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What Dictionary.com's words of the year say about us

By [Brandon Griggs](#), CNN

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(CNN) — If you made a judgment about our planet based on the words that reflect where we are as a culture, you'd probably reach this conclusion:

We're not doing well.

Dictionary.com's word of the year for 2018 is **misinformation**. Its word last year was **complicit**. The year before that? **Xenophobia**.

It's a far cry from 2010, when the word of the year was **change**. Of course, change can be good or bad, but its aspirational tone -- "I can change!" -- sounds downright quaint compared to words about silent acceptance of wrongdoing, or fear of foreigners.

Chris Kennedy, a professor of linguistics and humanities at the University of Chicago, said that if you put the words of the year in a cultural context, they reveal something ... not pretty.

"If you had that (context) ... then sure enough you'd conclude that this (especially the last three years)

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[nailed](#) against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar.

Ugh. OK, so maybe 2018 hasn't been a stellar year. But it has plenty of recent company.

Here's a look at all the words of the year since Dictionary.com began naming them in 2010.

2010: **change** -- Dictionary.com chose the word as a referendum on Barack Obama's 2008 campaign slogan -- and his presidency. "The national debate can arguably be summarized by the question: In the past two years, has there been enough change?" the site wondered. "Has there been too much?"

2011: **tergiversate** -- No, we didn't know what it means, either. Dictionary.com defines this little-known word as "to change repeatedly one's attitude or opinions with respect to a cause, subject, etc." They said they chose it because "the stock market, politicians and even public opinion polls have tergiversated all year long."

2012: **bluster** -- The word means both "to roar and be tumultuous, as wind" and "noisy, empty threats or protests; inflated talk." In other words, the year's extreme weather and politics.

2013: **privacy** -- The online dictionary cited Edward Snowden, TSA body scanners, the short-lived Google Glass eyewear and the growth of social media as examples of thorny privacy issues that made headlines that year.

2014: **exposure** -- "In 2014, the Ebola virus, widespread theft of personal information and shocking acts of violence and brutality dominated the news," Dictionary.com said. Not a great year.

2015: **identity** -- OK, this word wasn't so bad. That was the year Bruce Jenner became Caitlyn Jenner, and Dictionary.com chose it to represent discussions around gender and racial identity.

2016: **xenophobia** -- From the Brexit vote to Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric, fear of the "other" was a prevailing theme of the year. Dictionary.com sounded almost guilty in choosing it, saying, "xenophobia is not to be celebrated."

2017: **complicit** -- We can probably thank Ivanka Trump for this one. In [an April 2017 interview](#), the first daughter said, "I don't know what it means to be complicit." Dictionary.com defines the word as "choosing to be involved in an illegal or questionable act, especially with others."

2018: **misinformation** -- In other words, fake news. Enough said.

Sure, it's impossible to sum up a year in a single word. But taken together, these nine words paint a pretty dark picture of the past decade.

"I think 'change' and 'identity' are more uplifting choices, but yes, especially over the last few years, the words have been really heavy," said Jane Solomon, linguist in residence at Dictionary.com. She told CNN that their word-of-the-year choices are informed by which words users are looking up and are intended to reflect the zeitgeist.

"Looking through our trending lookups over the last few years, there really haven't been that many positive words," she said, "so it would feel odd to me for us to go with a positive theme."

All this makes "misinformation" just the latest in a depressing series of annual shorthand for our moment in history.

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