

## Alumni Insight: With RonNell Andersen Jones

04/15/2020

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### The Virtue of Truthseeking

My liberal arts education at Utah State University was a gift in many ways. When I walked across the stage at graduation, I took away not just a diploma, but valuable skills as a writer and a thinker, an understanding of the past that helped me plan for the future, the ability to strategize and problem-solve in creative and public-serving ways, and the knowledge I needed to build rewarding careers in journalism and the law. But the single most significant thing that my time at USU gave to me is something I did not fully appreciate until much later in my life. My university studies taught me to seek after and value truth.

This virtue of truthseeking is one I now study as a constitutional law scholar, and it is one that I'm convinced is increasingly threatened in our country. My current research, which focuses on how we consume news and the ways we communicate about matters of public concern, suggests that we are losing sight of this value. Let me offer three pieces of advice about how you might use your time as an Aggie to become a better truthseeker—and how you might enhance our democracy in the process.

#### Use Your Education to Combat Selective Exposure

Research makes clear that people have a wide variety of subconscious motivations other than truthseeking—and that we, as a society, have an increasing problem

with biased assimilation of information and “selective exposure.” That is, the evidence suggests many of us are primarily seeking out not what is “true,” but instead what confirms our existing beliefs and worldviews. Research on media consumption demonstrates that party affiliation and political preferences often drive media choices, including our awareness of and our trust in various sources of news. As you investigate your own behaviors on this front, think about whether you choose to inhabit echo chambers where you surround yourself with people and information sources who agree with you. Our online lives, in particular, are ideologically siloed because of our growing power to filter what we read—compounded by the ways that internet companies and social media platforms algorithmically filter information for each of us, based on what they know about us. The resulting “filter bubbles” mean we are only seeing what is already comfortable to us. Your liberal arts education is teaching you that exposure to a wider variety of ideas—and to a broader scope of views and positions on those ideas—is healthy for you as a person and critical to us as a society. The U.S. Supreme Court, whose work I study closely, has told us that our Constitution “presupposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues.” Think about your own information diet, and put your education to use in expanding what you consume.

#### Use Your Education to Make Yourself a Better Updater

We would all like to believe that if we possessed false factual information and were given new, better information, we would update what we know and embrace the truth. However, cognitive behavioral science now strongly suggests that our views on factual questions are actually quite “sticky,” and that we are slow to revise our view of the facts, even when the evidence is clear. Much of the research suggests that our group affiliation, political ideology, and emotional comfort are more important to us than getting at the truth, and so we make excuses to allow ourselves to cling to facts that are more favorable for people on our “team.”

But this isn't how democracies are designed to function—and it isn't what your education has taught you is the best path to knowledge and happiness. A university experience is designed, first and foremost, to expose a student to the mechanisms of truthseeking. You have the chance, here at Utah State, to explore in depth the ways that people throughout time have tested propositions, replaced old ideas with better ones, and improved their own intellectual rigor. Your experiences here place you in the privileged position of knowing the tools, procedures, and institutions that can be trusted in this truthseeking endeavor. Your education can equip you to ask hard questions and accept hard answers, and it can give you

both the intellectual curiosity and the intellectual humility to contribute meaningfully to our democracy. We are better as individuals and as a nation when we listen and update.

### **Use Your Education to Contribute to Public Debate**

Finally, and critically, you can use the education you are receiving at USU to make meaningful contributions to public discussions. Democracy demands not just that we gain knowledge, but that we turn knowledge into thoughtful action.

Studies suggest that, in this era of reality television and viral memes and entertainment-based smartphone apps, only a small number of people show meaningful interest in news about government and politics. There is significant evidence that many people have become so overwhelmed with news that they disengage entirely. But your time at Utah State has undoubtedly helped you see that citizens in a democracy have a duty to consume information responsibly and a corresponding duty to contribute to meaningful discourse—and that it is personally fulfilling to do both of these things. Build upon the things you have gained in your university experience and commit yourself to being a lifelong truthseeker who translates your learning into public-serving activity—voting intelligently, enhancing the integrity of government proceedings, clamoring for meaningful change, proposing remedies to societal wrongs, and holding elected officials accountable. Decline to take shortcuts, like labeling something “fake news” or “biased” merely because it contradicts your preference or is unflattering of your preferred politician. Refuse to allow name-calling and vilifying to substitute for meaningful conversations in the public sphere. Do the harder but more satisfying work of processing and digesting information and bringing critical judgment to bear on public affairs. A university education gives you excellent practice in exercising the power of reason in public discussions. It teaches you that thoughtful people can have civilized dialogue and disagree agreeably. It prepares you to be a real truthseeker and then to be an effective advocate for what you think are the best policy choices in our community.

Whatever your major, the most important thing you are studying at Utah State University is the process of truthseeking. As you commit yourself to consuming a wider range of news and information, updating your views on the basis of new facts, and contributing to public conversations, you will see the benefits of that education in your own life. More than this, you will improve the community around you and be an important part of what keeps our democracy vibrant and productive.

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