

# CREDO

LGT JOURNAL ON WEALTH CULTURE

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TRUTH | XXXIV 2022



# Truth

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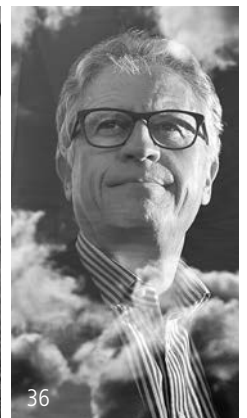
Can the relationship between truth and reason be deciphered? That is the question that the Italian writer and semiotician explores in "The Name of the Rose".

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**Dear Readers**

Media scientist Bernhard Pörksen's first book was "Wahrheit ist die Erfindung eines Lügners" (Truth is the Invention of a Liar). In it, he and the physicist and philosopher Heinz von Foerster explore the viability of the concept of truth and discuss the supposed objectivity of individual perception.

Today, more than 20 years later, the social media are fueling the debate over who has the right to claim their narrative is the truth. In a world where an ever-growing number of people can make their voices heard, the line between opinions and fact-based findings risks being blurred forever. In his essay in this issue of CREDO, Bernhard Pörksen warns that these systemic crises of truth and knowledge are endangering our democratic society.

According to climate researcher Thomas Stocker, every individual is ultimately responsible for deciding which truth they accept. However, he feels that the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that truth is extracted through painstaking scientific work. "We will never get to the truth," says statistician Erich Neuirth in an interview, "but we have to work on getting closer and closer to the truth."

Sacha Batthyany examines what happens to a country that distorts its history to suit its ideals and goals, using Hungary as an example. Meanwhile, in her native Italy, the subject of our cover story, Letizia Battaglia, was long dismissed: "As if it's my fault that I saw what I did," she says. However, today, this woman who captures the truth with her camera is considered a living legend.

And while in "The Name of the Rose", the novel explored by Ijoma Mangold, access to the library is strictly controlled ("For not all truths are meant for all ears."), we would be delighted if you were to share this issue of CREDO with people you think might enjoy it. I wish you insightful reading.



H.S.H. Prince Philipp von und zu Liechtenstein  
Honorary Chairman LGT

# “There are a lot of manipulative forces at play today”

Text: **Thomas Stocker** | Photo: **Adrian Moser**

**Truth is something that must be established and fought for. That is the conclusion that Professor Thomas Stocker of the University of Bern has drawn based on his long-standing experience as a climate researcher. And he believes that in its efforts to this end, the scientific community must now, more than ever, undertake to communicate effectively, provide context and correct untruths.**

Climate research has become a focal point for society and impacts political decisions. However, the truth about the climate and the changes it is undergoing is no longer something that is only discussed by scientists. Instead, it has become a matter of public debate. And as such, it is being negotiated and manipulated. The truth is dangerous for those who benefit from ignorance and uncertainty. In order to render this truth harmless, it is being relativized and neutralized with deliberately generated uncertainty. We climate researchers have experienced this directly over the last 30 years.

In the mid-1970s, scientists began to issue warnings that the world would become significantly warmer if the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, which has been measured since 1958, is not stabilized. They predicted that a doubling of this concentration, expected to be reached by around 2030, would have dangerous effects on humans and nature. The cause of the rise? The burning of fossil fuels; coal, oil and gas. This scientific truth was explosive, as it was the first time that the long-term consequences of global industry were revealed. The need to reduce emissions called into question what until then had been a profitable business model.

This truth became even more explosive when the conventions on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification were adopted at the UN Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The scientific basis for the Convention on Climate Change was provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), whose first

report was approved by the member states in 1990. At the time, it appeared that the truth about the causes and potential impacts of climate change had thus been firmly entrenched in international politics. People could have started to develop solutions.

But this truth was inconvenient. In the US, a number of new “institutes” and organizations issued reports that challenged the scientific evidence. They presented an alternative truth, namely that climate change has always existed, and that CO<sub>2</sub> is essential for life, that trees cannot grow without it. From then on, they pursued a debate with the scientific community using a targeted mixture of facts and speculative connections, which proved successful in influencing public opinion.

Skepticism may be the origin of all scientific progress. But not all skepticism is automatically also the key to new findings. Instead, it has an obligation to deliver: the skeptic must present a comprehensive new finding that conclusively explains all the existing facts and explains the contradictions being criticized. This is an enormous task – and the climate skeptics have never fulfilled this obligation. What should have been a scientific discussion was cleverly turned into a public debate: truth versus assertions. Over the years, this strategy has given some people the impression that man-made climate change is not a proven fact – in other words, not a reliable truth – and that there are instead still many uncertainties surrounding the matter. Some therefore conclude that climate protection is unnecessary.

This strategy of casting doubt was very successful in the US, and it was applied in virtually the same form in Europe. Throughout this process, the argumentation was astonishingly flexible – because apparently, truths can be created and changed. For example, in the 1990s, the claim was that global warming was part of a natural climate cycle; the position in the 2000s was that global warming was no longer happening. In the 2010s, it was admitted that a quantifiable amount of warming was indeed taking place, but that its effects were negligible.

## Thomas Stocker

Professor Thomas Stocker (62) heads the Department of Climate and Environmental Physics at the University of Bern's Physics Institute. He has been working on climate-related topics for 30 years, and was Co-Chair of Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) from 2008 to 2015. He was recently awarded the Prix Caritas 2021.



The truth has also been manipulated using less subtle strategies, however. A few weeks before the 2009 climate conference, where the two-degree target was to be adopted, an English university's e-mail server was hacked. Quotes from the correspondence between the authors of the IPCC reports were published that suggested that climate researchers were withholding or altering data. The direct attack on the professional integrity of these scientists was intended to damage climate research as a whole.

This mobilized climate researchers to defend the scientific truth against attack all the more vigorously. Two good examples of this come to mind. First: one of the key statements presented by the authors in the final document for the 2013 IPCC report, which I co-chaired, was the linear relationship between cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (all emissions since 1750) and global warming. This politically explosive truth met with fierce resistance, especially from China. After exceedingly tough negotiations, this important point was adopted by consensus at 2 a.m. Truth is therefore something that must be established.

Second: a year later, the IPCC's Synthesis Report, which would form the scientific basis for the Paris Agreement, was discussed. The pressure was correspondingly high. The authors had included a graph of the causal chain from effect to cause: temperature – sea level – greenhouse gas concentrations – fossil fuel emissions. This scientific finding, which was prominently positioned in the report, was something Saudi Arabia and certain

other countries did not want included. When, after four days, a small group proved unable to reach a consensus on the matter, this failure had to be announced to the full plenum. The facts were thus presented once again and after some skillful negotiations, the mood in the room shifted: the graph put forward by the scientific community would not be removed. Scientific fact had come out on top for this report. Truth is therefore something that must be fought for.

These two examples demonstrate how science is increasingly in the public eye, and that scientists are required to explain and defend their findings and, if necessary, fight for the truth. There are many forces at play today that want to define or manipulate the truth. They are not always recognizable, as many are now also firmly established in the virtual world, where it is even easier to “manufacture” truth and let it multiply in a targeted manner. The scientific community must therefore undertake to communicate effectively, provide context and correct untruths.

Ultimately, each individual is responsible for which truth they accept and on which “truths” they base their decisions and actions. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the truth is extracted through painstaking scientific work: from fighting the virus to developing vaccines and analyzing how it spreads. Science delivered the findings on all of these fronts and made it possible for expedient action and measures to be taken for the good of society. The climate crisis is no different. ♦