

FEATURE CULTURE

Merriam-Webster's Subversive Objectivity

A conversation with the highbrow trolls behind our dictionary of record's cheeky online presence

by Alex Halperin

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DURING THIS PERIOD OF EXTREME POLARIZATION, it may be some assurance to know that no matter their political persuasion, Americans tend to turn to the same dictionary when they need to know the truth: Merriam-Webster.

It wasn't always this way. Since it was founded 189 years ago by scholarly textbook publisher Noah Webster, the company has [vied with a number of competitors](#) to become the authority on U.S. English, from the elite Oxford American franchise to Microsoft's Encarta College Dictionary, available via CD-ROM. (Remember those?)

But once Merriam-Webster went online in the early 1990s, it quickly grew into the champion of the written word, boasting approximately [100 million views per month](#). And its reputation has skyrocketed in tandem with the popularity of its social media accounts.

If you're one of Merriam-Webster's nearly 400,000 Twitter followers, that may seem a bit counterintuitive. The company's "sassy" tweets often read as spiky rebukes to the Trump administration, so consistently pointed that when its recent #WordOfTheDay was "furtive" ("done by stealth"), one user responded by asking, "Holy crap! What happened now?!" Unbiased objectivity and partisan politics don't usually go hand in hand.

Officially, the company claims its social media presence leans neither right nor left. "Words from big stories get looked up, no matter what the subject," says Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's editor at large and frequent spokesperson (you may have caught a glimpse of him in an "Ask the Editor" video). "We see the news through the prism of vocabulary, and politics as reflected by the curiosity of the public has no greater or lesser role in our data [than the Oscars](#) or the World Series."

Sokolowski explains that after launching its "trend watch" feature in 2010, politics and language became inseparable. A month into its existence, trend watch helped confused Googlers understand what the White House was doing when it lifted its "moratorium" on deepwater drilling after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In 2012, when Mitt Romney criticized Obama for his European-style "socialism," internet users were desperate to find out exactly what that meant.

We now live in an unprecedented moment: One in which Kellyanne Conway, the president's senior advisor, goes on TV touting demonstrably untrue "alternative facts" about attendance at the inauguration ceremony, while our dictionary of record directly criticizes her on Twitter for doing so.



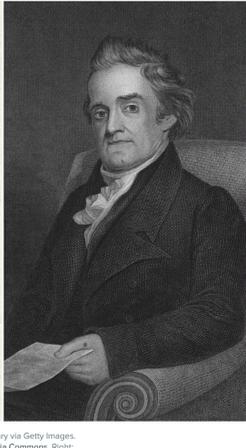
Merriam-Webster's chief digital officer and publisher Lisa Schneider says that, "Despite some assumptions to the contrary, the intellectual curiosity of the American people has not abated." The difference may be that the dictionary is no longer a simple dispenser of information. Today, it's an information exchange.

"Merriam-Webster has always been data-driven, by which I mean we rely on evidence, or data, about how a word is used in order to define it," says Sokolowski. "But we rarely knew how people were using the dictionaries we made until we put our dictionary online."

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Left: 1906 advertisement for Webster's International Dictionary via Getty Images. Center: An engraving of founder Noah Webster via Wikimedia Commons. Right: An 1860 pictorial dictionary has some fun with the definition of the word "accelerate" via Getty Images/Hulton Archive.



Sokolowski tells the story of the 18th century writer and lexicographer Samuel Johnson, who was "commended by a respectable lady for omitting the 'naughty words' from his dictionary." Johnson responded, "Madam, I see you looked them up!" Today, the publishers of dictionaries have incontrovertible evidence about which definitions—naughty or otherwise—are of most interest to the general public.

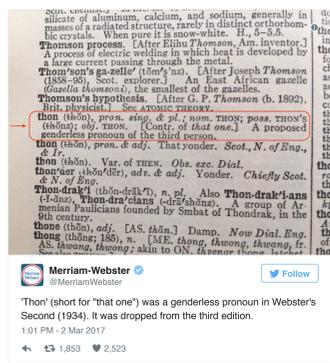
Content and social media manager Lauren Naturale, who has been painted by the press as an "erudite troll," says that even the tweets that appear to be throwing nothing but shade are drawn from data, not any kind of personal vendetta. She points to the time Kylie Jenner got a tattoo with the phonetic spelling of "sanity," which correlated with a spike in [lookups](#) for the word.

"We're pretty sure people were fact-checking her spelling," says Naturale. "Right now people are paying the most attention to (tweets about) words that trend because of something a politician said, but those aren't the only ones we publish."

Despite its playful attitude online, the company clearly refuses to portray itself as anything but "neutral," "objective" or "data-driven,"—which conveniently happen to be the same terms we use to describe reliable information. The numbers aren't supposed to lie. Words have specific meanings. Yet it may be Merriam-Webster's unswerving commitment to documenting reality that makes it seem so radical. As early as 1924, long before the Associated Press proclaimed the word "they" as an acceptable third-person pronoun for the genderqueer, the stodgy reference book included a definition for the word "thon": a proposed genderless pronoun of the third person.



Image via Kylie Jenner/Instagram



As long as Trump nonchalantly inflates the crowd size at his inauguration, or asserts without evidence that President Obama in what *The Economist* calls "subversive empiricism." Garry Kasparov, master of the utterly logical game chess and anti-Putin dissident, [tweeted in December](#) that, "The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth."

In 2006, Merriam-Webster's hailed the Stephen Colbert term "truthiness" as its Word of the Year—though if you try to look up the definition today, it appears only on [Dictionary.com](#). Nevertheless, it may be an opportune moment to look to his White House Correspondent's Dinner speech from that year, when he joked that "reality has a well-known liberal bias."

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"People seem to be seeking neutral, objective resources today more than ever," says Sokolowski. "If they are turning to the dictionary, it's in part because that is the traditional role of the dictionary, whether in a classroom, spelling bee, or court room. We're glad people are paying attention to language."

From the Energy Department's (unverifiable) alternative Twitter account to the [journalists jailed on felony charges](#) for covering a Trump riot, Merriam-Webster's commitment to objectivity has earned it a following in the Twitter resistance, even as it maintains its objectivity. Fortunately, they aren't [averse](#) to having some fun along the way.

Top featured image: Noah Webster. Born 1758-died 1843. "The Schoolmaster of the Republic"; portrait shown in front of dictionary, books, inkwell & desk. Image via Wikimedia Commons; photo illustration by Katie Wudel.

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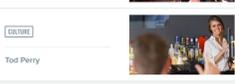
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