

Second prize Trinity 2025: **Magdalena Rostron** (Qatar)

Course: Truth in an Age of Disinformation (online): tutor Julia Weekend

Identify the sources of post-truth. Why is the post-truth attitude to knowledge so corrosive?

What truth is, everyone seems to know, yet hardly anyone agrees on. While academic debates have zigzagged from correspondence and coherence theories to pragmatism, relativism, and pluralism, a new “rough beast” has slouched its way into our shared reality, baptized by Ralph Keyes as post-truth in his 2004 book, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*.

The clearest definition of truth – still accepted as the most satisfying one – was formulated by Aristotle: “To say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true” (qtd. in Blackburn 2018, p.17). Crucially, truth loses its *raison d'être* without acknowledging its opposite, falsehood (Russell 2001, p.18; Arendt 1967, p. 12). It is through this polarity that we intuitively make sense of truth to build a reliable, workable knowledge of the world.

Knowledge, or “understanding of or information about a subject” obtained “by experience or study” (*Cambridge Dictionary*), encompasses propositional “knowledge-that”, knowledge by acquaintance, and knowledge how to do something (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*). It also incorporates the experiential competence to function effectively in a polity of other humans.

This competence, rooted in “human affairs”, relies on what Arendt defines as factual truth, belonging in the political realm (1967, pp. 2-3), where facts and events rule. Manipulating, concealing, or lying about facts are age-old tools of politics, making factual truth prone to forgery or false testimony (ibid., p. 10). Factual truth thus understood can subvert and deform our knowledge of the world.

Post-truth is a contemporary rendition of factual truth. Not only is post-truth the reverse of Aristotle’s definition built upon the premise of the truth-versus-falsehood dichotomy, but it goes further and obscures the very boundaries between truth and falsehood. In fact, post-truth bypasses falsehood, veering instead towards the murky peripheries of the human mind, the morass of emotion and personal belief, where facts are abandoned and objectivity and rational thinking jettisoned, leaving us with nothing but bullshit. And bullshit is worse than lying precisely because it disregards falsehood as the *sine qua non* of truth (Frankfurt (1986/2005), inviting ignorant irrationality and unforgiving subjectivity. It also has a tendency to reshape our cognition, leading us to what Quassim Cassam characterised as epistemic insouciance, or “a casual lack of concern about whether one’s beliefs have any basis in reality or are adequately supported by the best available evidence” (p.1).

Seen in this context, post-truth is corrosive to our knowledge of the world because it devalues rational thinking in favour of emotion and disregards objective evidence, distorting our view of reality.

Post-truth is derived from interrelated forces shaping the modern world – political, technological, psychological, and cultural – but it seems to be much older than the adjective “modern” implies. In his 2018 article, “Are We Living in a Post-Truth Era?”¹, Yuval Noah Harari abolishes the view of post-truth as a modern phenomenon and concludes that “humans have always lived in the age of post-truth” (p. 2). He equates post-truth with fiction and puts religions, nationalist mythologies, media, ideological movements and politics under its umbrella. The prevalence of post-truth in those domains, especially in the sphere of politics, indicates that “humans prefer power to truth” and spend “far more time and effort on trying to control the world than on trying to understand it” (ibid., p. 7).

What makes post-truth particularly corrosive in the current setting is the onset of new technologies and proliferation of epistemologically unreliable social media (Haidt 2019; McIntyre 2018, pp. 89-122; Rini 2017). Jonathan Haidt gives social media a scathing evaluation describing them as fostering public performance and moral grandstanding “on platforms that have been designed to make outrage contagious, all while focusing people’s minds on immediate conflicts and untested ideas, untethered from traditions, knowledge, and values that previously exerted a stabilising effect” (2019, p. 8).

It gets worse. The latest advances in digital technology, including Large Language Models (LLMs) with their AI-based bots, search engines, research and writing devices, present yet another challenge to established ways of obtaining reliable knowledge about the world. Oxford University professors Sandra Wachter, Brent Mittelstadt, and Chris Russell identify a serious new harm created by LLMs, with “long-term risks to democratic societies” (2004, p.1). They write:

“LLMs pose a unique risk to science, education, democracy, and society that current legal frameworks did not anticipate. This is what we call ‘careless speech’ or speech that lacks appropriate care for truth. Spreading careless speech causes subtle, immaterial harms that are difficult to measure over time. It leads to the erosion of truth, knowledge and shared history and can have serious consequences for evidence-based policy-making where details and truth matter, such as health care, finance, climate change, media, the legal profession, and education” (p. 2)

Our common human psychology also works against rational reasoning and makes us an easy prey for “manipulation and exploitation by those who have an agenda to push, especially if they can discredit all other sources of information” (McIntyre 2018, p. 62). McIntyre stresses the significance of key mental biases, ancient and universal – cognitive dissonance, conformity, confirmation bias – which underlie our irrational responses to and interpretations of unwelcome facts or uncomfortable truths (ibid., pp. 35-62), reinforcing the growing influence of post-truth on our non-thinking thinking.

Finally, contemporary culture, rebuilding itself from the devastation of WWII and

¹ An excerpt from his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*

framed by iconoclastic post-modernist philosophy, has contributed enormously to the rise of post-truth. McIntyre examines post-modernism as a possible source of post-truth, concluding that “post-modernism is the godfather of post-truth” (2018, p. 150). Post-modernist repudiation of former grand narratives – religious, national, cultural – and established truth forms, which in the past may have been debated or questioned, but were never rejected outright in full public view, has left an ideological and spiritual void, easy to fill with bullshit, conspiracy theories, and plain nonsense (Murray 2019).

In particular, it is the relentless, Enlightenment-inspired, Western self-critique that has eroded not only our traditional Judeo-Christian values and identity, but also trust in rational, evidence-based epistemology. This self-critique, exemplified through works by intellectuals such as Derrida, Foucault, Žižek, reviles Western civilisation (Boudry 2019) through academic doctrines which tend to conceptually reduce (or further obfuscate) complex social issues to fit in with the Critical Theory paradigm (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020), itself rather *uncritically* related to unfiltered, overtly anti-Western Marxism, despite its totalitarian history of subjugation and oppression. Arguably, such works have led to the rise of identity politics, performative victimhood, and distortion of scholarship, now geared towards exposing alleged systemic injustices, pervasive power structures, and the ubiquitous white male supremacy, instead of exploring genuine gaps in knowledge (ibid.). This changing cultural climate has opened yet another door for post-truth to invade our now-fragmented and increasingly unrecognisable reality with unprecedented force and audacity.

Defined as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (*Oxford Dictionary*, qtd. in McIntyre 2018, p. 5), post-truth becomes further detached from truth by reinventing its purpose. McIntyre discusses the concept of “truthiness” (ibid.) denoting something that *feels* true, despite lack of evidence. Thus, the way we ‘feel’ about facts determines our attitude to them. And it is this shift towards ‘feeling’ and away from reason that marks one of the key characteristics of post-truth, perhaps the most damaging one when it comes to its effect on knowledge.

Facts used to be part of reality. According to Arendt, “unwelcome facts” could be overcome by “plain lies” (1967, p. 8), but McIntyre’s “inconvenient fact[s]” (ibid., p. 13) tend to be twisted to match our unchecked beliefs and capricious emotions, bending “reality to fit [...] opinion, rather than the other way around” (ibid., p. 5-6), through manipulation, misrepresentation, distortion – a phenomenon observed by Arendt (1967) and described so devastatingly by Orwell in *1984*. The resulting self-deception and delusion mount “a challenge not just to the idea of *knowing* reality but to the existence of reality itself” (McIntyre 2018, p. 10).

The scope of this essay does not permit me to explore the topic of post-truth in greater depth or discuss more cases of it, such as Russia’s “special form of lying” or “*vranyo*” (Gorokhova 2011), or LLM’s “hallucinations” (Ho, Dahl, Magesh, Suzgun 2024). It does permit me to express dismay, even horror, at the current state of truth as it becomes not just post-truth, but ‘un-truth’, akin to Orwell’s “un-person”, subject to vaporisation, or erasure from memory, from reality. I strive to remind myself that the Aristotelian conceptualisation of

truth is reflected in Jesus's words: "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one" (Matt 5:37). This clarity is desperately needed now, lest we drown in the swamp of un-reality.

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