

# Education in a Post-truth World

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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” (The Oxford Dictionaries 2016). 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, characterized 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 of post-truth 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. Fueled 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” (Steinmetz 2016).

*The Economist* devoted two articles to the issue—“Post-truth politics: Art of the lie” (The Economist 2016a) and “The post-truth world: Yes, I’d lie to you” (The Economist 2016b) 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

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candidate, the ‘co-founder’, even some of his supporters were perplexed.” Trump has repeatedly told and retold “big lies”, such as

- that “The Birther Movement Was Started by Hillary Clinton In 2008,” when he both iterated and championed the birther claims.
- that he “was totally against the war in Iraq.”
- that “real unemployment rate is 42%.”
- that “It Could Be 30 Million” undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States.
- that because his taxes are under audit, he “can’t” make them public.
- that then Secretary of State Clinton “soundly slept in her bed” during the 2012 attack In Benghazi, Libya.
- that “inner-city crime is reaching record levels.”
- that Clinton wants to “abolish the Second Amendment.”
- that he is “really the friend of” the LGBT community, while supporting anti-LGBT legislation (Fernandez 2016).
- that “the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive” (Dickinson 2016).

Trump has also, as is well known, made multiple false claims concerning immigration and mass deportations (Sargent 2016). These are 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. (Krugman 2016)

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 neoconservative values, anti-immigration sentiments, and the plight of 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 labor. 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-globalization 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, which are not the fora most suited for argumentation, disputation, reflection and fact-checking. Post-truth politics is a development of an increasingly privatized 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, whereby news channels take on the mantle of party ideologies often deliberately distorting the truth.

Old Testament accounts of lying viewed it as a sin that admits no reservation, as to lie is deliberately to hide the truth. In *De Mendacio*, Augustine takes a hard line on lying; modern philosophical accounts hold that lying is detrimental to society because it erodes trust as the very foundation of relations among human beings that sustain our institutions (Bok 1999, p. 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 and Rachels 2011, p. 42–43). It interferes with the process of self-understanding and perverts our relationship to the world and to other people. In his lectures at Berkeley in the early 1980s, Foucault (2001) investigated the use of truth-telling [*parrhesia*] in specific types of human relationships, as well as the techniques employed in such relationships. 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” (Foucault 2001, p. 106) (see 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: “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 that lying and deception in public life are easy “*up to a point*”, and they do not necessarily come into conflict with truth to the extent that facts could always be otherwise (Arendt 1971). One major consideration about the shift to post-truth is the “truth carrying capacity” of new social media and the 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 recognize truth?

In his article “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies”, Harsin (2015) follows a Foucauldian line of argument, arguing 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*, which ran for 14 seasons and made him a household name, Donald Trump understands contemporary media better than his opponents. He utilizes 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 (Goldhill 2016). Trump has mastered Twitter as the ideal medium “unleashing and redefining its power as a tool of political promotion, distraction, score-settling and attack” (Barbaro 2015).

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! (Katz 2016) They bought into Trump’s politics of mediatization, 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 prospects 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 (2014) notes, “facts are futile”. 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 knockdown argument. By the time the facts are gathered, the media moment has passed, the headline has been grabbed, and the lie can be modified, apologized for or replaced by another. A leader in the *New Scientist* (2016) comments on the revolutionary results 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.

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* and the older “science wars;” and furore that greeted Funtowicz and Ravetz’s (1990) “post-normal science” where quality assurance systems replace 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” (Ravetz 2005).

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 not only affects politics and science, but also 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; we need to understand the broader Orwellian epistemological implications of post-truth politics, science, and education. More importantly, we need an operational strategy to combat “government by lying”, and its role in 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 power of the lie.

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