

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

DISCERNING FACT FROM FICTION GROWS MORE CRITICAL

As the parent of three grown children, I can say with certainty they have asked me hundreds of questions over the years on many different topics. I can also say they never once asked me about anything having to do with pop culture.

Knowing that, you might question my interest in the recent Hasan Minhaj controversy. If the name is unfamiliar (which it was to me, until last week) Minhaj is a Muslim Indian American comedian. He's known for telling stories that have social justice overtones and point to his own experiences with racism.

Minhaj uses television clips, mixed with personal photos, that add to the authenticity and appeal of his storytelling. He was considered a leading candidate to be the next host of "The Daily Show."

Here's the controversy, which caught my attention: It turns out Minhaj has been lying. A New Yorker exposé, written by Clare Malone, found that his stories are often embellished, or didn't happen at all. When Malone met up

with Minhaj (after weeks of sleuthing), Minhaj acknowledged the fabrications but stood by his work. He said, "Every story in my style is built around a seed of truth," describing his comedy as an Arnold Palmer drink: 70 percent emotional truth and 30 percent hyperbole, exaggeration or fiction.

The author of the "On Comedy" column in The New York Times, Jason Zinoman, said the nature of Minhaj's deceptions was "peculiar." Minhaj, he wrote, didn't lie to make himself funnier — he did it to raise the stakes "in the easiest, most self-regarding way possible." Zinoman believes that lying in comedy isn't necessarily wrong; the way Minhaj lied is what matters.

In his 2022 Netflix special, "The King's Jester," Minhaj told a story about opening a letter with his wife that had white powder in it. The powder spilled on their young daughter, who they rushed to the hospital, fearful it was anthrax. It was not — nor was the story true.

In another tale, Minhaj said

his prom date reneged on the day of the dance because her parents didn't want her seen in photos with a "brown boy." The woman told Malone that she'd turned down Minhaj (then a close friend) in person, days before the dance. If you're thinking that's not so bad (as lies go), the woman said she and her family were subjected to online threats for years.

Stories like these have broader consequences. Noor Noman, an MSNBC columnist, wrote, "Minhaj is the boy who cried racist wolf. Lying about racism does a huge disservice to racial and ethnic minorities, and it will likely only buttress White supremacy, an apparatus designed to belittle and deny racism as it is. Having a high-profile brown person build his career in part around fabricated experiences with racism will only feed into this narrative."

Zinoman properly concluded, "This genre of fiction is a shortcut to sympathy, an unearned tug at the heartstrings. It's not a capital crime, but it's an unnecessary and risky one. Treating trust carelessly has steep costs."

As a communications professional, I see the Minhaj story as part of a broader trend. We are less able to discern the truth and critically analyze the information (noise) that bombards us daily. A UC San Diego report estimated that Americans consume 11.8 hours of information each day, on average, from digital and analog sources. We're spending 7.5 hours looking at a screen.

That's bound to make it harder to distinguish fact from fiction, as was borne out by a 2019 study by the Stanford Graduate School of Education. When asked to look at a website about climate change, nearly all of the high school students surveyed failed to consider how ties to the fossil fuel industry might affect its credibility. When shown a grainy Facebook video of ballot box stuffing (that was actually shot in Russia), more than half felt certain it constituted "strong evidence of voter fraud."

The findings are particularly worrisome when you consider that today's high school students are tomorrow's voters.

Some states are taking pos-

itive steps to address the situation. Earlier this year, New Jersey became the first state to mandate instruction on media and information literacy in grades kindergarten through 12. The curriculum will cover the research process and methods for creating and producing information; critical thinking skills; and the difference between facts, points of view, and opinions. It will also address the economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information and how to ensure its ethical production.

When it comes to his stage shows, Minhaj told Malone, "the emotional truth is first. The factual truth is secondary." Thinking about his comment in a broader context, we can't accept this as reality. And we must become better equipped to tell the two apart.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncronline.com

HARBOR

FROM B1

Times called it Oceanside's "one last hurrah of summer" and noted it was the city's largest annual event, attended by 65,000 people. Admission and parking were free, but food and novelties were sold and there were fees for some activities such as the \$35 at the time to cover the cost of materials needed for the Nail 'n' Sail.

Camp Pendleton contributed displays of military boats, vehicles and weaponry, and the U.S. Coast Guard offered tours of its 85-foot cutter the Point Hobart, which was stationed in the Oceanside harbor at the time. Today, the nearest Coast Guard cutter is in San Diego.

Liz Rhea, chair of the city's Harbor and Beaches Advisory Committee, said the loss of the event is "a tragedy."

"It had gone downhill quite a bit," she said, probably for a combination of reasons.

"I think maybe the

Chamber got tired of it," Rhea said. "It was a lot of work ... and it's hard to keep everybody happy."

In recent years, the festival has become more corporate, she said. Commercial vendors selling products like windows and artificial turf replaced a lot of the "mom and pop" booths offering food and arts and crafts.

"It's really sad," Rhea said. "This brought people who would not otherwise come to the harbor down to see it."

She hopes somebody can bring the event back next year, she said.

"You've got to work on this," she said. "Don't give up the ghost."

If someone does bring back Harbor Days, it probably won't be the Chamber, Ashton said.

The most likely sponsor is Kennedy Faires, an event management consultant based in Vista that handles the annual Carlsbad Village Street Faire, two Encinitas street fairs, the Fallbrook Avocado Festival and others around the county. Kennedy has managed the ven-

dors for Harbor Days for about the past 10 years, Ashton said.

"We are continuing to talk with Kennedy Faires about it," he said. "That's key to the event. We (the Chamber) do the big-picture marketing."

Rick Bauer, a partner at Kennedy Faires, confirmed the discussions in an email Wednesday and said no decision has been made.

"We are continuing conversations with the Chamber about the future of Harbor Days, but we don't have any specifics to share at this time," Bauer said.

Community events like Harbor Days provide operating revenue for the chamber, along with membership fees and grants.

"With Harbor Days off our plate, it's allowed us to focus more on our other events," Ashton said.

Other Chamber fundraising events include the Heroes of Oceanside luncheon, the North County Health and Wellness Fair, and the Oceanside Senior Expo.

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SMOLENS

FROM B1

Unlike San Diego and Los Angeles, many local government agencies in the San Diego region and across the nation don't have their own pension funds but participate in state-run retirement systems, such as the California Public Employees Retirement System, known as CalPERS.

The states' combined unfunded pension benefits were just under \$1 trillion in 2021, according to a report last year by Pew Charitable Trusts.

That's actually an improvement from the \$1.25 trillion total pension debt in 2019. Despite the narrowing shortfall — which regularly fluctuates — Pew said "pension liabilities persist as a major long-term challenge."

"For most states," the report said, "unfunded pension liabilities are the largest of three major long-term obligations weighing on their future finances, ahead of unfunded retiree health care benefits for public employees and outstanding debt."

The numbers are so big it's hard to put them into context. Often, funded ratios in pension systems are used as a gauge of fiscal health more than debt in dollars. But, to no surprise, that gets complicated.

An 80 percent funded level or above frequently has been cited as a benchmark for pension plans in reasonably good shape.

The American Academy of Actuaries dismissed that as "The 80% Pension Funding Myth."

"In reality, however, no

single level of funding distinguishes a healthy plan from an unhealthy plan," according to the association.

For what it's worth, the city's and county's funded ratios have been below 80 percent in recent years.

CalPERS' funded ratio for its approximately \$450 billion pension plan dropped to 72 percent last year from 81 percent in 2021 after investments took a big hit. But the system reported an upswing on its returns in July.

Jen Sidorova, a policy analyst with the Reason Foundation, wrote that the CalPERS debt roughly translated to more than \$4,000 for every Californian.

The Pew report takes a different approach in assessing and comparing pension debt by calculating the shortfall as a percentage of personal income in a given state.

Looking at debts that way "reflects their size relative to each state's economic resources and allows for more meaningful comparisons between states and within states over time," according to Pew.

The last state-by-state data available, Pew said, was for 2019, when the total debt was \$1.25 trillion — "equivalent to 6.8% of all states' personal income, up from 3.0% in fiscal 2007, just before the Great Recession."

California was slightly above the average at 7.3 percent.

Nine states had pension debt greater than 10 percent of personal income in fiscal 2019, according to the report. New Jersey's un-

funded pension liability was the largest of any state — and the fastest growing since 2007 — at 20.2 percent of its total personal income.

On the other end of the spectrum, Wisconsin and South Dakota had pension assets that exceeded their liabilities and were among the eight states with declines in unfunded liabilities since the Great Recession.

The city and county of San Diego keep chipping away at their pension debt.

In July, the city put \$448 million into its retirement fund — the largest annual payment ever. The county expects to direct around \$800 million to its system this year.

City officials have asked its pension board to allow payments to be stretched out — so-called "smoothing" — that would lower the annual contributions.

Regardless of whether that happens, there will be familiar reports of huge pension debts and large annual payments for years to come.

Given the reforms in recent years, however, the shortfalls will narrow over time and, in theory, disappear.

But that will continue to be a costly path.

What they said

Tiffanie Simmons, a member of the United Auto Workers union in Michigan, regarding former President Donald Trump via [thesanger.com](https://www.thesanger.com).

"He, in so many words, has talked a great talk, but he didn't walk any of the walk."

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Together San Diego

LIVESTREAM

Community relations manager Paola Hernández-Jiao interviews the people and organizations working to make our community a better place.



Thursday, Oct. 5 at 12 p.m.

David Alarcon
Executive chef
Fuego Santo Restaurant

20 Baja chefs participating at Día de los Muertos festival

Hear from Chef David Alarcon about Mexico Gourmet's Día de los Muertos Gourmet Food and Spirits Festival, featuring 20 renowned chefs from Baja restaurants. The event will be held Oct. 21 and 22 at Fashion Valley and will include food and spirits tastings, entertainment, art and music. Funds raised will benefit the nonprofit Media Arts Center San Diego.

Watch the interview at:
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