

# Defining Post-truth: Structures, Agents, and Styles

Written by Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen

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ARI-ELMERI HYVÖNEN, OCT 22 2018

The extensive discussion on post-truth politics in the past two years is suffering from a lack of shared conceptual understanding. Different authors use the term differently without acknowledging the existence of competing definitions. Some talk about the 'death of expertise' and the lack of impact of scientific facts on policy. Others cite the Oxford Dictionaries (OD) definition as conclusive: 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.

For anyone familiar with the field of International Relations (or political theory, philosophy, or sociology), the OD definition of post-truth is bound to be unsatisfying. Is public opinion normally shaped by 'objective facts'? What are 'objective facts' anyway? Are they necessarily in conflict with appeals to emotion or personal belief? And if the kind of circumstances described have indeed emerged, why did they come about? What are their implications for democratic politics or international relations?

If the term 'post-truth' is to do any scholarly work whatsoever, I argue, a more direct and thorough conceptual engagement is needed. Concepts, after all, are devised to make phenomena more clearly visible and open to analysis. Engaging in the task of conceptualizing post-truth politics, furthermore, has the potential of productively broadening the ways in which truth is approached in International Relations and beyond.

This article seeks to initiate conceptual debate on post-truth so as to pave the way for empirical analysis of the phenomenon. I argue neither that we have entered a post-truth era (I suggest we leave eras to historians) nor that post-truth has emerged out of thin air. I propose we approach post-truth as a crystallization of a longer trajectory of devaluing truth in political discussion. Otherwise put, we should neither exclaim the emergence of something completely unforeseen, nor deny at the outset that anything noteworthy has happened. Mendacity is a political constant, but its forms are not.

Drawing from Hannah Arendt, I suggest that factual truth has a limited but indispensable role to play in pluralistic politics, comparable to material environment that both enables and limits democratic debate in important ways. I put forward an understanding of post-truth as a two-pronged process in which structures and agents mutually depend on and amplify each other.

From an agential point of view, post-truth coincides with what I call 'careless speech'. Careless speech forms an antinomy to 'fearless speech', to the courageous act of telling the truth in the face of danger that Michel Foucault analyzed in his lectures towards the end of his life. It also relates to an Arendtian understanding of 'care for the world' as a precondition of democratic politics. For Arendt, the world is a shorthand for the common, political in-between space that both brings us together and separates us. It is a space in which things become public, i.e. objects of meaningful disagreement that open themselves up for different perspectives. Crucially, the common world does not sustain itself, but requires care, attention and attendance. One of the main modalities for such care is debate that acknowledges a disagreement on something (an event, practice, law, social development) that lies between us but shows itself differently to each of our perspectives.

Careless speech is literally 'free from care', unconcerned not only with truth but also with the world as a common space in which things become public. It means unwillingness to engage with other perspectives, a reluctance to

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accept that speech has repercussions and words matter. It involves creating uncertainty over whether what is said aloud is actually meant; it means believing that anything can be unsaid. Like Harry Frankfurt's notion of 'bullshit' – frequently invoked in reference to post-truth – careless speech is indifferent to its truth-value. Unlike the former, however, careless speech does not build on carefully crafted empty statements that sound good but are nearly devoid of meaning. Rather than trying to persuade, careless speech seeks to create confusion and bring democratic debate into a halt.

Structurally, post-truth relates to an erosion of the common world due to the increasing irrelevance of factual truth in public discourse. This process can be traced to changes in the media-economy-politics complex. The emergence of the 'Lies, Inc.' and the general rise of public relations-led politics have substantially contributed to the cynicism over facts. The increasing overlap of media, politics, and entertainment, together with drastic changes in the media ecosystem itself and the declining trust in mass media, are also to be taken into account. They create the conditions for the subjectivization of shared facts and open the doors for actors like Donald Trump, capable of capitalizing reality TV experience for the purposes of manipulating the media and public discourse.

## Facts and Politics

If we are to understand current politics, I argue, critical scholars need to supplement the prevalent 'social construction of the factual' approach with a more polyvalent take on truth and factuality. I suggest that Hannah Arendt's distinction between rational and factual truths, although it simplifies a lot, is helpful for understanding post-truth. Rational truths are truths whose opposite is not a lie, but illusion and opinion (philosophical truths) or error and ignorance (scientific truths). They also contain the Platonic 'true standard of human conduct'. Rational truths, Arendt argues, are rarely politically relevant.

What we *should* be concerned about is the fate of factual truths. They indeed 'constitute the very texture of the political realm'. By facts, Arendt does not primarily mean what Mary Poovey has called 'modern facts' – namely, numerical representations of scientific and technocratic knowledge. On the contrary, facts emerge from the deeds of plural human beings, as the Latin word *factum* (things made, deed, action) suggests. This close relationship to action makes them contingent. Since action is free, facts have 'no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are'. Because of their contingent origin and the dependence on witnessing, facts are highly fragile and vulnerable. If we lose a set of particular facts, 'no rational effort will ever bring them back'.

Factual truth is mostly about modest verities of the *Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated on 17 December 2010* type. Given their dependence on testimony and storytelling, their existence is without a doubt socially constructed. In politics, Arendt argued, *appearances* constitute reality. Accordingly, I argue, facts must also be seen as real, yet not as reflections of things as they are prior to any contact with human perspectives. There are no *absolute* criteria demarcating truth from opinion, value, or the frame/discourse within which the facts are placed or from which they emerge. Yet, facts have a curious peremptory quality to them – they can even haunt us. The etymology of the Latin *factum* is rooted in the word *feri*, which refers to becoming; hence, facts are what inescapably *has become* the reality for us.

In terms of epistemic validity, most scholars (and others) tend to – at least implicitly and performatively – subscribe to some form of 'everyday realism' when it comes to facts in the abovementioned category. A skeptic might argue, nevertheless, that the types of factual truth just described are mostly irrelevant. The verities they contain are so 'modest' that nothing interesting follows from them. Such argument needlessly deprecates the political role of factual truth. It assumes facts should be capable of directly dictating policies lest they are doomed to irrelevance. But as Arendt points out, the role of facts is to inform opinions, to constitute the common reference point for widely differing opinions 'inspired by different interests and passions'. Facts themselves become meaningful only through the process of exchanging opinions about them.

Such agonial understanding of facts has nothing to do with the liberal market place of ideas, which is sometimes evoked as a process that leads to 'the truth' in the public sphere. Nor is truth about sharing a set of values in the sense of post-historical liberal consensus. Instead of being *distilled from* the plurality of perspectives, truth *invites*

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*and makes possible the expression of different viewpoints*. Factual truth stands at the beginning of the processes of agonal debate, of wooing and persuasion, not at their end. Opinions depend on a minimal ground of shared facts so that they can be opinions *about something*, that is, different perspectives on something shared and not subjective whims or prejudices. Thus, denying facts means undoing the basic supportive infrastructure of democratic politics.

Factual truths (or *matters of fact*) can be compared to what Bonnie Honig has in a recent book called 'public things'. In Honig's usage, this phrase refers to the material infrastructure, (very) broadly construed, that gathers people together both physically and symbolically. Extending this notion of 'public things' to the immaterial realm allows us to see how the 'despotic' character of factual truth is similar to the limiting conditions of the material things that enable the constitution of a public. Facts thus become an enabling constraint, a limitation that at the same time facilitates, encourages and stimulates debate.

Similarly, taking care of the facts, telling the truth, can be conceived of as a practice of caring for the world. Indeed, it is 'no less a world-building activity than the building of houses'. As it is with physical infrastructure and political institutions, furthermore, facts become a heap of meaningless statements if we cease to talk about them from our varying perspectives. The comparison is also helpful in that no one would expect guidelines on what to do from the material environment, just as no one would completely ignore the limitations it poses on our actions.

## What is Post-truth Politics?

Post-truth politics, I contend, ought to be understood as a predicament in which political speech is increasingly detached from the factual infrastructure. Consequently, our ability to react to political events and to engage in a democratic process of opinion-formation is compromised. This definition differs in particular from those that equate post-truth with the death of expertise. I also think we must be much more precise regarding the role of emotions in the production of post-truth. Defending truth might involve as much emotion as violating it.

Most potent examples of post-truth politics as a style available to individual politicians are instances in which outright lies about things that technically anyone could verify are used – albeit perhaps not always consciously – for various political purposes towards both adversaries and one's own supporters. This can mean, for instance, denying something obvious, trivial, or seemingly uncontroversial or making up an event that never happened. Both tendencies are frequent among the Trump administration, as exemplified by the dispute over the inauguration audience, and Kellyanne Conway's invocation of 'Bowling Green massacre'.

Such claims, I argue, are not primarily attempts to convince or persuade. On the contrary, their main impact is the creation of confusion, anger, and disorientation. Hijacking attention is the key here, and has little to do with letting the best argument win. Outrageously false claims seek to make 'normal' political debate and critical scrutiny of policies impossible. They easily direct attention away from the details of policies, and can shape public discourse even when being refuted. Counteracting such play-dirty-to-win strategies has proven challenging.

Even the more conventional array of lies produced by Trump are characterized by carelessness, shamelessness and numerousness. Many of his lies are misrepresentations of long-term processes in his own favor, false statements about media coverage, or lies about numbers – most recently about the number of victims of hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. When lies become prevalent enough, the media and democratic audience easily become disoriented, lose the basic coordinates that usually support critical scrutiny.

The type of mendacity linked to post-truth is closely related to what Harry Frankfurt famously described as 'bullshit'. Yet, I argue, the two are not exactly synonymous. Both forms of speech are indifferent towards the truth-value of statements, which distinguishes them from traditional lies. Frankfurt, however, also describes bullshit as being 'carefully wrought' and requiring 'thoughtful attention to detail'. It cannot be based on whim, but is produced by 'exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who – with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing, and so forth – dedicate themselves tirelessly to getting every word and image they produce exactly right.'

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I do not think this description can be applied verbatim to Trump and other post-truth politicians. Certainly, carefully and deliberately designed public images have not gone anywhere. But the archetypical bullshitters are neoliberal austerity politicians, technocrats, and the like. Their vocabularies are a mix of banalities, sound-bites created with advertising agencies, common sense 'truths' and corporate jargon: 'responsibility', 'tightening the belts', 'benchmarks', and so forth. This type of bullshit paves the way for post-truth, and even plays a role in it, but they are not the same.

Careless speech, rather than selling a nicely packaged respectable character, breaches the very idea of such packing. Instead of carefully spinning partial facts around a policy program (boring!), the political image of post-truth politician is built around unpredictability, carelessness to the detail, and the systematic use of blatant lies. Its main aim is not to persuade or convince, but to attract attention, confuse, and perplex. A bullshitter prefers not to be called out on their bullshit; the post-truth politician does not care. It appears that a new emotional regime has emerged. We have moved from 'truthiness' (feeling like truth) to a state where even a semblance of truthfulness is not required. How has such scene emerged?

## Accounting for Post-truth

According to a study of US politics conducted at the RAND Corporation, what makes the current situation potentially unique is the mistrust of information sources and the lack of shared facts. This, among other factors, makes possible the success of careless speech. Facts have often in history yielded to prejudices and subjective whims, but in the RAND study, no clear precedents were found in the US history for the current major disagreement over basic facts and their interpretations. Also mistrust of commonly recognized reliable sources of information 'seems to be more pronounced now'.

Some blame intellectual currents of these developments. I argue on the contrary that the issue comes down to more mundane questions regarding the changes in the economy-media-politics complex and the increasing overlap between the three areas of that complex. Indeed, Americans' trust in the mass media has dropped from 72% in 1976 (after Watergate/Vietnam) to 32% today. At the same time, visual media have almost completely replaced written word. The daily circulation of newspapers in the US has dropped to 36,7% of households in 2010 from 123,6% (sic) in the 1950s.

Equally important as the falling credibility of the media is the amalgam of media, economic rationality, and politics in the form of Public Relations (PR) that has slowly evolved to its current form during the twentieth century. PR is essentially about carefully crafted public images. Hence it is linked more directly to bullshit than to careless speech. PR is a crucial element, however, in creating the structural conditions that allow careless speech to bloom.

Writing as a response to the Pentagon papers in the 1970s, Arendt warned that due to the mass-mediated nature of our society, the image created by PR practices is usually much more visible than the 'original'. The image begins to substitute for reality. It does not matter whether policies lead to any hoped-for tangible outcomes as long as 'the audience', when they form their judgments, can be made to summon up the image crafted for media circulation rather than 'the stark, naked brutality of facts, of things as they are'. Indeed, this can at times be the explicit aim of PR.

In addition to the PR campaigns for politicians, the US has seen the emergence of a highly organized PR industry serving corporate interest by falsehoods and socially engineered science denial. In Russia, several commentators have described the unique reality of post-Soviet capitalism in terms of living in a simulated reality. Such PR industry has proven extremely capable of manipulating the media and having an impact on their mode of operation. Both media and citizens have increasingly adopted the view that there are always two sides to an issue and hence no definitive truth as such. For Arendt, this can give rise to a 'peculiar kind of cynicism' in which we refuse to believe any truths, no matter how well established. Such cynicism can have devastating consequences. It destroys 'the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world — and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end'.

Russia is an enthralling example here. A combination of state controlled TV and a general ethos of molding reality, as

# Defining Post-truth: Structures, Agents, and Styles

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pictured by Peter Pomerantsev and the novels of Viktor Pelevin, create a world in which 'everything is PR', or as Pomerantsev title has it, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*. The 'political technologies' applied by Putin seek to create the impression that everybody is lying anyway, so political struggle becomes a matter of creating the best lies and the most appealing character.

Besides PR, two things in the politics-economy-media complex are worth emphasizing. First, in the last 50 years, the very concept of news has undergone tremendous change. Up until 1960s and 1970s, news programming had not yet adopted the idea of constant streaming or, even more importantly, of making profit. This left much more time for background work and investigative journalism. Since the 1970s, however, cable news, 24-hour news cycle, and the idea of making profit have turned news into entertainment. And it turns out that controversy and collusion of pre-determined opinions is more entertaining than facts.

In the last decade, social media has added its own twist to this. Many scholars have pointed out that social media amplify bias, provide distractions and make us less receptive to inconvenient facts. In the 2016 election, it was also apparent that social media allowed the creation of a radical right-wing media ecosystem capable of insulating its followers from nonconforming news and building active links to conspiracy sites.

Finally, to conclude on a more speculative note, it is worth considering how the transformation of economy affects our general experience of reality. We live in a world defined by service and experience centered economy. If my comparison of facts to physical environment holds, we might wonder to what extent our relation to facts resonates with the increasingly fluid, affective, and ambivalent role of physical objects in our lives in the age of on-demand streaming of affective experiences. We increasingly consume images and experiences rather than physical objects. Thus, we decreasingly experience things in their stubborn thereness. Perhaps we also want to stream our personalized, on-demand 'facts'.

## Notes

This article draws from Hyvönen (2018), "Careless Speech: Conceptualizing Post-Truth Politics". Published in *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & Eastern European Politics and International Relations*.

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