

Post-truth

Vlad P. Glăveanu

Webster University Geneva, Switzerland

University of Bergen, Norway

This entry examines the phenomenon of post-truth in its relation to the notion of the possible. It starts by outlining the roots and main characteristics of the post-truth context, including its relation to politics, social media, and post-modernist assumptions about the relativity of truth. While the spread of falsehoods and lies are not uncommon across the history of society, what makes the current trend particularly alarming is the fact that we are dealing with more than distortions of what is true but with a growing disregard, in the case of some individuals and groups, of reality itself. To overcome the pitfalls of relativist accounts, what we need is a recognition of the fact that the possible is not the opposite of the real but its ever-present companion. And, also, that cultivating possibilities, including in the form of ‘possible truths’, should be guided by ethical question about what these truths ‘do’ for self, others, and society. Keywords: post-truth, misinformation, post-modernism, relativism, possible, ethics.

The current debate on post-truth has a lot to tell us about the possible. On the one hand, this association might sound surprising as the two have widely different connotations: highly negative in case of post-truth, commonly associated with the rapid deterioration of democracy and the dismantling of social consensus, and generally positive about the possible, usually connected to human striving and human ways of being in the world. On the other hand, both these notions raise important questions about the nature of reality and, in particular, the relation between what exists in the mind vis a vis what exists in the world.

In some ways, post-truth societies opt for inhabiting possible rather than actual worlds, they prefer fiction to fact and, most importantly, position their own fictions as facts. They are, thus, effectively making some possibilities real while ignoring unwanted realities. This process is central for many possibility-enabling phenomena discussed within the present encyclopaedia, from play and imagination to utopian forms of thinking. And yet, at the same time, there is a fundamental distinction between a post-truth mentality and a playful one, for instance. This difference comes from the fact that the possible and real are not opposed to each other but inter-dependent. And it is precisely this inter-dependence that is challenged by post-truth beliefs and practices. In the end, analysing more closely the reality of post-truth invites us to reflect much more deeply on the ethics of possibility, a topic we return to towards the end.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote that “the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist” (Arendt, 1958, p. 474). This is a chilling reflection for our times, marked by what many call post-truth politics or “the triumph of the visceral over the rational, the deceptively simple over the honestly complex” (D’Anconda, 2017, p. 20). Politicians, corporations, and journalists stand accused of fomenting this alarming

trend by showing little concern for objectivity in their support for populist and nationalist policies. And yet, this is much more than a political issue as it is an epistemological one, a question of what we consider to be truthful knowledge and of our ability to know ourselves, others, and the world we live in. Such interrogations have a long history in philosophy and, for the most part, they served the purpose of helping us reflect on the (im)possibilities associated with the human condition. But in today's social and political climate, they became weaponised by extreme groups who tend to share one or more of other beliefs such as anti-science, anti-vax, climate change denial, and white supremacy, among others.

The era of post-truth

The term post-truth has an interesting history (for more details, see D'Anconda, 2017). It is believed that the term was first used in a 1992 article written for the *Nation* by Steve Tesich. He decried in that article the fact that the American public, traumatised by Watergate and other scandals, not only started turning away from the truth but suppressing it. Moreover, as Tesich noted, they had decided this freely, not because of some external totalitarian pressure. The notion rose to prominence many years later, in 2016, in the context of the double shock of the Brexit referendum and Trump's election. It was that year that post-truth became Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year after its usage surged by 2000% (McIntyre, 2018).

But what exactly is post-truth and does it mean a total disregard for the truth? More than this, is this a new phenomenon, specific for early 21st century or one that goes back to 20th century propaganda and perhaps even further? When we are lamenting the fact that we live now in post-truth world, aren't we forgetting perhaps that we have lived this way all along?

In trying to define post-truth it is best to start from the notion of truth. For centuries, at least since the times of Aristotle, deciding what is truth has been a relatively straightforward affair. This was made easier by Aristotle's early definition: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (in Baggini, 2017, p. 4). Such an understanding of truth substantiates the correspondence theory or the belief that a high degree of correspondence should be established between statements about the world and facts of the world. The more statements diverge from facts, the further we get from gaining (or stating) true knowledge. This conception has been attacked across the centuries both by philosophers who didn't believe we can 'objectively' grasp reality and those who saw language as polyphonic thus making our statement about the world impossible to be reduced to a one-to-one type of correspondence. But, even when challenging the basis of an 'objective' truth, the concern for it remained. In contrast, in recent decades, "objectivity – or even the idea that people can aspire toward ascertaining the best available truth – has been falling out of favour" (Kakutani, 2018, p. 17). Beyond a contestation of what counts as fact, we notice more and more a disregard for facts.

Why post-truth? Why now?

The Oxford Dictionaries definition of post-truth states that it designates a climate in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and

personal belief. This doesn't mean, however, that we don't care anymore about truth claims but that they start to be subordinated to political points of view (McIntyre, 2018, p. 11), to how we want to see the world rather than how it is. This is not a question of misperception or the creativity of language, as post-modern thinkers would have us believe. It is a bold reversal of power in which the possible (e.g., imagined events and facts) dominates the real or, at least, what people perceive as real. The possibility that a political viewpoint is just as good and truthful as any other – more than this, that my views are better than yours, despite any need to critically reflect on evidence – has become the new normal, at least for specific groups.

For some, this is a sure sign of a global trend. This trend “is a crash in the value of truth, comparable with the crash of a currency or a stock” (D’Anconda, 2017, p. 8). For others, speaking of post-truth societies is “premature and misguided”, “we wouldn’t even be talking about post-truth if we didn’t think truth mattered. The world is neither ready nor willing to say goodbye to truth, even in politics where it sometimes seems as though it has already taken its leave” (Baggini, 2017, pp. 6-7). The ‘truth’, as always, is somewhere in the middle.

More specifically, we need to make some important distinctions in this area (see McIntyre, 2018). First, we should distinguish between falsehoods and lies. The former are unintentional mistakes, the latter refer to deliberate ways of covering up the truth. Then we have wilful ignorance whenever we don’t know if what we say is true, but we say it anyway. In other words, we don’t bother to know if what we are saying is indeed correct, often out of laziness. This gets us closer to what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt referred to as ‘bullshit’ (see Frankfurt, 2005), which is different than lying. When lying, the person needs to have a clear understanding of what is true, in order to conceal it. When bullshitting, he or she demonstrates only a careless indifference towards knowing what is actually true. From here on there is just one more step to self-deception and delusion in which we get to convince ourselves that a falsehood is, in fact, the truth, even when all credible sources dispute this conclusion. This is much closer to what specialists discuss as post-truth: the conviction that what one thinks and especially how one feels can change a lie into something truthful.

All the phenomena above – uttering falsehoods, lying, bullshitting, deceiving ourselves – are not new and have been part of human history since its beginning. Either for cognitive reasons (related to how we perceive and process information) or social ones (related to how group membership changes our thinking), we have always dwelled, to some extent, in the realm of heightened possibility that is post-truth. But the difference today is that not only individuals do this – entire communities engage in such practices as well. Even more alarming, some politicians take part in this. As McIntyre (2018, p. 10) shrewdly notes, and as we could see from Donald Trump’s presidency and Boris Johnson’s premiership, “when our leaders – or a plurality of our society – are in denial over basic facts, the consequences can be world shattering”.

From history to fiction

We established, above, that today’s current social and political climate is both similar and different than other historical times. This means, among other things, that we can and should learn from the past, including past works of fiction, in order to learn more about the

mechanisms of post-truth politics and, perhaps, find more effective ways to counter them. In the words of D’Anconda:

“Lying has been an integral part of politics since early humans arranged themselves in tribes. Anthropologists note the importance of deception in primitive societies, especially, but not exclusively, when dealing with outsiders. Plato ascribed to Socrates the notion of the ‘noble lie’ – a myth that inspires social harmony and civic devotion. In Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli urges the ruler to be ‘a great pretenders and dissembler’” (D’Anconda, 2017, p. 23).

This reality has often been dramatized by novelists with a taste for the dystopian and for constructing (almost) perfect totalitarian worlds. As mentioned earlier, it was the grim experience of Nazi, fascist and communist propaganda that inspired many of these authors to explore the processes underpinning post-truth politics and to dissect its main features. George Orwell stands out among novelists in this regard for offering us, with his well-known book, *1984*, a great example of how politics, power and technology can collaborate in rendering any notion of truth useless. At first sight, there aren’t many parallels between the dystopian universe of *1984* and our world today, the former designed and controlled by the Party, down to every detail of one’s life, including mental life, the latter marked by fragmentation, mobility, and interconnectivity. And yet, some commonalities can be found. Take, for instance, the role played by technology. In his piece of fiction, technology is used to monitor and dominate individuals while, in our (real) world, it has the power to bring people together and increase participation, including in online spaces. But, as a closer look at the Internet and, in particular, social media and their impact of the spread of post-truth mindsets and ideologies quickly comes to show that technology remains “the all-important, primary, indispensable engine of post-truth” (D’Anconda, 2017, p. 49). The use of algorithms to expose people to content they are likely to want and believe in, the emergence of ‘echo chambers’, and the general ease with which conspiracy theories spread online are as disturbing as Orwell’s view of total control.

Perhaps one of the most direct anticipation of today’s discussion of post-truth transpires in *1984* in the notion of ‘doublethink’ or the power to hold two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind at the same time, and trust that both of them are true. It is by controlling language, especially simplifying it, that people in Orwell’s dystopia become incapable of questioning the reality imposed by the Party and are trained, from early on, into accepting whatever the Party wants to be true, even when this constantly changes. Today’s simplified use of language on social media, often reduced to abbreviations, hashtags, and the use of emojis, could be interpreted as signs of cognitive impoverishment, at least in some online spaces. And yet, the power of the Party went beyond language and was ultimately expressed in how the mind and body of dissidents were subjected to torture at the hands of interrogators. The famous scene in which Inner Party member O’Brien tells his victim, Winston Smith that reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else, is emblematic for the methods of those who spread misinformation online. In *1984*, however, the Party was supposed to hold the ultimate truth. Today we are more likely to be persuaded that there is no such thing. The outcome is the same though: more openness to manipulation and a generalised sense of resignation.

Fiction itself, even when presumably about the future or alternative worlds, is rooted in history. In this case, it is interesting to note that George Orwell was not a passive bystander to the major world events taking place during his lifetime, most notably World War II. A participant in the Spanish civil war, he was terrified by the ability of Fascist propaganda to shape people's perception of the Russian intervention in the conflict. This prompted him, in his 1942 essay called *Looking Back on the Spanish War*, to reflect on the strange feeling that 'the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world' (see D'Anconda, 2017, pp. 3-5). The fact that lies can pass into history and, effectively, become history, made Orwell wonder about how the story of the war will be written if Franco remains in power and even if he doesn't (given the fact that his government kept traces of only those narratives that served its purposes). Most interestingly, his main concern was not that history is biased – this is very much a fact of living in a human society – but that few people of this time showed interest in correcting such biases. That, in the end, they lacked the belief that history could be written truthfully... The endless possibilities of (re)imagining history had no anchor in reality, they would only serve as mirrors of individual and collective intentions, hopes and fears. Who was to be blamed for setting up those mirrors? Many people, both then and now, but one group seems to stand out, at least for how unexpected (even for its own members) their contribution is to post-truth.

Blaming post-modernism

It is rare to have philosophers and other academics (partially) accused of societal upheaval and yet this charge is often repeated by those who analyse post-truth. In brief, besides the political and technological dimensions of this phenomenon, there is a clear epistemological underpinning to the debate. Epistemology concerns the theory of knowledge used by scientists, philosophers and lay people alike to make truth claims and, as such, ideas such as 'there is no ultimate truth about the world' and 'truth is a matter of perspective, my truth being just as good as yours' are epistemological in nature. They are typically associated with relativism which itself is associated with post-modernism and its related manifestations (e.g., social constructionism). As a current of thought that swept across the social sciences and humanities in late 20th century, post-modernism offered a much needed counter-point to positivist science with its essentialism, reification and, oftentimes, justification of social inequality. In response, post-modernist thinkers claimed that there was no single privileged position from which to understand reality and, as such, inclusive and critical dialogues between perspectives were needed in order to grasp the world as it appears to the multiple participants in society. This view, for as modern (or rather, post-modern) as it might sound, has an illustrious past in philosophy and science, versions of it being promoted, at different times, by thinkers as varied as Gorgias, Protagoras, Plato, Descartes, Hobbes, Darwin, Nietzsche, William James, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, among others (Blackburn, 2006). While it is hard to do justice to the diversity of these philosophical views, overall, the post-modern position promotes:

"the idea that there was a right or wrong answer to what a text (whether written or behavioral) 'meant' was thrown into question. Indeed the notion of truth itself was now under scrutiny, for one had to recognize that in the act of deconstruction, the critic was bringing his or her own values, history, and assumptions to the interpretation as well. This meant that there could be many answers, rather than just one, for any deconstruction.

The postmodernist approach is one in which everything is questioned and little is taken at face value. There is no right answer, only narrative” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 125).

This way of framing post-modernism brings it close to current sociocultural theories of the possible (see Glăveanu, 2020), theories that discuss this phenomenon with the help of notions like difference, multiplicity, perspectives, and dialogue. However, it is on the topic of relativism that post-modernism and sociocultural theory split, in particular when the latter is grounded in pragmatism. This is because, as critics of post-modern views argue, there is a difference between saying that knowledge depends on one’s position and perspective and that reality itself is relative to one’s position and perspective. The first standpoint acknowledges the fact that our understanding of the world depends to a large extent on who we are and where we are in this world, but it doesn’t deny the possibility of grasping reality through the coordination of multiple perspectives. In contrast, the second standpoint makes any attempts at grasping reality futile and shatters it into a multitude of isolated and solipsistic perspectives.

What is interesting to notice when it comes to the current debate about post-truth is the paradox at the heart of relativism. When it was first proposed, in mid to late 20th century, its aim was social, political, and emancipatory. In particular, post-modern thinkers wanted to give voice to the marginalised and oppressed and to challenge the hegemony of the powerful (e.g., white, male, rich, Western), including their hegemony on truth. It was an effort to increase pluralism within society and contribute to calls for diversity, inclusivity, and civil rights. In early 21st century, however, almost the same arguments about truth are being paraded, especially by (far) right politicians and commentators, in order to promote misinformation, squash resistance and, more generally, suppress voting rights and increase social inequality (McIntyre, 2018). This is all done through the simple act of questioning obvious facts. If everything is a ‘social convention’, D’Anconda (2017, p. 92) asks, “what is to stop the purveyor of ‘fake news’ from claiming to be a digital desperado, fighting the wicked ‘hegemony’ of the mainstream media?”

It is by using the epistemological means of post-modernism that creationists, for example, argue that children should also learn in school about ‘intelligent design’ or anti-vax supporters and climate change deniers claim that their experience and beliefs should be as important as those of scientists. ‘Teach both sides’ or ‘teach the controversy’ (Kakutani, 2018) are calls often heard today, ignoring how deeply unequal the evidence for each side is. Controversies are created where there arguably should be none. And this displays, once more, the perverse power of post-truth propaganda to appropriate the means of post-modern thinkers and, to some extent, of those who are concerned with how the possible is envisioned and enacted in society. One great example of this is doubt, a key practice fueling the post-modern drive to deconstruct language and criticise power. But, also, an enormously potent weapon in the assault on truth we have been witnessing for many decades. In their seminar book, *Merchants of Doubt*, Oreskes and Conway (2011) document how the tobacco industry fought against scientific consensus around the negative consequences of smoking on health. By setting up the Tobacco Industry Research Committee in 1954, these corporations wanted not to deny the role of science but cultivate doubt about scientific consensus. They aimed, and to a large extent succeeded, to pit a few fringe, questionable figures, against the scientific establishment and foster confusion about what might actually be the case. Even if the Committee has been

disbanded following a series of lawsuits across the US, this post-modern and, in essence, possibility-enhancing practice of doubt would be extended to climate change where it continues to be relatively effective, at least for some. In the words of D'Anconda, again:

“the normal practice of adversarial debate is [nowadays] morphing into an unhealthy relativism, in which the epistemological chase is not only better than the catch – but all that matters. The point is simply to keep the argument going, to ensure that it never reaches a conclusion” (D'Anconda, 2017, p. 46).

The ethics of possibility

There are lessons to be learned about the possible from considering the case of post-truth, namely the fact that unconstrained possibility often has negative consequences for individuals and society. In this context, without a set of criteria for what passes as ‘truth’ we are left with the daunting possibility that everything could be true, a situation that renders the notion hollow. This, in turn, opens the door for extreme forms of relativism, scepticism and apathy to take over and reduce the prospect of building common ground and engaging in collective action. On the other hand, sociocultural and pragmatist studies of the possible hold the key to sidestepping some of the most negative implications of post-modernism while harnessing its power to question hegemonic relations and structures. To achieve this, we need to engage with the possible not only as ontological and epistemological category but an ethical one. The question of ethics is intrinsically related to debates about post-truth, for example in the double standards adopted by people who “routinely embrace an obscenely high standard of doubt toward facts that they don’t want to believe, alongside complete credulity toward any facts that fit with their agenda” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 11). But, at a deeper level, this question is about the consequences of spreading misinformation for other people and society as a whole. In the end, our capacity to create new possibilities and go against ‘what is’ doesn’t mean that we should do so without considering what our explorations of the possible mean for others.

When it comes to the notion of truth, we need to collectively find a way to “defend the plurivocality, ambiguity and non-programmability of truth while also defending the right to say that some things are not just different, they’re wrong, and this without embracing the no less mistaken idea of absolutism” (Caputo, 2016, p. 9). And the first step towards reinstating truth is to understand its complexity and the fact that no easy definition would do. As Baggini (2017, pp. 8-9) notes, “truths can be and often are difficult to understand, discover, explain, verify” but “they are also disturbingly easy to hide, distort, abuse or twist”. Our responsibility, as scholars of possibility, is to examine the implications of any ‘possible’ truth in the world and what it affords human action and interaction. It is not only the case, in this regard, that basing one’s beliefs and choices on misinformation or falsehoods ends in failure. What matters most is what any given position and perspective helps us do or achieve, in a pragmatic sense. ‘Truths’ that lead to oppression, discrimination and exclusion are, ultimately, possibilities not worth exploring. The ethics of the possible invites us to consider possibility as inter-dependent with what is real and not a separate category; together, they substantiate the joint reality we experience and try to improve with, for, and towards others (Glăveanu, 2018).

Cross-references

Ethics
Imagination
Post-modernism
Misinformation
Social change
Social media

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