



[Post-Truth Politics, the Fifth Estate and the Securitization of Fake News](#)

Nayef Al-Rodhan - 7th June 2017



Nayef Al-Rodhan looks towards international solutions to the problem of fake news.

“Post-truth” was selected the 2016 ‘word of the year’ by the Oxford Dictionaries but the term is symptomatic of an ‘era’, rather than a year: an era of boundless virtual communication, where politics thrives on a repudiation of facts and commonsense. ‘Post-truthness’ crosses new lines of division: political splits seem to be less about ideology and more a battle between facts and lies.

Although the term “post-truth” has existed for over two decades, 2016 was an appropriate time to give it a boost of popularity. The Oxford Dictionaries [defined “post-truth”](#) as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. The Economist has devoted several pieces to [post-truth politics](#), which it defines as a “reliance on assertions that “feel true” but have no basis in fact”. Such assertions often remain unverified and have little or no repercussions for the culprits; even if said claims are exposed as stark lies, they do little to delegitimize the perpetrator.

Post-truth politics everywhere has a fundamental common denominator: it appeals to emotions and gut feeling more than facts and evidence. Fake news and conspiracy theories can go viral in a matter of hours, creating alternate realities and serving propaganda purposes. Post-truth is a threat to liberal democracy and its institutions and simultaneously exposes the vulnerability of the liberal order. It is also a symptom of a greater problem, which is accountability in the online community.

Denial of facts, deceit and rumour-based allegations are nothing new in politics. In 1986, Ronald Reagan admitted publicly on national television that he had traded weapons for hostages with Iran – after having insisted for months that he had not. He [concluded](#) that: “my heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not”.

Nowadays, the term “fake news” has become ubiquitous to the extent that it is conveniently used in an accusatory manner, to denounce or belittle any uncomfortable or inconvenient facts. President Trump has frequently labeled real, verified news from mainstream outlets as [“fake news”](#) – a step further from what any other politicians have done in the past, despite the fact that many US presidents have had a complicated and adversarial relationship with the press. In 1962, Nixon partly blamed the press for his loss in the elections for governor of California. Subsequently, once president, he created the [White House Communications Office](#) to ensure his interactions with the media were as predictable and orchestrated as possible.

Even so, what we are witnessing today, in the “post-truth” era is more menacing because of the multiplication of channels of communication. Information now can circulate freely and unverified on the Internet, providing possibilities of misinformation and propaganda on a scale that was previously virtually impossible. In effect, it is now possible to share fake news more frequently than verified news, also due to the fact that social media has enabled the proliferation of authentic-looking or misleading [fake accounts](#) that help spread lies, most often directed against the liberal public.

What is truth anyway?

The Oxford Dictionaries dates the first use of the term to a 1992 essay by Steve Tesich, a Serbian-American playwright writing in *The Nation* following the Iran/Contra scandal. Tesich reflected that after the Watergate revelations and reporting of atrocities from Vietnam, Americans had become contemptuous of uncomfortable truths. He [noted](#): “we came to equate the truth with bad news (...). We looked to our government to protect us from the truth”.

Journalist [David Roberts](#) also used the term “post-truth” more than two decades ago to refer to the response of some US politicians refuting scientific claims about climate change.

In 2004, Ralph Keyes proclaimed we had reached the age of “post-truth”. In his 2004 [book](#), “The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life”, Keyes expressed the concern that we are losing the stigma attached to lying, meaning that lies can be told with impunity. For Keyes, such times of “post truthfulness” represent an ethical twilight zone.

The common theme running across the history of the term is that post-truth is defined by lies spread routinely by politicians, with little or no significant consequences for their legitimacy and reputation. But there are inevitable consequences for the future of democracy and the future of humanity: a future in which scientific facts are repudiated cannot be anything but insecure. [Veritas](#), or truth, and facts are crucial for humanity, and indispensable for effective decision-making and ultimately, for human progress. Moreover, facts-based policies are also important in an existential sense and indispensable to our own survival – the case of the debate on climate change being a prime example.

Geopolitics and Fake News

Geopolitics in the era of fake-news is also complicated because post-truth disrupts a fundamental element of diplomacy and international politics, namely communication. Unsubstantiated allegations and groundless claims will distort diplomatic relations and lead political and military processes astray. False claims about the money ‘extorted’ from the UK by the European Union helped build the case for Brexit, with its ensuing implications for stability in Europe and elsewhere. The Russian state used social media to spread allegations that the [Ukrainian government](#) crucified a child – a claim later debunked, yet telling of how fake news can help fuel wars. Similarly, populist rhetoric about NATO’s inadequacy and misinformation about its funding [mask ignorance](#) about the real benefits of the alliance for its members’ common security. Although unsubstantiated, such comments are enough to create anxiety in political quarters and prompt some Eastern European nations to see their state security in a wholly different geopolitical light. In the post-truth era, a complete [lack of understanding of military strategy](#) and the intricacies of warfare will be less relevant in devising policies, and this comes at the risk of dismantling security communities and the foundations of the liberal order.

The possibility of hijacking national elections also has profound geopolitical and security implications. This has been a particularly key topic in the aftermath of the US elections. The stakes are especially high in [France](#), which is a key member of the European Union and NATO, and where the winning candidate can, quite unequivocally, impact the future of the liberal order.

The Enlightenment Tradition and Fake news

The conflict between objective fact and subjectivity has a long history in philosophical debates. Indeed, philosophy has mulled over relativism for centuries. After all, epistemic relativism is all about attributing validity to different views of the world, accepting those views are construed in a particular context and that somebody's 'truth' depends on their context.

Yet, while we can accept that there are many 'truths' that individuals live by, the post-truth era repudiates science and scholarly expertise with a vigour that can only concern us. If everything can be interpreted, then nothing can be certain whatsoever. What place is there for the [community of scientists](#) in an era of post-truth? Facts, statistics, evidence are either distorted or rebuffed in the age of post-truth. The Enlightenment tradition taught us to celebrate freedom of thought and human reason as a marker of our shared humanity, affirming that despite different opinions, we could find common ground owing to our capacity for reason. Humans, as independent, sovereign entities were bound to seek to unlock the forces that keep them in the dark. [The Enlightenment](#) project was not only about reason, but also about wider political goals: it was internationalist in spirit, strongly anti-clerical, and celebrated individual freedom and human rights.

[Edmund Burke](#), who vigorously opposed the ideals of the French Revolutions, decried the turn to reason that the Enlightenment so strongly advocated: for Burke, history, tradition and collective wisdom were more meaningful and enduring sources of legitimacy for human institutions. [Nietzsche](#) was a fierce critic of the Enlightenment, considering its ideals as arrogant illusions. Many other thinkers, like [Isaiah Berlin](#), for instance, challenged the claims of the Enlightenment and considered it rather utopian. Rationality, and the notion that mankind can carve its own destiny, was dangerous and materialistic. The ideas contained in the anti-Enlightenment movement gained traction and essentially laid the foundations for anti-intellectualism. The 'post-truth age' is reminiscent of this attack on reason.

Anti-globalization, xenophobic and nationalistic politicians will be relieved to have the Enlightenment legacy challenged but their alternative is anything but sustainable in the long run. The fact that individuals are swamped with fake news that question scientific forecasts is hardly a reason for celebration.

Moreover, as further detailed below, we are now compelled to question the long-held premise about the human faculty to seek intellectual freedom and reason from another angle altogether. Cognitive sciences and [cognitive linguistics](#), in particular, send a similar warning, demonstrating that people are more likely to validate messages that use certain mental structures such as metaphors and frames, rather than pure reason.

Neuroscience and Fake News

Neuroscience hints at similar biases of interpretation of the world – our brains acquire knowledge and understanding of the world by a combination of sense experience and reason. Knowledge is

always situational. It also always rooted in physicalism because everything in the brain is physical: every thought process is mediated by neurochemistry and neuroanatomical responses. This means knowledge develops as a unique experience for each individual. With insights from neuroscience, I have called this paradigm of knowledge-formation [neuro-rational physicalism](#). The idea of knowledge as not only personal (and therefore not universal), but also a physical process was not particularly popular in philosophy before the advent of neuroscience and neuroimaging tools, which allowed unprecedented visual access into the brain.

Neuroscientific research also provides insight into why fake news could appear so enticing and easy to spread. The clue seems to lie in the role that [emotions](#) play in our thinking, being far more important than the 'rational' portion of our decision-making. [Other recent findings](#) reinforce this premise: the prefrontal cortex, which hosts the logical part of the brain, comes second in the process of reading the news. What will make a piece of news more likely to be shared is whether it activates the social part of the brain, and whether it has a wider social value for the reader.

However, the problem with post-truth goes beyond individual responsibility, as a vast panoply of political and commercial entities contribute to complicating the access to information.

Digital Capitalism and Fake News

The search for 'truth' in the age of technology is complicated by the unique challenges raised by the medium of communication itself.

Content no longer comes primarily in [bundles](#), such as newspapers, but through social media. A [survey by the Pew Centre](#) revealed that the majority of adults in the US (62%) get their news from social media platforms. The internet has changed how people communicate, not only in terms of speed but also by enabling individuals to find and coalesce around other groups with biases similar to their own, thereby [reinforcing their beliefs](#).

In the early 2000s, the advent of the internet was hailed as a new era in individual and political freedom, allowing for greater democratic participation. The [transformative power](#) of internet-mediated communication seemed to be tested and confirmed with "color revolutions" around the world. In this context, blogs epitomize the democratization of the media, empowering private citizens to expose abuses of power, call for grassroots mobilization or voice concerns – often protected by anonymity. Such new opportunities of expression give online channels an immense role in public life. I have previously called blogs "[the fifth estate](#)", for their potential to become avatars of power, going beyond the power of the traditional press, which Edward Burke had famously dubbed 'the fourth estate'.

But the emergence of a post-truth reality shows the reverse, darker, side of this development. Now the Internet and its many platforms are emerging as terrifying forces, giving rise to the major moral crisis of our times.

The profusion of fake news in the post-truth age can do irreparable damage to the foundations of the liberal order. [Fake news](#) will only sharpen polarizations, corrupt intellectual integrity and damage the fabric of democracy. Post-truth thrives in a very polarized or partisan environment, where the idea of truth is already split into notions of "my truth vs. your truth". Fake news then reinforces existing political and social polarizations, leading to a downward spiral into more divisions and uncertainty.

But focusing exclusively on the end results of media falsehood and [“alternative facts”](#) risks misplacing blame entirely on dishonest politicians. Indeed, the medium itself in which the post-truth age has developed is not neutral. Rather, much of this medium is owned by private “digital giants” that profit immensely from click-baits. Given the power of companies like Google and Facebook, [digital capitalism](#) has a share of responsibility in the larger narrative about post-truth.

What is the way forward?

Tackling the serious challenge of fake news requires stronger action by governments and private actors alike. Complete fact-checking on the internet might remain a utopia, but there are many ways to counter the epidemic of fake news or [“alternative facts”](#).

1. Improved technological tools for fact-checking

States and digital companies must immediately implement better systems for fact-checking. This is, to some extent, already underway and it needs to be pursued more vigorously.

As early as 2014, the European Union started funding a project called PHEME, a technology to verify the accuracy of information online. Ahead of its elections in 2017, Germany is taking action unilaterally to prevent misinformation aiming to distort public opinion. Following false stories such as that its oldest church was set alight by a mob, [Germany asked Facebook](#) to introduce a fake news filtering tool. Aside from state initiatives, some other types of actors, such as non-state or non-profit entities, have also expressed interest in using verification tools, such as [Check](#), which is a platform for collaborative verification of content on digital media.

2. Greater public presence for scientists and dialogue with the scientific community

Another way of ensuring that facts take precedence over groundless rhetoric is to have an unmediated dialogue between scientific expertise and policy-making. The UK is implementing this by bringing scientific research directly into Parliament: [the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology \(POST\)](#) briefs parliamentarians (MPs and Lords) on various topics, in accessible and succinct formats. A recent [report by the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee](#) also highlighted that scientists need to be aided in becoming better and more efficient communicators to the public. This also included more concrete recommendations for science journalists.

3. Stronger government action – but staying mindful of not infringing upon civil liberties

For example, [the Czech Republic](#) recently set up a unit within the Ministry of Interior to help combat the spread of fake news, particularly in preparation for the upcoming elections and an expected surge in Russian propaganda. The security dimension of this initiative is explicit: the name of the unit that will tackle fake news is [“Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats”](#).

While state-sanctioned control and filtering of news was always associated with authoritarian regimes, these recent developments are, conversely, efforts to help save liberal democratic processes and secure fair elections. Yet state-led initiatives have both risks and deficiencies. For a start, the claim of “fake news” can be used as an excuse to introduce censorship and thus further erode trust in the state. [Another problem](#) is that in states with fewer resources and institutional

capabilities to respond to the threat of fake news, it is citizens that must be careful and vigilant about the information they receive. This is a wishful proposition but impractical for many reasons, not least because it assumes that all citizens have the requisite literacy skills to assess the authenticity of the news.

Increasingly, calls for fact-checking are prompting private digital companies to react but there is a long road ahead to fully implement a system of monitoring disputed information.

4. Securitizing fake news

Post-truth represents a dangerous surge of populism that glorifies vulgarity and lies, with implications that are not 'just' ethical, but destabilizing for domestic politics and geopolitics.

To confront the dangers of post-truth, the international community must consider it an emerging security challenge, in need of stern responses and collective efforts.

So far, numerous countries have tried to tackle this independently. The US has recently cooperated with Spanish authorities to arrest a prominent [Russian hacker](#) for his involvement in the US 2016 elections. Operating under the alias "Severa", his fake antivirus software functioned as a spam engine for several years, infecting between 70,000 and 90,000 computers and sending up to 1.5 billion spam messages a day. These figures show the frightening dimensions of this type of propaganda.

Tackling the complications around fake news and identifying trolls can prove to be a difficult task, even for countries with extraordinarily strong and competent intelligence services. Countries with fewer resources find themselves in an even more vulnerable position.

The international community must devise collaborative processes and means of exchange to help counter the noxious effects of fake news. For example, the international community needs to step up its efforts to support projects like EU's PHEME. Fact-checking online can have critical impacts in elections, and needs to be considered an integral part of electoral assistance, together with other financial efforts or sending electoral observers.

Simultaneously, the international community must ensure that states do not use their efforts to purge the digital realm of trolls and fake news as an excuse for implementing tighter controls of information.

In March 2017, a "[Joint Declaration](#) on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda", issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE and the Organization for American States, warned against the effects of 'fake news' and propaganda but made a strong point of condemning attempts at state-mandated censorship and blocking of websites. This will be a delicate balance to strike, but one that states must remain committed to maintaining.

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