The Challenges of Epistemic Communities in Shaping Policy in the Age of Post-Truth

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/10/06/the-challenges-of-epistemic-communities-in-shaping-policy-in-the-age-of-post-truth/

ATAL AHMADZAI, OCT 6 2022

This is an excerpt from *Global Politics in a Post-Truth Era*. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The scope and implications of global threats often transcend nation-states' jurisdictional and territorial boundaries. By creating inevitable trans-planetary connectivity and interdependencies, globalization and its associated threats have challenged the effectiveness of state-centered interventions and, for that reason, have instigated the need for global governance. In the absence of an overarching authority, global governance aims to manage interdependencies caused by transnational threats and issues (Rosenau 1999). Accordingly, different approaches have been expounded to govern and manage these threats, including policy networks, epistemic communities, interest groups, advocacy groups, issue networks, and international organisations. These approaches focus on the involvement, nature, and authority of the actors involved in the global policy enterprise (Sending 2015). In other words, actors within these approaches compete for authority. For that reason, each approach claims a different source of legitimacy, including institutional, expert, moral, or delegated.

The emergence of post-truth politics has deepened global governance's authority and legitimacy challenges at the policy making and implementation levels. Sensationalised, provoked, and emotionally driven public opinions on issues such as climate change, public health, immigration, and others push global policy initiatives toward fragmentation and disintegration. Populism, driven mainly by simplistic explanations, the fast and furious spread of misinformation, and the conspiratorial understanding of given issues (Bergmann 2020, 251-65), has erected new obstacles for policy on issues with global scope and implications. The authority and legitimacy of transnational actors is challenged or rejected by the polarised and mostly nationalised public opinion of post-truth politics. Such limitations are more consequential in political and social contexts where democratic deliberations are essential for policymaking.

Returning to science and facts has been promoted as the antithesis of the post-truth age and socialisation. Science as a fact-based enterprise should be an accepted central source of authority for informed reflection. One approach with claim to science and facts is the notion of epistemic communities – 'networks of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain, who withhold an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area' (Haas 1992, 03). Unlike interest- based or normative approaches, the significance of epistemic communities is their empirical and objective orientation. As a knowledge-policy nexus, the approach should be consequential for global policy outcomes in the age of post-truth politics. The question, however, arises concerning the practicality of this approach in the realm of democratic politics in the post-truth age, where polarised discourses, beliefs, ideologies, and emotions are more influential in shaping public opinion. Furthermore, with the democratisation of knowledge creation and dissemination due to technological advances and social media, the post-truth age challenges epistemic communities' authoritative claim to knowledge and facts and their interpretations for policy consumption. Therefore, it can be argued that in an age characterised by the rejection of monopolising information, facts, and knowledge, epistemic communities do not serve as a solution but as part of the problem. An elitist approach to issues and policies can further stir populist controversies and strengthen the rejection of authority over the production, interpretation, and dissemination of facts, if not facts per se.

This chapter is built around three sections. The first section looks at the evolution of the concept of epistemic communities. It discusses how a promising concept in a time characterised by hyperglobalism (the early 1990s) could not stand its ground as an approach to global governance. The second section deconstructs post-truth politics. By destabilising the link between objectivity and Enlightenment, the section argues that untruths, distorted facts, and misinformation have been prevalent in public discourses and politics since the European Enlightenment. The current hype about the post-truth politics is due to the losing grip of elite circles in Western societies over the monopoly of constructing and disseminating master narratives and discourses for channelling distorted facts, misinformation, and untruths. The third section explores the theoretical and practical challenges associated with epistemic communities' approach to dealing with global governance in the age of 'post-truth.'

Epistemic communities: An approach for global governance

Realism, and later neoliberalism, have dominated International Relations (IR) theory for most of its evolutionary age. Despite conceptualising the nature and dynamics of the international system differently, these approaches converge on the unmalleability and fixed nature of state interests, which constrain state's behaviour on the international stage. However, these mainstream and positivist IR paradigms could not adequately explain states' uncertainty regarding their respective interests in the age of globalisation. The emergence of transnational threats and structural issues has caused uncertainty and misperceptions about states' interests, which are the underlying reasons for conflicts in international relations (Stein 1990, 55). Uncertainty and misperceptions about states' interests have inspired and shaped new patterns in states' behaviour for realising new interests in a rapidly transforming and unpredictable international milieu. Accordingly, such dynamics expanded the scope of intellectual inquiries in International Relations to the new frontiers of global governance. New analytical approaches and tools for explaining and comprehending the socialisation of states on a globalising international stage have emerged. Research on epistemic communities is one of many bodies of literature that seeks to explain patterns of states' behaviour in an uncertain and complex global context.

As a conceptual framework within the constructivist IR paradigm, the epistemic communities approach explores the coordination of global governance in an interconnected and interdependent world (Haas 1992, 1–35). It explains the authority, role, and effects of experts in global affairs. Haas identified four defining characteristics for epistemic communities: shared normative and causal beliefs, shared notions of validity, and common policy enterprise. Unlike interest-based and normative approaches to global policy – such as policy networks, interest groups, and issue networks that are engaged in political exchanges to secure better stakes – epistemic communities scrutinise issues exclusively under a scientific lens. It is considered more instrumental to effective policy formulation and tangible outcomes. As an example, the approach was deemed influential in shaping some directives and consensus of the European Union (Haas 2016, 08). However, it could not seem to evolve beyond its initial conceptualisation and became marginalised (Cross 2013, 137). Different aspects of the concept have been scrutinised to understand the reasons behind its stagnation, including the political autonomy and orientation of experts, the vague definition of experts, confusion about the target audience (state only or non- state actors as well), the application of science-based arguments in public policy and discourses, and the lack of an analytical tool to explain the consensus on the authoritative claim to knowledge.

While the proponents of epistemic communities have responded to such criticism, a novel area of inquiry about these communities is their application and implications in the post-truth age. Thus, while the concept has emerged to coordinate and facilitate informed policy initiatives in a globalising world with prevailing uncertainties, contemporary post-truth politics have introduced the concept to new challenges. Before exploring these, it is essential to shed light on the emerging narrative of the post-truth age.

International Relations (IR) in the age of post-truth politics

Post-truth is a relatively new adjective in the domestic and global political lexicon. In the age of globalisation, the implications of post-truth politics are directed at societies' collective intellectual reflection on issues with national and transnational scope. As such, post-truth politics have effects on international politics and global governance, mainly in societies with democratic deliberations on policy making. It can be inferred that rather than being informed by the

objective reflection of the truth of reality, the circumstances related to the post-truth drive the orientation of public and global policy initiatives towards populistic socialisation.

The unexpected rise in narratives related to post-truth politics resulted in widely varying accounts of what caused it to emerge. However, many existing explanations fail to revel the substantive aspects of the problem. The RAND Corporation, for example, identified the transformation and proliferation of conventional and social media, the spread of disinformation, and polarisation as drivers of 'truth decay' (Kavanagh and Rich 2018, 79). Such is a simplistic description of a complex and multidimensional issue. While the proliferation of information sources can facilitate a conducive environment for disseminating both facts or lies, restricting or monopolising these sources have social, political, and moral implications. Furthermore, having control over sources of information does not mean the objectivity of information or the reality of truth. It only restricts the plurality of given narratives in favour of the status quo.

Lewandowsky et al. (2017, 356) relate the 'malaise' of post-truth to the creation of alternative epistemic spaces as platforms for sharing alternative realities. Similarly, Fuller (2016) argues that the post-truth age results from the universalisation of symmetry or epistemic democratisation. Such perspectives hold post-truth as circumstances facilitated by the proliferation of information production and dissemination instruments. Once again, these accounts exclusively focus on the tools and platforms (conventional vs. popular, or mainstream vs. alternative) of information, not on the underlying processes and structures involved in producing information and knowledge. Accordingly, in an editorial, the *Social Studies of Science* (2017, 3) argues that while the production of scientific knowledge requires infrastructure, effort, ingenuity, and validation structures, the current popular information tools destroy these structures. In general, existing explanations of the post-truth age revolve around the role of social media and other alternative information platforms. They point to the diminishing role of scientific knowledge, objectivity, and facts in shaping public opinion, politics, and policy initiatives. Such comprehensions seem to be based on the assumed role of conventional sources and spaces of information in socialising public opinion with objectivity. The question, however, is if conventional sources truly disseminate facts and objective information?

Scrutinising against the theoretical and practical aspects of objectivity and facts in informing public opinion, the rigor and robustness of existing comprehensions about post-truth politics are questionable. Notably, in the milieu of International Relations, conceptual and practical relationships between objectivity and facts with politics and public opinion are complex. Therefore, it is essential to have a theoretical discussion on the subjectivity of truth and a brief retrospective look at the Western powers' long tradition of politicising realities and distorting facts to shape public opinion. These two discussions reveal a complicated picture of truth and objectivity in the political sphere.

Science and 'Truth'

Truth is a philosophical concept, and plenty of controversies are associated with the simple statement of 'what is truth?' (Glanzberg, 2021). It has a strong subjective appeal and is shaped by personal convictions and opinions. Therefore, truth is contested. As a belief-based enterprise, the popularity or universality of a 'truth' does not make it factual or objective, per se. These characteristics complicate the relationship of truth with science, for that reason, with facts. Within the realm of scientific knowledge, the purpose of inquiry is not about truth. Scientific inquiry and its different epistemologies confront or support a position, idea, thesis, and theory with facts and evidence. This is to draw a clear line between scientific and non-scientific endeavours, such as authoritative knowledge. While the beliefs and personal convictions of an overwhelming number of people can constitute a 'truth' this does not necessarily constitute 'facts', as these 'truths' can be based in superstition or other unprovable mental processes, such as beliefs.

Furthermore, as a self-restraint measure and to avoid transforming to a belief- based enterprise that is not only unquestionable but at the same time equally unprovable, scientific inquiry applies anticipatory processes. These make science open to challenge and change. Within the complex field of philosophy and history of scientific knowledge, explanations such as the 20th century's probabilism, Karl Popper's falsifiability (Popper 2002), Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift (Kuhn 2012), and Lakatos's research program (Lakatos 1980) identified different mechanisms and structures for the internal consistency of and progress in scientific knowledge. Consequently, while not directly

dealing with truth, scientific knowledge actively evolves to defy becoming a belief- based enterprise that can neither be disproved nor subject to argument and challenge.

These arguments do not imply to justify the manifestations of the post-truth politics, such as deceptions, lies, and misinformation in the public sphere. However, the point is that the concept of truth is a complicated philosophical construct that can hardly be squared within the fundamental characteristics of scientific inquiry, including falsifiability, testability, generalisability, and parsimony. Truth is a multifaceted, delicate, and loaded notion that even those who talk about post-truth avoid talking about the 'truth'. For example, RAND Corporation, in its report on 'Truth Decay', while using the phrase 'truth decay' hundreds of times, the term 'truth' however, is used not more than a handful of times and that exclusively in the context of disclaiming discussing the truth (see Kavanagh and Rich 2018). Similarly, Kakutani (2018), unlike what the book's topic reads – *The Death of Truth* – did not discuss truth but focused on 'the fall of reasons' or 'the vanishing of reality'. Even though these three – truth, reality, and reasons – are separate and different elements of mental processes.

The intellectual context surrounding the philosophical juggernaut about discussing 'truth' is understandable. Truth has a pervasive use in ordinary language. However, its meaning, interpretation, and comprehension are nothing but intellectually nebulous. As such, where does this leave the conceptualisation of the term post-truth? A logical fallacy. While the premise 'truth' cannot be straightforwardly conceptualised, at least intellectually, the conclusion – 'post-truth' – also is challenging to hold up to scrutiny. Nevertheless, it does not mean that prevailing manifestations of the construct of post-truth – such as lies, dis/misinformation, and deceptions – should be acceptable. However, it also must be acknowledged that the contemporary manifestations of post-truth politics are not novel in the domestic and international domains. In retrospect, the history of modern politics, mainly in a democratic setting, is hardly based on communicating pure facts and evidence. In international relations, the manifestations of post-truth politics has been there forever. This leads us to briefly look at the history of Western powers' use of distorted facts, lies, and deceptions in public discourses for shaping public opinion.

The politicised utilisation of facts

Misinformation, fake news, lies, deceptions, and erosion of trust in facts and reality are identified as the manifestations of post-truth politics (Lewandowsky et al. 2017, 364). These ills are even considered deliberate efforts against the broader idea of sanity (Gopnik 2017). A retrospective look at the history of using facts in democratic politics, however, indicates that the contemporary understandings and outcries about the post-truth age are hyper-sensational and idealistic. In politics, distorting, bending, stretching, moderating, or appropriating facts and evidence for public consumption have always been practiced in political deliberations, both democratic or non-democratic.

Public consumption of facts and evidence (acquired or experienced) goes beyond the control and mandate of the scientific knowledge enterprise. The enterprise's scope is limited to describing and explaining (positivist approaches) or constructing and interpreting (post-positivism) reality through producing evidence and facts. The utilisation of the discovered or constructed facts within domestic and international political arenas is a political process that contextualises, configures, or appropriates facts for public consumption. The *Social Studies of Science* (2017) refers to such a process as the configuration of the practices, discourses, and epistemic politics of modern facts. Studying the history of the modern facts, Poovey (1998) explains that facts need to go through a complex configuration with educational and government agendas to look more credible. In the contemporary world, even the hard facts related to environmental issues and catastrophe are appropriated and politicised by juxtaposing them with a politicised deep geological past that is likely to be confusing and forgettable (Davis 2016, 25).

Retrospectively, in international relations, the politicisation, configuration, and appropriation of facts for serving political agendas have existed since the Enlightenment. Therefore, facts, reality and truth have hardly been apolitical. On the contrary, they have been used as raw material for constructing discourses and legitimising power and oppression. European imperial and colonial powers formulated discourses based on distorted facts, lies, and deceptions to shape public opinion in their political domains. They were not concerned with telling the truth but with their interpretation of the truth (Du Bois 1946, 24). They went to the extent of holding their version of truth and facts as representations of nature. From misrepresenting and twisting the notion of natural law, the history of which goes

as back as to ancient human civilisations (Neff 2003), to the reducing the state of nature to man's nature and reducing the latter to the good-evil dichotomy (see Hobbes 2011; & Locke 1986), the Enlightenment thinkers carelessly but confidently messed with the 'truth'.

In service of Western imperial and colonial agendas, the Enlightenment thinkers relied on empirical or fact-based validation to construct abstractions that could justify and rationalize violence and subjugation. For example, the abstraction of sovereignty, a contested notion in the contemporary globalized world, was formulated to rationalize the violence against the 'illegitimate' and invisible non-state people (Krishna 2006). Beyond literal meanings, such abstractions contain legal, moral, or political tropes for codifying societies. These are anything but objective, factual, or truthful classification criteria, and schemes. Indeed, ideological, moral, and even pseudoscientific imperatives were packaged and configured as facts and truth for advancing power agendas. Such falsifications were, and still are, needed for influencing Western public opinion about legitimising endeavours undertaken by their states and governments. The philosophical and intellectual foundations for such fabrications were provided by the very Enlightenment ideas such as Locke's government by consent and natural rights (Locke 1986); Kant's metaphysics of morals and perpetual peace (Kant 1983); Mill's promotion of happiness (Mill 1963); and Cobden's natural harmony of interests, to name a few.

Enlightenment era ideas, such as equality of citizens, limited state power and property rights, served Western societies and their domestic politics. These ideas became instruments for European powers to legitimise violent imperialist and colonialist agendas by constructing discourses grounded in unscientific and untruthful ideas. For example, while Kant promoted 'republic constitutionalism' in the Western world, his pro-slavery and culturalist ideas of mental and cultural incapability of native Americans, Indians, and Africans gave imperialist powers all the [pseudo]intellectual and moral reasons to justify their imperialist endeavours and brutal oppressions in those lands. Similarly, Mill's unscientific construct of promotion of happiness, and his pseudoscientific classification of non-European as barbarians and savages provided European powers with intellectual and moral contents to justify their brutal practices elsewhere under the discourse of civilising barbarians and savages. Even Mill's idea of non-intervention within and among 'civilised' nations was to effectively create internal harmony among these powers to implement their outward expansionism.

Against the backdrop of Enlightenment thoughts, the news, oral stories and published materials from non-Western colonised or occupied territories presented the Western audience with moral and intellectual reasons to justify Western interventions. They, therefore, legitimised the brutal practices of oppression and domination of their states as it seemed a burden over their shoulders to 'humanise' the 'less human'. The sources of such a mandate were nothing but the very reasons, morals, facts, truths and knowledge fabricated by Enlightenment thinkers. In brief, the intellectual revolution of the era, on the one hand, domestically helped Western societies in terms of subjecting government power to public opinion and consent. On the other hand, it enabled the same powers to construct discourses based on fabricated facts and truth orchestrated by intellectuals to legitimise oppression and brutality.

As a result, the Enlightenment era provided intellectual materials for forming a highly stratified and racially driven and codified international society. The Western powers and their public were unanimous about the subjectivity of [non-European] races to be ruled and about the well-deserved and earned right of the [European race] to rule and expand its rule beyond its own domain (Said 1995, 30). Therefore, in addition to having controversial racial histories, the thinkers of the Enlightenment were instrumental in shaping public opinion via untruthful facts. By doing so, these thinkers served as enablers in legitimising European violence and repression. Hence, post-truth is not an ahistorical contemporary phenomenon but a historical one which goes as least to the onset of the modern age, the age of reason and Enlightenment.

Similarly, since the end of the Second World War, fabricated facts and overstretched truths have been influential in defining power dynamics and the relationships between the Western powers and 'the rest'. To advance their international agendas Western powers package distorted facts and truths within constructed discourses with moral and normative appeals for the domestic audience. Modernisation, development, freedom, security, globalisation, democracy, terrorism and other such terms are examples of discourses that have been shaped and presented as objective facts and undeniable truths for stratifying international society. The main instrument for the Western powers

to disseminate fabricated facts and untruths is through the media.

Conventional media is an integral part of this enterprise that furthers the discourses by adding additional layers and contents. From the colonial era, including during the professionalisation period of journalism in the early 20th century, media has routinely used hoaxes, sensationalism, and exaggeration (Finneman and Thomas 2018, 1–12). In addition to serving specific ideological and strategic goals, the media also has an economic incentive in promoting and disseminating constructed discourses. Using hoaxes, sensationalism, and exaggeration has remained means of selling newspapers from colonial times to today (Fedler 1989). So, if lies, deceptions, and untruths have been shaping public opinion since the beginning of the modern era, why is the concept of post-truth now becoming a lexicon in political science and international relations?

Post-truth or the end of a monopoly?

In the current age, the problem is not the invention of the post-truth political malaise but the dissolution of monopoly over the means of constructing discourses and their subsequent propagation. Since the Enlightenment, such a monopoly was in the hands of states machinery and mainstream traditional media. The populace was only at the receiving end to consume or recycle the presented discourses containing lies, fabrications, and untruths. With the democratisation (or proliferation) of information production and dissemination tools, the one-way top-bottom dynamic of manufacturing and dissemination of discourses has drastically transformed. Popular and alternative information creation and dissemination sources have become relevant, significant and influential in today's world. This has challenged the authoritative grasp and monopoly of elite sources, including the mainstream media, over the production, configuration, and dissemination of facts. Such a challenge has caused the emergence of the current alarmist narratives about post-truth politics. Among others, the proliferation of social media is crucial in challenging the domination and monopoly of political and ideological elites to influence and shape public opinion on given issues.

This change has three main aspects. First, with the proliferation of social and alternative information sources, the domain of discourse formulation and dissemination has diffused to the public sphere. Referred to as the universalisation of symmetry or the democratisation of epistemic (Fuller 2016), the monopoly over influencing and shaping public opinion is no longer the exclusive enterprise of the government and conventional media. Now the populace has platforms and tools to construct discourses and shape the opinion of their own kinds. Secondly, this democratisation subjected politics and power structures, mainly in democratic societies, to polarised public scrutiny through (mis)informed reflection shaped by alternative sources. Thirdly, and perhaps the most crucial but overlooked aspect of the post-truth age, is the changing relationship between the populace and the mainstream/ conventional media.

The popularity of the alternative means of information over the mainstream may not necessarily mean denial of facts or science, but the rejection of master narratives and discourses channelled from (mostly) mainstream media sources. Polarised public opinion may not indicate rejecting specific policy but resisting political discourse channelled from ideologically oriented mainstream sources, including media, corporations, and networks. Farrell (2015, 373) found that the increase in the climate change contrarian/denialist materials in five US media sources from 1993–2013 was not directly the rejection of climate change but the attached discourses. The study revealed that networks and corporations successfully influence the production and dissemination of denialist discourses, as they have broader interests in the privatisation of science and the influence of corporate lobbying around scientific issues (Farrell 2015, 373). As such, the public scepticism or rejection of media and corporate discourses does not imply the rejection of facts and science. Boussalis and Coan (2016, 98) found that relative to arguments against climate policy, the amount of denialist materials against mainstream climate science has increased since 2009. The study concludes that scientific scepticism often has political roots. This indicates that the polarised popular approach in the post-truth age is not necessarily against facts or truth but against monopolising facts and truth by elites, establishments, corporations and mainstream media.

The hyper-sensationalism about post-truth politics does not indicate the emergence of a new age in the relationship between the public and the truth. It is about the diminishing monopoly of conventional sources over controlling the construction and dissemination of master narratives. On the contrary, alternative sources effectively sway public

opinions away from the mainstream influence on different issues. In such an antagonistic epistemic milieu, when the proliferation of epistemic sources and spaces disrupts the realisation of 'informed public reflection' on issues related to public and global policies, what challenges are there for epistemic communities.

The Challenges of Epistemic Communities in the post-truth Age

In the age of post-truth, the epistemic communities approach to policy enterprise has practical challenges. These challenges, however, stem from the epistemological foundation of the approach, which is at a crossroads of constructivism and empiricism. Hence, before discussing the practical challenges, it is helpful to review its theoretical limitations.

Theoretical challenges

Constructivism challenged the fundamental tenets of the positivist IR paradigms. However, before the emergence of constructivism, the positivist tradition experienced an internal rift by reconceptualising the assumption of facts as natural. Thomas Kuhn, in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, rejected correspondence theory – which claims that true statements correspond to facts about the world (Hacking 2012). The theory was fundamental in shaping the logical empiricist International Relations approaches that inferred conclusions about the nature of the international system from the overarching ontological assumptions such as 'nature of man' and 'man in nature'. Subsequently, constructivism reconsidered the fabric of facts and reality, which led to redrawing the fundamental theoretical premises of international politics and governance.

As an IR theory, constructivism discusses the role of ideas and structure in shaping world politics by redefining relationships between actors. While ideas shape the meaning and structure of material reality through interpretation, structures give the agents autonomy to interact with others inside the structure to reshape the structure (Wendt 1999). This challenged the fixed nature of actors' interests, leading to restrained manoeuvrability in their behaviour on the international stage. Within the 'ideas' and 'structures' theoretical premises of constructivism, epistemic communities offer a model in which state and non-state actors construct their political realities through the knowledge provided to them by the experts. These actors formulate their interests and reconcile differences of interests (Haas 2015, 13). Haas argues that in their efforts to ameliorate uncertainty surrounding unfolding issues and hold some reality or truth about them, policymakers would turn to epistemic communities for knowledge. The communities will bring their knowledge- based interpretation of their casually informed version of reality and validity (Haas 1992, 21).

This account of reality and truth is embedded in constructivist epistemology, which argues against the 'true' existence of reality out there in the social world (Holznere and Marx 1978). However, by claiming an authoritative claim to policy knowledge, epistemic communities' epistemic attitude converges toward positivist orientation. While constructivism conceptualises reality as socially constructed and is suspicious of the existence of objective reality, the epistemic communities approach monopolises its construct and interpretation to a close expert circle. Haas argues that the communities do not necessarily generate truth (Haas 1992, 23). However, monopolising the construct of reality to experts is not compatible with the fundamental premises of constructivism. As such, while originating from constructivist epistemology, epistemic communities as an elitist approach re-introduces policy enterprise to empirical orientation. In the post-truth age characterised by the proliferation of epistemic sources and spaces and a hyper-polarised political struggle for dominance within the domain of policymaking, such a monopoly over the construction and interpretation of reality is counterproductive. Instead of offering a solution, epistemic elitism further polarises the struggle for authority and dominance within policy and knowledge enterprises.

Policy enterprise, by nature, is in a dialectic tension between knowledge and politics (Torgerson 1986, 33–59). This tension was crucial in derailing the public policy field from its initial envisioned post-positivist and democratic epistemological orientation towards empirical enterprise (DeLeon and Vogenbeck 2007, 3). The latter is characterised by the objective separation of facts and values (Fischer 2007, 223). As a result, the empiricist orientation introduced epistemological and methodological limitations to public policy enterprise, including over-generalising facts to non-related contexts. Initially, the facts-values paradox prompted the overlooking of political and social values that could not be translated into brute facts or pure scientific ends. As a result, the paradox practically

distorted the effectiveness of the policy field for much of its evolutionary age. Rigorous quantitative analyses did not prove practical for social problems. With the shift of policy enterprise to post- positivism, the facts-values paradox seemed to resolve by reconciling empirical and political ends. However, the epistemic communities approach revives the facts-values paradox by pushing policy enterprise into the empiricist-constructivist epistemological juncture. It designates exclusive circles to reside over constructing facts, reimaging values, and, hence, shaping public policy as an exclusive expert or elite-oriented policy enterprise.

Such an epistemological realignment of public policy is not a solution but a problem in the post-truth age, characterised as the democratisation of the epistemic. In such a contested milieu, claiming expert authority cannot overrule the significance and relevance of other sources of authority claimed by other actors such as moral authority by activist and advocacy groups, or delegated and institutional authorities of elected officials and technocrats. As such, to claim exclusive expert authority in the age of post-truth is to conspire with political elites to monopolise facts and truths. The monopoly of expert and political elites over facts and reality production is not a novel idea, but a tradition that has been in practice at least since the Enlightenment, where intellectuals created norms, morals, ideas, and knowledge, and the imperialist and colonialist statesmen built upon them and created their own truths and realities about the world.

Practical Challenges

Given its elitist orientation, a question arises about the functionality of epistemic communities in the realm of democratic politics in the post-truth age. How can expert communities influence public opinion that socialises within unconventional and alternative epistemic spaces? The first practical challenge the approach faces in the post-truth age is its disconnect with democratic deliberations. The elitist orientation of epistemic communities to dominate policy enterprise contradicts the competition and pluralism principles of democratic deliberations.

In democratic settings, competition between actors is integral to policy processes. These processes are undertaken in a crowded and contested field of actors who claim different sources of authority and legitimacy to influence policy proposals and outcomes. In addition to expert authority, delegated, institutional, or moral are sources of authority in the policy arena (Sending 2015). This shows that scientific reasoning is only one instrument among many means of influence and reasoning at the disposal of different actors to advance their ideas and interests. Pluralism is another characteristic of democratic policy deliberation incompatible with the epistemic communities' expert-centred approach. Public participation is crucial for policy initiatives and a core normative value in functional democracies (Fischer 2002, 01). To realise this, public opinion (directly or indirectly) in policy deliberations is an unavoidable condition, and elected officials are entitled to moral, delegated, or institutional authority by virtue of representing people. Within the contemporary political landscape, socio-cultural, ideological, and identity- related values and discourses are crucial in defining and shaping polarised public opinion and perspectives. Opinions on given issues, domestic or global, shape a unique character of contemporary democratic politics – the rise of both right and left populistic orientation to public policy. Epistemic communities, claiming to offer an apolitical instrumentalist approach to policy processes, are impractical options whilst policymaking is becoming more politicised.

In the post-truth age, the malleability of public opinion to emotional appeals and personal beliefs should not, and cannot, defy the public deliberation principle of policymaking in democratic settings. While the functionality of democracy is linked with well-informed citizens (Kuklinski et al. 2000, 790– 816), misinformed or ill-informed reflections on policy issues cannot override the principle of public participation. More importantly, with the emergence of post-positivist approaches to knowledge and reality, the notion of informed or ill-informed became more subjective to meaning and interpretation. This challenges the legitimacy of the elitist authoritative claim to policy knowledge. In general, these limitations point to a gap in dialogue and communication between epistemic communities and democratic politics. By relying on scientific language, experts may not convince a politician whose arguments may be focused on public interest or opinion.

The second practical challenge is that the instrumental rationality of epistemic communities is incompatible with the bounded rationality that drives policy practices. Epistemic communities hold expert knowledge as an exclusive means to policy ends. Policy practices, on the contrary, are driven by 'bounded rationality' which is defined as

incomplete human understanding of social phenomena due to limited cognitive, attentive, or scientific factors that drive policymakers to be part of a given problem at the expense of others (Andrews 2007, 161). As such, such a tension weakens the robustness and practicality of the epistemic communities' authoritative claim to knowledge.

The expert-focused approach of epistemic communities reinforces the challenges for its practicality in post-truth politics. Focusing exclusively on instrumental rationality as the means of influence overlooks the significance of dialectic/communicative discourses and participatory action practices of democratic politics and policy deliberations. Communicative rationality makes the democratic policymaking processes contested with dialogue and argumentation to reach a consensus. Rather than merely scientific, such argumentation is based on various discourses – normative, socio-cultural, ideological, and identity. In addition, communication and interactions are necessary conditions in policy deliberation. It not only contextualizes rationality but also validates normative rightness, theoretical truth, and subjective truthfulness (Habermas 1992, 28–57). In the post-truth age, in addition to scientific facts, these three elements of mental processes are crucial in driving public opinion. As such, the role of these elements in domestic policy deliberations has become substantive. They shape perspectives and public opinion.

Communicative rationality is a widespread practice within democratic policymaking processes. Epistemic communities, by offering policy solutions from a highly centralised and elitist source, on the contrary, is an authoritative approach and is incompatible with dialogue and argumentation. Focusing exclusively on instrumental rationality as the means to influence, the approach overlooks other practicing communicative discourses and participatory action practices of democratic politics.

A fundamental epistemological assumption of constructivism holds human agreement on social facts independent from the voluntary contract between actors. On the contrary, the exclusive contract between experts and policymakers that excludes public and democratic deliberations prevents epistemic communities from transforming into structures capable of offering language and meaning for generating agreement. Furthermore, in the age of post-truth, characterised by the proliferation and dissemination of sources of inferring meaning, any efforts to monopolise processes of inference and interpretations in the hands of experts are counterproductive. It further pushes public opinion on facts, reality, and truth towards novice alternative sources and spaces. This can happen as a reaction against pushing policy enterprise further away from democratic deliberations toward the expert- policy nexus.

Furthermore, global policy's uncertain and complex nature challenges epistemic communities' claim of authoritative expert knowledge. Paradoxically, given the changing nature of global issues, such a claim seems subjective and unsubstantiated. For instance, about global immigration, in an intellectual and scientific milieu, where different studies of various disciplinary nature and at different analytical levels suggest conflicting impacts of immigration on a national economy – what authoritative knowledge can a given epistemic community offer to policymakers? Similarly, the authoritative claim to knowledge cannot be objectively verified when globalisation and its master discourse of neoliberalism affect and transform contemporary social and economic issues differently in different socio-economic and political contexts. As such, any authoritative claim to facts and reality lacks objectivity and rigor and is more inclined to secure dominance and primacy in a contested global policy milieu crowded with different actors claiming various types of authorities.

Lastly, the increasing complexity of domestic and global issues confounded by the prevailing manifestation of post-truth politics necessitated an additional task in the policy enterprise – public education and learning. The task of scientific policy professionals would be to provide technical information for problem-solving and combine it with a new function of facilitating public deliberation and learning (Fischer 2004, 21–27). Fischer proposes that public deliberation and learning are highly relevant to domestic and global issues of democratic politics to expand and enable popular participation and informed reflection in the policy process.

With the polarisation of public opinion on domestic and global issues, policy formulation and making processes have become more contested by a struggle between science and politics or facts and values. In addition to competing for authority and power within these processes, the need for the contemporary science-based policy intermediaries – including expert networks and think tanks – to facilitate transferring learnings, communicating knowledge, and

fostering public debate on policy issues and solutions to the grassroots multiplies. In its expounding, the epistemic communities approach mostly overlooks these undertakings in policy-related practices. While the role of science and facts in policy endeavours is becoming more crucial in a time identified as post-truth, focusing exclusively on the experts-politicians dynamics excludes an increasingly crucial element from the nexus – the significance and the role of informed public reflection.

Conclusion

Contemporary narratives on post-truth alarm us about the emergence of a new age in the relationships between truth and public opinion. These accounts describe the post-truth age as a circumstance in which emotions and beliefs are more effective in shaping public opinion and political actions than facts and truth. However, in the realm of international relations, objectivity, pure facts, and the truth of reality do not often have the currency for informed reflections. On the contrary, since the Enlightenment, untruths,

distorted realities and fabricated facts have enabled Western powers to domestically shape public opinion to justify their inflicted injustices, oppressions, and brutalities elsewhere. The current hype about post-truth in Western societies has less to do with facts and science but more with a dissolving monopoly of power circles – political establishment and mainstream media – over constructing and disseminating master narratives and discourses. The proliferation of alternative epistemic sources and spaces has provided the populace with instruments and tools to construct and disseminate their own narratives about given issues. Such epistemic democratisation pushes public policy endeavours on domestic and global issues towards a populist orientation. Accordingly, having a pure scientific orientation, epistemic communities approach to public policy seems promising in counteracting the post-truth politics both in domestic and global policy arenas. However, the approach has theoretical and practical limitations in effectively shifting policy practices from populist toward scientific socialisation.

The post-truth age reinforces epistemic communities' challenges to be an effective and transformative policy approach. Its expert-centred epistemic practices are not aligned with some crucial aspects of policy processes in a democratic setting. The elitist orientation defies the competitive and pluralistic nature of democratic policy practices. Furthermore, the instrumental rationality of the approach is not compatible with the practical 'bounded rationality' of public policy. In the post-truth age, instrumental rationality is far from having an authoritative command on peoples' perspectives, perceptions, and understandings shaped by emotional appeals and personal beliefs.

With the spread of populism, where emotions and beliefs shape public opinion and political actions – and where the arguments of politicians are centred exclusively on public opinion – the scientific nature of the language employed by epistemic communities may not be convincing. Such divergence creates a strategic gap in dialogue and communication between epistemic communities and democratic politics. Lastly, as post-truth politics is characterised by being informed by polarised and ill-informed public opinion, epistemic communities' approach to policy offers no initiatives to facilitate an informed public reflection on policy issues through public deliberations and learning. By offering an exclusive expert-policy nexus, epistemic communities overlook the significance of communicating knowledge and fostering public debate on policy issues.

References

Bergmann, Eirikur. 2020. 'Populism and the Politics of Misinformation'. *Safundi* 21(3): 251–265.

Boussalis, Constantine, and Travis Coan. 2016. 'Text-mining the Signals of Climate Change Doubt'. *Global Environmental Change* 36, 89–100.

Burrell, Gibson, & Gareth Morgan. 1985. *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life*. Routledge.

Clinton J. Andrews. 2007. 'Rationality in Policy Decision Making' in Frank Fischer et al. (ed),*Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, politics, and methods*. CRC Press.

Cross, Mai'a. 2013. 'Rethinking epistemic communities twenty years later'. *Review of International Studies* 39 (1): 137–160.

Davies, Jeremy. 2016. *The birth of the Anthropocene*. (2017). California. University of California Press.

DeLeon, Peter, and Danielle M. Vogenbeck. 2007. "The Policy Sciences at the Crossroads' in Frank Fischer et al. (ed). *Handbook of public Policy Analysis: Theory, politics, and methods*. Florida. CRC Press.

Denzin, Norman. 2001. *Interpretive Interactionism*. 2nd Edition. London. Sage Publications.

Douglas Torgerson, Douglas.1986. 'Between Knowledge and Politics: Three Faces of Policy Analysis'. *Policy Sciences* 19 (1): 33–59.

Du Bois, Willian Edward Burghardt. 1946. *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa has played in World History*. New York. International Publishers.

Editorial. 2017. 'Post-truth?' *Social Studies of Science* 47(1): 3–6.

Farrell, Justin. 2015. "Network Structure and Influence of the Climate Change Counter-movement."*Nature Climate Change* 6: 370–74.

Fedler, Fred. 1989. *Media hoaxes*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

Finneman, Teri, and Ryan J. Thomas. 2018. 'A Family of Falsehoods: Deception, Media Hoaxes, and Fake News'. *Newspaper Research Journal* 39(3): 350–361.

Fischer, Frank. 2000. *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* . Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Frank Fischer. 2004. 'Professional Expertise in a Deliberative Democracy'. *The Good Society* 13 (1): 21–27.

Frank Fischer. 2007. 'Deliberative Policy Analysis as Practical Reason: Integrating Empirical and Normative Arguments' in Frank Fischer et al. (ed), *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, politics, and methods* . London: CRC Press.

Fuller, Steve. 2016. 'Embrace the Inner fox: Post-Truth as the STS Symmetry Principle universalized. Social epistemology Review and reply Collective'. https://social-epistemology.com/2016/12/25/embrace-the-inner-fox-post-truth- as-the-sts-symmetry-principle-universalized-steve-fuller/

Glanzberg, Michael. 2021. 'Truth'. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (ed.) https://plato. stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/truth/.

Gopnik, Adam. 2017. 'Orwell's "1984" and Trump's America'. *New Yorker*, January 27.

Haas, Peter. 1992. 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination'. *International Organization* 46 (1): 1–35.

Haas, Peter. 2016. *Epistemic Communities, Constructivism, and international Environmental Politics* . London/New York: Routledge.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. 'Themes in post-metaphysical thinking' (W. Hohengarten, Trans.). In*Post-Metaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hacking, Ian. 2012. 'Introductory Essay' in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (4th ed) by Thomas Kuhn. Chicago. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hobbes, Thomas. 2011. *Leviathan*. United States: Pacific Publishing Studio.

Holzner, Burkart, and John H. Marx. 1979. *Knowledge Application: The Knowledge System in Society*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Kakutani, Michiko. 2018. *The Death of Truth*. New York. Tim Duggan Books.

Kant, Immanuel. 1983. *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*. Translated by Ted Humphry. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Kant, Immanuel. 2007. 'On the use of teleological principles in philosophy', translated by Günter Zöller. In*On the use of teleological principles in philosophy*, edited by Robert Louden and Günter Zöller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kavanagh, Jennifer, and Michael D. Rich. 2018. Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing

Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/pR2314.html/

Sankaran Krishna. 2006. 'Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations'. In*Decolonizing International Relations*, edited by Branwen Gruffydd Jones. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kuklinski, James, Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer J. Jerit, David Schwieder. & Robert

F. Rich. 2000. 'Misinformation and the Accuracy of Democratic Citizenship'. *Journal of Politics* 62(3): 790–816.

Lakatos, Imre. 1980. *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers, edited by* Gregory Currie, John Worrall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewandowsky, Stephan, Ullrich Ecker, and John Cook. 2017. 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era'. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6: 353–369.

Locke, John. 1986. *The Second Treaties on Civil Government*. New York: Prometheus Books.

Mill, John Stuart. 1963. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited by John M. Robson. 33 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Mill, John. 1977. 'Civilization' in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited by John M. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Neff, Stephen. 2003. 'A Short History of International Law' *in International Law*. 3rd edition, edited by Malcolm Evans. New York: Oxford University Press.

Poovey, Mary. 1998. *A history of the modern fact: Problems of knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* . Chicago: University to Chicago Press.

Popper, Karl. 2002. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Routledge

Rosenau, James. 1999. 'Toward an Ontology for Global Governance' in Martin Hewson and Timothy J. Sinclair (eds.). *Approaches to Global Governance Theory.* New York: State University of New York.

Said, Edward. 1995. 'Secular Interpretation, the Geographical element and the Methodology of Imperialism' in*After Colonization: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, edited by Gyan Prakash. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Sending, Ole Jacob. 2015. *The politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* . Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Stein, Arthur. 1990. *Why Nations Cooperate*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

About the author:

Atal Ahmadzai holds a Ph.D. in Global Affairs from Rutgers University and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of International Relations. He has a diverse educational background that geographically stretches from South and Southeast Asia to North America, which covers both Western and non- Western epistemologies. His research focuses on the thematic intersection of environment-conflict-development. His publications are in the areas of human development, global governance, environment, and terrorism.