

On Not Being an Obama-Lama Ding-dong
By Russell Frank

In the run-up to the Pennsylvania primary in 2008, a voter told a New York Times reporter that she couldn't see voting for Barack Obama because he was going to force everyone to convert to Islam.

The Times reporter felt obliged to point out that Obama was actually a Christian. The voter's response: Then what was he doing with "that lama guy" in Iraq?

Where do we begin to untangle the mass of misinformation in this voter's mind?

First and foremost, of course, the Dalai Lama is not a Muslim.

Second, he has not, as far as I know, spent time in Iraq, either with Barack Obama or without him.

And third, even if Obama had wanted to force everyone in America to convert to Islam, it is hard to imagine how, exactly, he would have pulled it off.

In the aftermath of the 2020 election there has been a lot of wrangling about voting rights. On one side are those who say they are trying to prevent fraud by tightening voter identification requirements and limiting the potential for ballot tampering. On the other side are those who see these fraud prevention measures as a smokescreen for disenfranchising certain voters by making it more difficult for them to cast their ballots when we should be making it easier.

As is often the case when Americans argue about rights, there's no parallel discussion of responsibilities. To raise the issue of voter responsibility is not to call for the revival of literacy tests or the institution of media literacy, but to call on voters themselves, as a matter of their own self-interest, to be as informed as possible before they cast ballots or exercise any of the other prerogatives of citizenship like signing petitions and participating in protests.

It isn't easy, especially now, when there is as much noise as news and it is getting harder and harder to tell one from the other.

Reporters are taught to corroborate – that is, check with multiple sources to ensure that every morsel of information is true. Ideally, the well-informed citizen would do the same.

Realistically, though, most of us have other things to do than devote a large chunk of our day to perusing the websites of multiple news outlets to learn whether they're all reporting more or less the same things. We have to trust. But whom do we trust?

The venerable titans of the journalism world – The New York Times, the Washington Post and the rest of the metropolitan dailies around the country – have become the punching bags of

critics on the left and the right. The right sees liberal bias. The left sees staunch defenders of the corporatist status quo.

Both sides are occasionally right but mostly wrong. Most mainstream journalists, believe it or not, believe in the mission of journalism, which is to say that their primary agenda is not to advance this or that cause, but to find out what's going on in the world that their audiences would be interested in knowing, and produce accurate, impartial accounts of those goings-on. Do journalists have opinions? They do. Can they set them aside? They can, just as umpires and referees can set aside their rooting interest in teams they loved when they were kids and call a fair game. It's called being a pro. Good game officials and good journalists take professionalism seriously, partly out of personal integrity, partly out of awareness that they're being judged by their peers and by the public.

Keep in mind also that the fiercest critics of the so-called legacy media are not exactly disinterested parties. They have agendas of their own, and if their agendas include deflecting negative news coverage, they will not hesitate to accuse the authors of that coverage of distorting, exaggerating or inventing the news.

As for all the other purveyors of news out there, including the social media platforms for stories that originated elsewhere, it's worth the few minutes of detective work it takes to track a story to its point of origin and then get a sense from what a website says about itself, and from the overall tone of its other stories, whether they're a reliable source.

But it all begins with recognizing the value of being well-informed. Look at it this way: If you only skim the news, or listen to it with half an ear, you may be quoted 13 years later as having said that Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama took a Muslim buddy trip to Iraq.