

# 'Alternative facts' not just in politics and media

February 19 2017

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A Michigan State University scholar is warning those who read about the latest groundbreaking research to proceed with caution.

"In [everyday life](#), we recognize that we should think twice about trusting someone's decision if they have a significant vested interest that could skew their judgment," said Kevin Elliott, an associate professor who specializes in the philosophy and ethics of science. "When reading the latest scientific breakthrough, the same tactic should be applied."

Elliott is presenting an analysis of case studies this month at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or AAAS, annual meeting in Boston. He's addressing the issues that currently exist when it comes to conflicts of interest in research and offering advice on how to detect "alternative facts" when it comes to science.

According to Elliott, historians have gone back and analyzed a number of different cases where groups with a financial conflict of interest either deliberately withheld scientific information or lied about what they knew and even designed studies in order to obtain the results they preferred.

"The Volkswagen scandal is a good contemporary example of this, along with more historical cases such as the tobacco industry's research around cigarette smoking," he said.

Last year, it was discovered the German automaker was cheating

emissions tests by installing a device in diesel engines that could detect when a test was being administered and could change the way the vehicle performed to improve results. This allowed the company to sell its cars in the United States while its engines emitted pollutants up to 40 times above what's accepted by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Elliott added that when it comes to the [tobacco industry](#), the "alternative facts" issue dates all the way back to the 1950s.

"When it comes to big tobacco, the industry developed a whole playbook of strategies to help manufacture doubt among consumers about the health implications of cigarette smoking," Elliott said. "They gave grants to researchers who they thought were likely to obtain results that they liked and developed industry-friendly journals to disseminate their findings."

Elliott added that similar strategies have also been used by big oil companies in response to climate change.

Besides employing an everyday skepticism to the research that exists today, Elliott suggests taking note of who is actually conducting the science and confirming if the science has been published in a well-respected, peer-reviewed journal.

"My number one piece of advice though would be to see what respected scientific societies like the U.S. National Academy of Sciences or the British Royal Society have to say about a specific topic," he said. "These societies frequently create reports around the current state of [science](#) and by reviewing these reports, people can avoid being misled by individual scientists who might hold eccentric views."

Elliott's AAAS presentation will take place on Feb. 19.

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: 'Alternative facts' not just in politics and media (2017, February 19) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-02-alternative-facts-politics-media.html>

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