal workers, than the 20 percent given in the article referring to some 4 million workers.

An [article entitled “Counting federal employees is no simple task”](#) made the point that data may not always include Postal Service employees and that various factors can be used to justify certain numbers, such as what year the data were obtained for.

With this one example reasonable people can see that various numbers could be cited for the size of the federal workforce, such as 1.8 million, 2.8 million, or even 4 million. They are, it seems, alternative facts not carrying the burden of being intentionally false and deceptive.

In recent days there are more examples of how “facts” can vary and support the view that there really are alternative facts. The New York Times said there were 1.36 million civilian federal employees; Politico said it was 2 million; the Baltimore Sun said it was 2.7 million.

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