

# THE TRUTH IS NOT US DONT SMITHS ONE YET WITH NOT

'Is this supposed to be good news? This is awful news.'

'LaMont, are you willing to listen to a Remark about what is true?'

'Okeydokey!'

'The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.'

*Infinite Jest*, p. 389  
David Foster Wallace

Text – Tommaso Valastro

Anyone who has even the slightest interest in the post-Soviet space is intimately familiar with the whirlwind of anger and disbelief that enveloped us in the months following February 24, 2022. To be honest, there are many ways in which we were not protagonists in those events, and in a certain sense it seems almost presumptuous to bring them to light in order to talk about ourselves. Yet, apart from the obvious moral responsibility of not having done enough, that first period of cold sweats tells us a great deal about us, and in way more than one aspect.

I have no intention of reiterating how unprepared many Europeans were for the concept of war: distant in time and space, I fear that for many, war will continue to be something that happens to others, until it happens to them. Nor do I think it is useful to revisit the various prejudices that, with the help of deliberate disinformation campaigns, have long prevented informed analysis of Ukraine from reaching the general public. To tell the truth, what I am about to develop is an intentionally banal reflection, as banal as water is to fish in David Foster Wallace's famous metaphor: a reflection on the uneasy and twisted relationship we have developed with that public good called truth [1].

We live and breathe in a saturated information environment: a high-choice and high-pace media ecosystem in constant transformation, in which we consume and produce content at insane rates. This hyper-mediation of our social reality has the paradoxical effect of increasing our reach to world events and decreasing our share of non-mediated knowledge. By now, each of us has found some way to adapt to this informational overload. Unfortunately, many have given up on understanding most things, to the point that they try to avoid most news. But could people really do that after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Let's explore it with three examples.

It's February 24th, 2022. Imagine Riccardo, an Italian man in his forties with an upturned nose and a slightly hoarse voice. While shaving his beard, he listens to the news at full volume on his cell phone, much to his wife's complaints. As he notices a few gray hairs peeking out above his sideburns, the news manages to intermittently capture his attention through the buzzing of the electric razor. Or imagine Johann, a young German student with a passion for both revolutionary socialists and very avoidable missed deadlines. While hastily eating his breakfast, he compulsively updates his Twitter feed, with the grim frown of somebody who will not remain once the platform transforms into "X".


Imagine also Lucía, a bright law student from Madrid who just recently moved to Brussels for an internship at the European Commission. While sitting on the tram, she listens to a breaking news podcast. All three of them, by the end of the day, are very likely to have consumed the Russian aggression as a main course of their media diet. You may ask them: “Is it true that the Russian army has just crossed the border with Ukraine?” They’ll most likely reply that this is true. Lucía will also have no problem asserting that Russia illegally invaded a sovereign state, and Riccardo will probably shrug without much bother. With Johann, we might already run into some specifications about NATO expansion but, in the end, he’ll at least admit the formal violation of international law. Terrible as the truth may be, it’s at least shared and public.

Fast forward to late March 2022: the inhumane bombing of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater in Mariupol by the Russian Armed Forces makes its way to the media diet of our protagonists [2]. While Riccardo keeps trimming his beard, Lucía pauses the podcasts and starts drafting a long LinkedIn post about it, urging for more sanctions. In the meanwhile, Johann has shifted his doomscrolling from Twitter to Telegram, where the channel “Anti-Spiegel” labels the bombing as “Western propaganda.” All of a sudden, the truth has turned from public good to private belief. Confused by the contradictory reports, Riccardo will soon conclude that he can’t really tell what’s happening outside of his personal experience, which is the best way he can find to feel better about civilians being bombed by an aggressor. If you thought that only in Putin’s Russia nothing is true and everything is possible, you may want to reconsider: in Johann’s mind, the 600 victims of that bombing will easily become just a propaganda tool of the Associated Press, while Riccardo will be too bothered by his own life to care about numbers. Furious about the slaughter, Lucía will include independent reports of the event in a policy note for her internship, but she’ll be too busy with her tasks to actually read them through. In the end, all three of them will have reached what is their personal truth: a coherent way to account for a

headline without putting anything too much into discussion.

How did we get from shared knowledge to private truth? As anticipated, the key lies in our relationship with truth. The prevalence of second-hand experiences in our knowledge of world events has become an excuse for our ignorance, but it could be easily overcome. All of us, at different points, have been Riccardo, Johann, or Lucía: too busy to be bothered with politics, too uncomfortable to accept some truth, or too irritated to challenge falsehood. And in this frenetic pursuit of some short-term comfort, we may have missed a chance or two to give our contribution to restore truth as a public good. Overcoming the urge to look for immediate comfort requires effort; to restore a reasonable societal agreement on the epistemological foundations of our world, we need to make this effort together. Only then, maybe,

“And in this frenetic pursuit of some short-term comfort, we may have missed a chance or two to give our contribution to restore truth as a public good.”

will truth be done with us, setting us free. 

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[1] DFW was an American novelist and philosopher. In his famous commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, he employed the image of fish not knowing what water is to describe those self-evident, all-encompassing conditions of existence that, being so constant and unremarked upon, remain unseen by virtue of their very ubiquity. Similarly, I argue that the very ubiquity of our problem with truth consigns it to the unnoticed background of most lives..

[2] The Russian Armed Forces bombed the theatre, which was being used as a shelter by over 1,200 people, on March 16, 2022, with an unknown death toll. An AP news investigation suggests that approximately 600 people were killed. Images circulated of the theater which had “CHILDREN” painted in massive Cyrillic letters around the theater.