

Living in the Post-Truth World

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The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is “*post-truth*” – an adjective defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

In October, a British filmmaker, Adam Curtis, produced a 2 hour 46-minute documentary titled “HyperNormalisation.” The provocative trailer to the film starts with the words:

*We live in a world where the powerful deceive us
We know they lie
They know we know they lie
They don't care
We say we care but we do nothing
and nothing ever changes
It's normal
Welcome to the post-truth world.*



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The fundamental thesis of Curtis’s documentary is that governments and politicians, themselves beholden to business interests, have deceived us so brazenly and for so long, that we no longer expect to be told the truth. Bereft of the hope that we can shape the world in which we live in a meaningful way through the political process, we channel an increasing amount of our energies into inconsequential pursuits that take place in cyberspace rather than the real world. When we do participate in the political process by casting our vote, our selections are frequently made not on the basis of truth, facts or likely outcomes, but out of frustration, confusion and disaffection. To Curtis, both Brexit and Donald Trump are evidence of this post-truth world.

This article addresses two questions: Whether the notion of a “post-truth world” actually describes a new reality, and, how we got to where we are today.

The “post-truth” world: a new reality or sour grapes?

The notion of post-truth suggests that people have historically had access to objective information and possessed the ability to assess the objectivity of facts presented to them when forming an opinion.

The majority of people in the world live in countries where there is no unfettered freedom of information. They are told what their leaders want them to hear. North Korea is the ultimate example of a country where people are told exactly what to think; the consequences of demonstrating any form of dissent are dire. To a lesser degree, information is still controlled in China today and hundreds of political dissidents languish in Chinese jails. In Russia, political opponents are murdered and journalists routinely beaten up. Even in Japan and South Korea, press organizations generally exercise a form of self-censorship at the risk of being frozen out of government press conferences if they do not play ball.

In Western democracies, while we pride ourselves on the freedom of our press, there was no universal suffrage in which women had both the right to vote and stand for office until the 20th century. It was not until after the Second World War that whole populations had widespread access to information through the spread of television. Even then, the way people voted was not so much based on objective facts but on social and personal circumstances and the attitudes of those around them.

Outcomes of elections have always depended largely on the ability of political parties to convince swing voters, one way or another, that *their* manifesto will best address the voters’ wellbeing. Back in the second half of the 19th century, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli is reputed to have said: “We know not right from wrong, yet with words we govern men.”

In sum, if there ever was a “truth world,” prior to the emergence of a “post-truth world,” we can already limit its scope to post-war Western liberal democracies. Even then, the existence of such a reality is

questionable.



The concept of post-truth has been in existence for the past decade, but Oxford Dictionaries saw a spike in frequency in 2016 in the context of the EU referendum (Brexit) in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.

Many will argue, therefore, that the idea of “post-truth” is simply a term made fashionable by people who did not like the outcome of recent elections. If so, the idea of post-truth may resonate more strongly with those 48% on the losing side of the Brexit vote or those 52% who voted for Hillary Clinton in the recent U.S. presidential election.

Notwithstanding, there have been profound changes in the world since the 1960s and three significant trends stand out.

Loss of trust in our government and leaders

There has been steady erosion of the public’s trust of their leaders, governments and intelligence services in Western democracies. Ever since John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 and the shooting of his assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, two days later, conspiracy theories have abounded. Many unanswered questions around these events remain. Similarly, in the UK there are abundant theories about the death of Princess Diana in 1997.

Watergate and Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974 in the face of pending impeachment marked a watershed in U.S. citizens’ relationship with their President. In 2003, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was shown to have taken the country into the Iraq war in support of George W. Bush on the basis of what became known as “the dodgy dossier.” This cast an almighty blemish on a hitherto successful career. Today in the UK, Blair has relatively few admirers.

In his documentary, “HyperNormalisation,” Curtis makes some extraordinary, yet believable assertions about events in the Middle East over the last 40 years. He draws a line that starts with the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad’s support for suicide bombing by Shia terrorists in the 1980s and ends with ISIS today. As he tells it, the U.S. government, through both overt and covert actions, has been a prime-mover in a modern-day tragedy that has culminated not only in the collapse of Iraq and Syria, but Gaddafi’s Libya too.

Alternative sources of information

Meanwhile, the growth of the internet has changed the way in which people consume their information. According to the Alliance for Audited Media, combined sales of the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* fell by over 25% between March 2013 and September 2015. Other newspapers saw even sharper falls in circulation. Newsprint could soon be a thing of the past.

Libel and slander laws in Western democracies force the established press to take responsibility for the veracity of the news it publishes. Failure to do so can lead to punitive fines or even imprisonment. But, on a global scale, the rise of such alternative news sources as WikiLeaks, beyond the reach of legal institutions, yet purporting to reveal accurate information leaked by conscientious individuals, have further undermined the trust of the public in their governments and intelligence agencies. Nowadays, even the utterances of experts or those in a position to actually know the truth surrounding an event are frequently viewed with suspicion.

Similarly, blogging and social media combine to provide an extremely powerful and unregulated channel for the dissemination of (mis)information. They have spawned their own vocabulary, especially among young people, which includes such words as “memes,” “trending” and “trolling.” Ordinary citizens in almost every field of activity can build up a large following on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other sites, enabling them to influence the thinking of tens of thousands of people – sometimes with a

single message of 140 characters and usually with no accountability.

A burgeoning social media agency in the UK called Social Chain is evidence of this new reality. Its 100 employees, of whom the average age is 21, collectively control social media accounts capable of reaching millions. Operating in a grey area of the law beyond the domain of current advertising regulation, they have been able to profitably commercialize their influence through undisclosed advertising on behalf of business and other interests.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump's incessant use of Twitter prior to his inauguration to bypass traditional media channels in order to counter negative press and transmit his point of view to the public may herald a new standard in populist leadership. Ironically, mainstream media felt a compulsive need to report on his tweets!

The deteriorating norms of truthfulness and authority seen throughout the 2016 election threaten the long-term integrity of U.S. institutions, says Stanford political scientist Francis Fukuyama.

Political correctness

For the past quarter century, the term "political correctness" has been a familiar part of our vocabulary. In the interests of social cohesion, Western societies have attempted to inculcate in their citizens a tolerance for minorities, people with disabilities and those who are socially disadvantaged – sentiments to which all decent citizens with an ounce of compassion can subscribe.

Political correctness has however had the disturbing side effect of putting certain topics beyond the realm of public debate – none more so than sexual mores and gay rights. In Western democracies today, we have freedom of speech but only within permitted limits. Those limits have been set, to a large degree, by a vociferous minority who exercise a disproportionate amount of influence through the media and lobbying groups. Through the political process, they have brought about the enactment of laws criminalizing those who do not share their views.

Prior to the advent of political correctness, laws were enacted in order to proscribe activities that the overwhelming majority regarded as detrimental to their society's wellbeing. Citizens participated in a common reality underpinned by a shared understanding of "truth." Today, that is no longer the case. One man's truth has become another man's prejudice and many citizens are being forced to think and behave in ways contrary to their deep-seated beliefs.

President Trump – the deep blue sea

Nine months ago, few would have believed that Brexit could happen. Six months ago, few believed it possible that Donald Trump would become the most powerful man in the world. Following his election victory in November, political analysts have dissected the data every which way. Much has been said about how the establishment, to its peril, ignored large swathes of the population who had been on the wrong end of the growing inequality gap. This was particularly the case in the Rust Belt.

But another key demographic in Trump's victory was the evangelical vote. Trump had said little to pander to it, was politically astute enough not to make LBGT issues part of his campaign, and is unlikely to spend political capital trying to reverse legislation already enshrined in law. The Democrats had wagered that the religious right could not bring itself to vote for a seemingly misogynist bully and philanderer who had mocked disabled people and, by his own admission, paid little or no taxes. In so doing, the Democrats severely misjudged the depth of ill-feeling towards them and some of the causes they had championed over the previous eight years. Given a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea, the evangelical vote cast Hillary Clinton as the devil and opted for the deep blue sea.

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"Post-truth" may not be an accurate description of the world we live in. It implies some previously existing state in which everyone was fully aware of what was true. But undeniably the world has changed in very significant ways. Today, beset with "fake news" and "alternative facts," we are unable to prove the objectivity or factual correctness of much of the information fed to us.

Like it or not, we have been living in a "post-truth" world for as long as we can remember. It's just that truth is getting ever harder to find.

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