

Kellyanne Conway, one of Trump’s key advisors, has come up with a new term for deliberate falsehoods: “alternative facts.” It’s a concept that does not augur well for the next four years. And it hasn’t gone unnoticed: the hashtag #alternativefacts is spreading like wildfire.

Here’s how the alternative facts concept surfaced. Upset by press reports that the inauguration crowd was smaller than Obama’s, the White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer called the press in to berate them, vehemently [insisting](#) that the crowd was the biggest in history. He also gave some figures about Metro use to justify his claim. Unfortunately, both claims were [flatly false](#), as shown clearly by aerial photos and the actual metro figures. Conway defended these falsehoods, saying that they were merely “alternative facts,” rather than lies. (The transcript is [here](#); if anything her evasiveness and hostility to being questioned is even more dismaying.) Her view brings to mind a pro-Trump pundit who opined that “[t]here’s no such thing, unfortunately anymore, of facts.”

Unlike statements about global temperatures, determining the facts here doesn’t turn on massive amounts of data and extensive analysis. It’s true that estimating crowd size accurately is difficult, as Conway said. But the [photos](#) make it obvious that the Mall was completely filled by Obama in 2008 and that there was a lot of empty space in the back two-thirds of the Mall in 2017. And counting the number of Metro rides on a given day isn’t exactly rocket science.

It’s really no wonder that scientists were frantically trying to save data before the new Administration took office, or that many economists are [deeply worried](#) about the future of government data-collecting efforts. Why worry about actual data when it’s so much cheaper, easier, and more comfortable to invent alternate data? And, as Holly Doremus has [written](#), there are serious reasons for concern about protections for scientific integrity in the new Administration.

It looks like we will now have to amend a famous saying by Mark Twain. Now there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and “alternative facts.” It’s fortunate that in our system the government has to justify its actions in court. Few government lawyers will be willing to make arguments that contradict the evidence in the record. And even fewer judges will accept the defense that the government was relying, not on the actual facts, but on “alternative” ones.