



Education in a post-truth world

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EDITORIAL

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The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is *post-truth* 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.’¹ In their brief history of the concept Oxford Dictionaries notes a spike after a decade of use in relation to Brexit and Trump’s election as US president and the rise of the compound noun *post-truth politics* as a description for our times. Oxford Dictionaries also notes earlier formations with the *Post* stem like *post-national* (1945) and *post-racial* (1971) and they trace its incidental use in a variety of media before it became a general description and characteristic of our age. It ought not to be a surprise that the 2016 shortlist also included both *Alt-right*—‘An ideological grouping associated with extreme conservative or reactionary viewpoints, characterised by a rejection of mainstream politics and by the use of online media to disseminate deliberately controversial content’ and *Brexititeer*—‘A person who is in favour of the UK withdrawing from the European Union.’

The concept has certainly been picked up and anchored quickly in mainstream media. *Time* magazine deliciously states as a headline ‘It describes a situation in which feelings trump facts.’ *Time* quotes Casper Grathwohl, president of Oxford Dictionaries as saying ‘It’s not surprising that our choice reflects a year dominated by highly-charged political and social discourse. Fuelled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, *post-truth* as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time.’²

The Economist devoted two articles to the issue—‘Post-truth politics: Art of the lie’³ and ‘The post-truth world: Yes, I’d lie to you’⁴ beginning the latter with the sentence ‘When Donald Trump, the Republican presidential hopeful, claimed recently that President Barack Obama “is the founder” of Islamic State and Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate, the “co-founder,” even some of his supporters were perplexed.’ Trump repeatedly told and retold ‘big lies’:

- Trump Falsely Claimed That ‘The Birther Movement Was Started By Hillary Clinton In 2008’ when he perpetrated and championed the birther claims;
- Trump Has Repeatedly Falsely Claimed That He ‘Was Totally Against The War In Iraq.’
- Trump Has Repeatedly Falsely Claimed That The ‘Real Unemployment Rate Is 42 Percent.’
- Trump Has Falsely Claimed That ‘It Could Be 30 Million’ Undocumented Immigrants Currently Residing In The United States.
- Trump Has Lied That, Because His Taxes Are Under Audit, He ‘Can’t’ Make Them Public.
- Trump Has Falsely Claimed That Clinton ‘Soundly Slept In Her Bed’ During The 2012 Attack In Benghazi, Libya.
- Trump Claimed That ‘Inner-City Crime Is Reaching Record Levels,’ Which Is False.
- Trump Lied That Clinton Wants To ‘Abolish The Second Amendment.’
- Trump Claims He’s ‘Really The Friend Of’ The LGBT Community But He Supports Anti-LGBT Legislation⁵
- Trump falsely claimed ‘The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.’⁶
- Trump made multiple false claims concerning immigration and mass deportations⁷

This is just the ‘big lies.’ *The New York Times* (2016) commented on Trump’s technique:

... Donald Trump has come up with something new, which we can call the ‘big liar’ technique. Taken one at a time, his lies are medium-size—not trivial, but mostly not rising to the level of blood libel. But the lies are constant, coming in a steady torrent, and are never acknowledged, simply repeated. He evidently believes that this strategy will keep the news media flummoxed, unable to believe, or at least say openly, that the candidate of a major party lies that much.⁸

Taken together, Trump’s triumph in the US elections and Brexit indicates a decided turn against the global liberal internationalist order. It is fueled by the rise of both extreme right and left fractions—a coincidence of older neo-conservative values, anti-immigration sentiments, and white working-class people, especially men, who populate the deindustrialized areas in the US and got left behind when American manufacturing went East in search of cheap labour. Arguably, this group is less educated, more open to conspiracy theories, and less likely to change their deeply seated beliefs in the face of evidence. The style of Trump campaigning and the turn to anti-globalisation protectionist policies as a rejection of the liberal global order has led to what has been called ‘post-truth politics’ based mainly on appeals to emotion without any detailed policy specifics, delivered through video and social media, especially Twitter, that are not ideal media for argumentation, disputation, reflection and fact-checking. Post-truth politics is a development of an increasingly privatised and fragmented public news that began with the ‘sound bite’ and ‘photo opportunity’ to bypass public discussion in the regime of the 24-h news cycle, where news channels take on the mantle of party ideologies often deliberately distorting the truth.

Old Testament accounts of lying have viewed it as a sin that admits no reservation as to lie is to deliberately hide the truth. In *De Mendacio* Augustine takes a hard line on lying and modern philosophical accounts that lying is detrimental to society because it erodes trust as the very foundation of relations among human beings that sustains our institutions (Bok 1999: 31). Truth, truthfulness and truth-telling are seen as a necessary precondition for society. Lying is bad because it harms people through false information and because it is a violation of trust (Rachels, 2011: 42–43). It interferes with the process of self-understanding and perverts our relationship with the world. Foucault in his lectures at Berkeley in the early 1980s investigates “the use of *parrhesia* [truth-telling] in specific types of human relationships” and “the procedures and techniques employed in such relationships” (Foucault, 1999: 66). In the Ancient Greek, *parrhesia* is a speech activity where there is an exact coincidence between belief and truth and truth-telling is “a practice which shaped the specific relations that individuals have to themselves” (p. 66) (Peters, 2003).

The classic account of “Lying in Politics” is Arendt’s (1971) account of political imagination as a reflection on the Pentagon papers that draws interconnections between “lie, the deliberate denial of factual truth, and the capacity to change facts, the ability to act.” She argues “the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness; moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear.” As she argues “factual truths are never compellingly true” as contingent facts they carry no guarantee of truth and “no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt.” Arendt goes on to argue “Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs” (Peters, 2015). Arendt maintains lying and deception in public life is so easy “up to a point” and does not necessarily come into conflict with truth because facts can always be otherwise (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1971/nov/18/lying-in-%20politics-reflections-on-the-pentagon-pape/>).

One major consideration about the shift to post-truth is the “truth carrying capacity” of new social media and its propensity to disseminate fake news through Facebook, Google and Twitter, and thereby to create a “bubble world” where algorithmically selected news sources simply reinforce existing prejudices thus compromising the capacity for moral thinking. Does the new social media undermine our ability to recognise truth?

Harsin (2015), in his article ‘Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies,’ following a Foucauldian line of argument, argues that we have moved from ‘regimes of truth’ to ‘regimes of posttruth.’ In the new regime that characterises postpolitics and postdemocracy ‘power exploits new “freedoms” to participate/produce/express (as well as consume/diffuse/evaluate)’ where ‘resource rich

political actors attempt to use data analytic knowledge to manage the field of appearance and participation, via attention and affect.'

As an experienced star of the reality game show TV series *The Apprentice* that ran for 14 seasons and made him a household name, Donald Trump understands contemporary media better than his opponents. He utilises the same media strategies in his politics: he gets attention; he isn't polished; He promotes unfiltered feelings; He follows a tried-and-true storyline; He encourages a subjective interpretation of the truth.⁹ Trump has mastered Twitter as the ideal medium 'unleashing and redefining its power as a tool of political promotion, distraction, score-settling and attack.'¹⁰

In this new media political landscape, the liberal media and pollsters have fared very badly indeed. How could they be so wrong? How could they consistently overrate Clinton's chances over Trump's? The robust *New York Times* gave Clinton an 85% chance of winning!¹¹ They bought into Trump's politics of mediatisation responding emotionally to his taunts and bullying, desperately wanting to point out his failings and losing their objectivity. They contributed to his success by overestimating Hillary's prospect of success, dismissing Trump's chances and misunderstanding the electorate and their hatred of the professional political elite.

In this post-truth political environment Gay Alcorn notes 'facts are futile.'¹² Post-truth is often taken to mean 'post-fact.' It's not so much that facts are futile, it's just that they take a while to collect and marshal into a knock-down argument. By the time the facts are gathered the media moment has passed, the headline has been grabbed, and the lie can be modified, apologised for or replaced by another. A leader in the *New Scientist* (2016) comments on the revolutionary result when free speech meets social media:

the right to free speech has morphed into the ability to say and spread anything, no matter how daft or dangerous. Hence the buzz around the idea of 'post-truth politics'—although a cynic might wonder if politicians are actually any more dishonest than they used to be. Perhaps it's just that fibs once whispered into select ears are now overheard by everyone.¹³

There have been some important historical precursors in the lead up to the post-truth zeitgeist most recently in the 'science deniers,' especially the climate change deniers, in the neoconservative attacks by Lynn Cheney on US history teachers over the rewriting of the American past, the Holocaust and genocide deniers, the Sokal hoax involving *Social Text*, the older 'science wars,' and furore that greeted Funtowicz and Ravetz's (1990) 'post-normal science' where quality assurance systems replaces the search for truth. Ravetz explains the line of argument thus: 'We argue that the quality-assurance of scientific inputs into policy processes requires an "extended peer community," including all the stakeholders in an issue. This new peer community can also deploy "extended facts," including local and personal experience, as well as investigative journalism and leaked sources.'¹⁴

It takes little imagination to draw some conclusions from this melange of past examples to understand that the notion of 'facts' and 'evidence' in a post-truth era affects not only politics and science but becomes a burning issue for education at all levels. Education has now undergone the digital turn and to a large extent been captured by big data systems in administration as well as teaching and research. Criticality has been avoided or limited within education and substituted by narrow conceptions of standards, and state-mandated instrumental and utilitarian pedagogies. There have been attacks on the professional autonomy of teachers as arbiters of truth. If education is equated almost solely with job training rather than a broader critical citizenship agenda for participatory democracy, we can expect the further decline of social democracy and the rise of populist demagogue politicians and alt-right racist parties. In the era of post-truth it is not enough to revisit notions or theories of truth, accounts of 'evidence,' and forms of epistemic justification as a guide to truth, but we need to understand the broader epistemological and Orwellian implications of post-truth politics, science and education. More importantly, we need an operational strategy to combat 'government by lying' and a global society prepared to accept cognitive dissonance and the subordination of truth to Twittered emotional appeals and irrational personal beliefs. Rather than speaking truth to power, Trump demonstrates the enduring power of the lie.

Notes

1. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year>.
2. <http://time.com/4572592/oxford-word-of-the-year-2016-post-truth/>.
3. <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21706525-politicians-have-always-lied-does-it-matter-if-they-leave-truth-behind-entirely-art>.
4. <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21706498-dishonesty-politics-nothing-new-manner-which-some-politicians-now-lie-and>.
5. <http://mediamatters.org/research/2016/09/21/trump-s-11-biggest-lies-debate-moderators-should-be-prepared-address/213234#Birtherism>; see also <http://www.dailywire.com/news/4834/trumps-101-lies-hank-berrien#>.
6. <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/trumps-big-debate-lie-on-global-warming-w442167>.
7. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/08/29/one-of-trumps-biggest-lies-is-falling-apart-so-naturally-hes-blaming-the-media-for-it/?utm_term=.e84aec9c1ccd; <https://thinkprogress.org/two-big-lies-in-trumps-immigration-speech-769ac7e060a9#.bfps3glw5>.
8. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/09/opinion/donald-trumps-big-liar-technique.html?_r=0.
9. <http://qz.com/828700/2016-presidential-election-donald-trump-has-used-reality-tv-strategies-throughout-his-campaign/>.
10. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/politics/donald-trump-twitter-use-campaign-2016.html>.
11. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html>.
12. <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/facts-are-futile-in-an-era-of-posttruth-politics-20140227-33m70.html>.
13. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23030763-000-free-speech-has-become-sound-bites-with-revolutionary-results/>.
14. <http://www.jerryravetz.co.uk/work.html>.

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