

Opinion

Time to know the difference between manure, chocolate mousse

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

Good luck to President Joe Biden. He's going to need it.

On Jan. 20, Biden walked into a White



Ortals

House with an inferno of problems awaiting him. Of course, there was the virus situation — 400,000 dead already and 3,000-4,000 dying every day. While companies like Moderna, Pfizer and others performed extraordinarily in develop-

ing and manufacturing effective vaccines for wide distribution in a matter of months, apparently no thought was given to how vaccines would become vaccinations.

The economy is staggering under the siege of the virus and the pathetic handling of it. High unemployment, businesses failing and people on the verge of eviction with no income and nowhere to go.

A federal budget that was already running \$1 trillion in the red

was lambasted by \$3.5 trillion in additional stimulus spending. The national debt is now near \$28 trillion.

Violence, division and racial unrest plaguing our cities and murder rates setting records from Miami to Seattle. And these are just some of the domestic issues that have been left for Biden to try to clean up.

But, as Biden has said, there is nothing we cannot accomplish if we work together. And that is Biden's greatest challenge.

At no time since the Civil War has this country been more divided. Four years of Trump stoking those divisions, playing on fears and prejudices and demonizing "the other" — whether that be immigrants, the news media, Democrats or anyone else who didn't toe the line — is partially responsible for the mob storming the Capitol on Jan. 6, but that's almost more of a symptom than a cause.

According to Thomas Jefferson, "the best defense of democracy is an informed electorate." True. And today, two centuries later, our democracy is in danger because there is a fault line running through American society: fake news. Like never before, we are besieged with information from a cornucopia of sources: television, radio, social media, the internet and others. What can you believe?

Information comes flying at us from a thousand different sources with no requirement to make it true or accurate. Social media has provided the means to spew it on the winds. As the saying goes, "a lie travels half-way around the world before the truth can get its shoes on." What can we do about it?

There has been a lot of talk about reining in Twitter and Facebook, but these are just two of the sources of disinformation and there are so many. Is censorship the answer? Who would be the censor? Based on what authority? Using what criteria? Censorship is a slippery slope. There's a reason Freedom of Speech is the First Amendment.

But, if we're not going to put limits on the information that permeates the atmosphere, we're going to have to get a lot better at consuming it.

The people that stormed the Capitol believed that what they were doing was absolutely right. They were the "good guys." They believed that Trump was sent by God to save America and they were doing His work. That's because everything they watch and read and hear tells them so. And they don't question it.

There is truth and there are facts and we all need to get a lot better at

telling the difference between manure and chocolate mousse. We need to improve our critical-thinking skills.

The Trump campaign made numerous accusations and claims about voter fraud: dead people voting, rigged voting machines, ballot dumps, etc. These claims were taken to court — 60 in all — and they were all tossed. Why? Because you can't go to court and just make accusations and claims. You have to provide evidence. There was none.

We all need to act like those courts. Start with an open mind; listen to different points of view; be suspicious; investigate; demand evidence and review it critically. The only way we can begin to heal the division in the county is if we all come to some agreement as to what the facts are.

Years ago, I was riding MetroLink to a Cardinal baseball game. A young man was luring people into a three-card monte con by letting them win. I asked him, "If you lose all the time, how did you get that big wad of cash in your hand?" Without looking up, he replied, "Let them think for themselves." I agree. Just get better at it.

Alan J. Ortals, former publisher of the Illinois Business Journal, can be reached at aortbals@ibjonline.com.

Zoom and the new workspace; don't forget to dust your mantel

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Where would we be in the past year without the ingenuity of Eric Yuan?

The founder of the Zoom Video



Grubaugh

Communications platform transformed our lives by offering us a chance to meet and greet, conduct business, educate, litigate, legislate, stay in touch, raise funds, and otherwise

safely hook up with people during the worst health crisis in a century.

And while it has its drawbacks — such things as bad links, operator error, and other crises of computerization — it's done far more to benefit mankind than not. Zoom, and platforms like it, are here to stay and will impact much of the communication of the future.

So, it's best to learn to live with it in the workplace. Bosses who frequently call employees to the conference room have no compunction about calling those same people working in remote locations to hold a video conference. That can be an imposition and it can be awkward.

Not every meeting goes as planned. Some employees make the most of their

meeting time by doing other things. I've watched people take phone calls, conduct secondary conversations, leave and come back with a full cup of coffee and other distractions in meetings that would be handled quite differently if they were being conducted in person.

My oldest son told me his district manager got wise to the actions of submanagers when, right after every Zoom call, the boss' email would be full of work schedules that the managers were compiling while they were supposed to be paying attention to the boss.

There is something to be said for multitasking, I guess.

And my youngest son recounted a video work meeting in which his cat climbed up behind him and began attacking a mouse toy, visible to everyone but the cat owner.

Social media has been alive with such animal sightings, along with errant spouses, crying children, and just about everything else that breaks loose in the average household, always at an inopportune time, and in the case of Zoom meeting productivity, often laughably disruptive.

Individually, we've adjusted somewhat. Bad hair days, for instance, are no longer an issue and sometimes pajama attire is perfectly fine. Some people have discovered that you can put up a stationary picture in place of the Real McCoy, live view, thereby escaping closer ex-

amination from peers. So long as they keep their mics muted and their photo on display, participants could be running a vacuum cleaner, and no one's the wiser.

A Twitter page has sprouted up, dedicated to examining the background of Zoom participants. It's called Room Rater. Imagine what coworkers think when they see dust on the mantel behind you. You'd never invite these people to your living room, but you'll allow them an unadulterated, online view of your mess.

The way we are adapting and the proper protocols have been subject of countless webinars — themselves conducted over Zoom. The Metro East chapter of People in Business Networking, for instance, held one of those last month, calling it, "Simple Steps to Succeed in Zoom."

And, Cynthia Spraggs, CEO of Virtira, a completely virtual company that helps other businesses work virtually, wrote a helpful book with a name you'll soon not forget, called, "How to Work from Home and Actually Get SH*T Done" (www.virtira.com).

Among Spraggs' tips for getting the most out of online meetings:

- Limit the time. "Two hours is much better for a maximum," she said. "When they run longer, your participants are going to experience significant muscle and eye fatigue, not to mention be tempted by the incredible distractions that come with working remotely."

- Build a structure to keep things on track. Templates for meeting agendas, action items, business reviews and such can be cross coordinated and reinforced on calls.

- Protest pointless meetings. "Don't take valuable chunks of work time away from team members for a call they don't need to be on."

- Treat meetings like contract discussions. "Online loosey-goosey meetings without any real point don't get anyone anywhere," she says. "Get opinions from everyone. For the introverts not comfortable with sharing, consider implementing anonymous input forms. You'll be amazed how engagement increases."

- Don't drive yourself to distraction. "Turn off your phone and notifications. Otherwise, someone is going to ask you something and there will be that dead air as everyone waits for you to respond."

Spraggs said some supervisors are not doing a very good job respecting their employees' personal time. She's heard stories about workers mandated to eat lunch on camera or be forced to gather socially after a long workday.

"Some remote workforces have transitioned smoothly, but a great many need to learn how to adjust," she said.

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Illinois Business Journal

The *Illinois Business Journal* is owned and operated by Better Newspapers Inc.
P.O. Box C • Mascoutah, IL 62258

Web site: www.ibjonline.com

Periodical mailing permit 332440

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