

## **Social Media and the Politics of Truth in the Post-Truth Era.**

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### **Abstract:**

Humans are a post-truth species whose ability to create myths that have brought people together is what gives them their power. In the post-truth world in which falsehoods and fictions abound, the skill of lying undermines every fact. Sensationalism prevails over facts, conspiracy theories flourish, and true lies win. Today, there is a general distrust of everything. Post-truth is a term used to describe situations in which the public's perception is shaped more by appeals to personal conviction and emotion than by objective facts.. The idea of post-truth, which holds that "nothing is true and everything is possible," is discussed in the study as a way to characterise today's fatigue. A collapse in the importance of truth there puts rationality in jeopardy. Accuracy and honesty are no longer valued in politics. Truth's declining value nowadays causes it to lose value. Truth is less important, if important at all. In the post-truth era, social media creates this sensationalism at the expense of facts and the truth. The social media language game and the politics of truth have won the hollowness of humanity in the modern period, leading to a crisis in values across the board for Homo sapiens.

**Key Words:** social media, truth, lies, post-modernity, post-truth, ethics, politics.

### **Introduction - Exposing the Truth and Deception**

The well-known fictional tale about 'the Naked truth and the Lie' tells of a chance encounter between the Truth and the Lie on the road. The Truth is told by the Lie: 'Today is a wonderful day!' The Truth gazes at the heavens and breathes out, as the day was truly lovely. They strolled side by side for some time, until they arrived at a lovely well. The Truth is told by The Lie: 'The water in the well is lovely, let's go for a swim together!' The Truth, once more doubtful, investigates and finds that the water is, in fact, quite pleasant. They take off their clothes and begin to bathe. All of a sudden, the Lie emerges from the well, dons the attire of the Truth, and dashes towards a village in the vicinity. The angry Truth jumps out of the well and races to locate the Lie in order to retrieve her clothing. The Villagers are disgusted and angry as they turn away in

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horror at the sight of the Naked Truth. The Truth, now poor, went back to the well and vanished, never to be seen again, concealing her embarrassment. Ever since that day, the Lie has been spreading across the globe disguised as the Truth. The original story 'Naked Truth and Lie' hails from the 19th Century.

This paper aims at explaining what is the post-truth and what is post-truth era that becomes the byproduct of the history of noble falsehood propagated from time immemorial in different cultures and traditions that runs the logic of fake news in the social media today. The validity of truth is any longer an objectivity rather it is validated either subjectively or inter-subjectively. The post-modernist's and post-structural understanding of truth and post-truth is analysed; and in analysing this fact we argue that there's a media created surrealism or a new game of language - the politics of truth - at work in the social media in the post-truth era. Hence, we state that true lies are lies in true sense; and far beyond the political game of the social media one strives for the meaning of truth beyond mere facts and fictions. Beyond such phantasm everyone looks for meaning that lasts forever. True lies are true lies only; they are ever truth!

### **Post-Truth Era**

Explaining the concept of Post-truth is essentially reaffirming the idea that we are currently living in a time where truth is less significant. The term post-truth was chosen as the word of 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, defined as situations where emotions and personal beliefs have more impact on public opinion than objective facts (Modereanu, 7). While the idea of post-truth has been around for ten years, it gained significance in politics during Brexit and the US presidential election. The post-truth era is not limited to just Europe or America, as seen in Donald Trump's presidency and Brexit. It can be traced back further as discussed in Ralph Caise's Post Truth Era. Caise contends that the post-truth era affects not only politics, but also permeates various aspects of human interaction.

Immediately after the Second World War the world order remained under the hands of the world leading democracies or political forms of governments. America claimed to be the world leader that was totally shattered by the events of 9/11. The events after the 9/11 witnessed the fall of US as world leader. US tried to propagate all political lies that would stand up for the claims of US as World capital. Media plays a crucial role in creating and distorting truth i.e., the politics of truth by the media today. Scree time

impacts can re-tell truths and convert facts to the interest of the viewers. The world around us is presented to us as world of facts having no truth. Media being the forth pillar of democracy failed in upholding the ethics of politics. The political myths fabricated truths favoring the fortunes of the political authorities; and in turn truth is never desirable. There is a growing disinterest to truthfulness. The mass production of lies permits the beginning of post-truth era. There is no rational boundary that can be fixed to the concept of post-truth; hence post-truth era is far beyond any epistemological conceptions and rational articulations. According to Simona Modreanu,

In fact, the post-truth era has emerged because of several long-cycle trends that affect how we make sense of the world around us. This phenomenon has a name – agnotology, the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt. We used to have truth versus lies. Now a days we have truth, lies, and some sort of statements that might be false, but are considered too benign to be really discarded. We'd rather use euphemisms, or tell 'the truth improved.' The political correctness leads us to a ridiculous moleresque mimicry. For instance, we no longer call a liar a liar, but an 'ethically challenged' person, someone for whom the 'truth is temporarily unavailable.' This is the so called post-truth. In the post-truth era, frontiers are blurred between truth and lie, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction. Deceiving other became a habit, a challenge, even a game (Modreanu, 7).

Modreanu clarifies the concept post-truth so vividly in her argument that the ethical code of approving one's commitment to truth that was traditionally considered with one's moral uprightness is under erasure. Considering someone as liar is not to the level of considering him/her as morally wrong rather one understands such a person lacks moral correctness. One is neither put into question or challenged by his/her ethical dishonesty rather valued as a person ethically challenged, i.e., for someone 'truth is temporarily unavailable'. This would amount to say that either no one is always correct, or everyone, at some point in life, lacks truth. No one could be true always. This would result to state that being a liar is only a condition that is very relative as to say that no one could be always true.

The French Post-Modern Philosopher Jean-Francoise Lyotard in his most celebrated work, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, states that the very term postmodernity cannot be defined not because it is ambiguous rather the ambiguity itself remains a characteristic of it. He states "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward

metanarratives” (Lyotard, xxiv). Jack D. Caputo explains ‘metanarratives’ as any “big overarching story that tries to make Big point, to make sense of everything” (Caputo, 6). There is false balance between truth and lie in a world where we live that permits certain weak balance between mixed truth and lies. Truth has given way to understandable truth that allows only to the epistemological creation of truth. Truth as held by reason comprehends those rational identifiable categories. There is a growing mistrust to truth and authority in and around us; “[t]his collapse of trust is the social basis of the Post-Truth era; all else flows from this single, poisonous source” (D’Ancona, 36). The collapse of trust is the heartthrob of post-truth era; any fall of this “social capital” (D’Ancona, 36) can easily slide into political assault on truth. In such societies nothing is true and everything is permissive. This is a tricky way leading to the politics of truth in societies that has been existing side by side in the societies from time immemorial.

### **The Noble Falsehood**

The traditional philosophy right from its inception remained quest for truth. Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* opens with the statement that “All men by nature desire to know” (Aristotle, 1). The quest for knowledge and wisdom is always considered to be a search for truth. Truth, for Aristotle, remained as an *ad equation* of the object to the intellect. The perennial search for reality was a search for Being. Being was understood as true. Hence truth remained at the crux of human pursuit for knowledge and wisdom. One understands that truth has its history to that of lies. Noble lies, indeed, were the ways of telling truth, that is to say, true lies existed. The Athenian philosopher Plato in one of the most famous Dialogues entitled as *Republic* says that one should say true lies to bring about just society. He says, “we devise one of those useful falsehood, ... one noble falsehood, in the best case, persuade even the rulers” (*Republic*, Book. III, 414b-415d). Plato in his Dialogues presents the argument that one can state such lies for bringing about certain apparent condition for the well being of oneself and others. This would imply that there is nothing as to state conclusively or absolutely as the truth, rather truth claims remain much on the myth told by the tradition for bringing about truth and in this case relative truth. The myth of metals told by the Phoenician story that Plato uses in his Dialogue *Republic* remains one of the earliest records of the ‘noble falsehood’ (*Republic*, Book III, 414b).

The true lies continue in the post-modern age as interpretative truth that blurs the distinction between truth and lie. Frederick Nietzsche states that “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Nietzsche, 458). This claim of Nietzsche that there are no facts, only interpretation gives rise to total relativism in handling truth claims proposed by scientific and rational modernity. Truth, thus, are illusions. The objectivity and authenticity of truth is in flux. The value of truth is always put in question at Nietzsche’s vehement proclamation of de-valuation of all values. This resulted in one way to the genesis of post-modernity (Desbruslais, 13).<sup>2</sup> Post-modernity brought about certain ambiguity in to epistemological and scientific truth claims. Mathew D’Ancona strikingly states, “Post-modernism is notoriously resistant to precise definition, to the point that some deny it has any coherence as a school of thought. It is certainly not a homogenous body of work and, as a consequence, has had a diffuse and even contradictory impact upon world outside academia” (D’Ancona, 91). Post-modern understanding of “language and culture as social construct” (D’Ancona, 91), would really impoverish the claim of truth. No one holds the answer to truth in such an idea of ‘language and culture as social construct’ proposed by Post-modernists. Nietzsche believed that

In humans, the skill of pretending reaches its highest point... the consistent obsession with seeking validation is so common that it's hard to understand how a genuine desire for truth could exist among people. They are fully absorbed in fantasies and images of dreams; their gaze only skims the outer layer of objects and perceives ‘shapes’ their emotions do not guide them towards reality, but simply accept stimuli, engaging in a game of blind man’s buff on the surfaces of things.

The post-modernists have presented us with a great deal of doubt and despair. It destroys the concept of concrete reality and truth. D’Ancona correctly states that post-modern thinkers like Richard Ashley, Derrida, and Foucault encouraged people to scrutinize language, visual expressions, institutions, and traditional beliefs to uncover hidden forms of power and 'hegemony' in words, narratives, art, and architecture

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<sup>2</sup> Desbruslais notes that “the first use of the term ‘postmodern was certain Rudolf Pannwitz (in German), in 1917, in his study of the *Crisis of European Culture*. He used it there to refer to an ‘athletically hardened, nationalistically conscious, military trained, religiously exalted’ type of person who has recently ‘emerged from the decadence of the radical revolution of European nihilism.’”

(D'Ancona, 92). The truth is shaped by my beliefs and defended by me, ultimately turning into the imagination of my thoughts. The concept of 'doublethink' as the ability to have two conflicting beliefs simultaneously is the precursor to Post-Truth (D'Ancona, 102). The influence of social media and fake news is clear in the post-truth era.

### **The Rationality Behind False Information**

The reasoning behind fake news gives importance to the propagandist's assertion of truth as claimed truth. "Post-truth also has market value" (D'Ancona, 51). Truth, whether it aligns with facts or not, is not real truth; instead, the truth that is accepted, whether true or not, is what remains as truth. Joseph Goebbels, the chief of Nazi propaganda, remarked that a lie repeated a thousand times can be accepted as truth. In today's post-truth era, the phenomenon of something becoming popular is due to the media repeating lies until they are perceived as truth. It is common knowledge that a lot of the fake news nowadays is false, but people still get deceived by the propagandist's insistence on its accuracy. Fake claims in the media create a fictional effect, a language game repeated to confirm their truth. The influence of Goebbels can be seen in today's social media landscape. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler emphasizes the importance of focusing on a few key points and repeating them consistently in order for propaganda to be successful (Hoffman, 140). The truths spread by the current media are truths that have been exchanged for power and control. Social media, in particular, engages in political maneuvers that enable those in power to influence the truth people receive. Social media spreads a misleading reality that can quickly propagate in the era of the internet. Social media attempts to increase engagement through sensationalism that leaves the public feeling uninformed. Mass culture is characterized by a 'herd mentality' (Kierkegaard, 223), where individuals do not stand out but instead conform to average thinking.

Jean Baudrillard discusses 'the hyper reality' created by such mass media in the post-modern era; and he argues that the mass media symbolises a new era in which old forms of production and consumption have given way to a new universe of communication. Thus, in Post-truth era social media play a leading role in the fabrication and distortion

of truth. He continues saying that we live in an ecstasy of communication (D'Ancona, 95).<sup>3</sup>

The mass media has invaded everything, and as a result we have the loss of public space. The loss of public space brings in the simultaneous loss of private space. Social media has rearranged our sense of space and time. What is real is not direct contact with the world but what we are given on the TV screen. TV channels create the real world. TV is dissolved in world and world is dissolved in to TV. We, today, live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning. Such a situation forces me to say that the TV and the media are the new opium of the poor. Pointing to this fact he argues that the function of the mass media to prevent response, to private individuals, to place them in the universe of simulacra where it is impossible to distinguish between the real and the spectacle. We are hopelessly locked up in the screens that appears to be real. It has certainly become the psychological mood of our time in the post-truth era. Social media has made a myopic vision of reality where we lose sight of the true and the real. There is a growing epistemological uncertainty in the post-truth era against the traditional epistemological theories of truth.<sup>4</sup> The value of the representational truth is any longer valid in the Nietzschean water-downing of rational truth. The Cartesian Lockean-Kantian cognising subject of modernity is de-constructed. Mind can no longer mirror reality become the *mantra* of post-modernity. Since truth is only an interpretation or a perspective the post-modern thinkers show great respect to plurality of perspectives. This epistemological non-certainty is also seen as in their habit of keeping the word or text under erasure. The post-modern theories of truth [?] creates or rather fabricates theories of truth as an assault on truth itself which is brought to forth in the surrealism created by the phantasm of the social media politics of truth.

### **Surrealism was brought to life by the media.**

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<sup>3</sup> He argues that “Communication technology, in other words, would subvert our inherited notions of the real. Bear in mind that Baudrillard’s prophecy of social media becoming both a measure of belonging and a source of disinformation – ‘fake news’ – was made eight years before Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, twenty-three before the launch of Facebook and twenty-five before the creation of Twitter. In this, as in other respects, post-modernist texts paved the way for Post-Truth.”

<sup>4</sup> for one, looks for another kind of truth than the ‘objective’ truth of knowledge: the existential truth of the self. To BE IN the truth is more important than to KNOW the truth. The object of belief is less important than HOW one believes. Subjectivity constitutes the truth. Nothing is true for me without my participation and commitment to it. The self is now an important criterion of truth.

Media-generated truth supersedes factual reality in the era of post-truth. The media constantly provides entertainment, education, and corruption. Nowadays, it is getting harder to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. The distance between reality and fantasy has decreased so much that we can describe our world as one of magical realism. It's no surprise that both children and adults are still hooked to the TV for long periods of time. The merging of the lines between the fictional and the actual is known as surrealism or hyperrealism in academic environments.

German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger states that the philosophical tradition has strayed from the search for truth (Heidegger, 2). Philosophers, who are typically truth and wisdom seekers, often neglect themselves in their pursuit of truth. Edmund Husserl, who is Heidegger's mentor philosopher and the founder of phenomenology, ends his Cartesian Meditations by citing St. Augustine, "Do not desire to go out, instead return within yourself." The inner man is where truth resides (Husserl, 157). The quest for truth by humans is a personal journey within oneself, rather than a pursuit of objectivity that doesn't fulfill one's desires. The line separating truth from lie has become increasingly unclear in current times. In the era of post-truth, speaking falsehoods has become synonymous with truth-telling. This form of communication serves as the sound of modern social networks.

Nothing remains certain and true; everything is possible as true lies. Lies are 'ethically changed' version of speech. To Pilate who washed his hand, Umberto Eco gives the answer to his question to Jesus: what is truth? 'Truth is a successful lie'. Truth is made by the fictitious mind. Here there is nothing as fundamental and true. In a world of social media all that is fake is not fake rather that's the way of saying; hence post-truth era argues for truth as 'ethically changed' ways of understanding. One could look for no rooms for ethical code of writing and publishing in the post-truth era, rather everything that fits to print is the code of conduct in the post-truth era. "Post-truthfulness and cultural carelessness build a fragile social edifice based on suspicion, eroding the foundation of trust that underlies any healthy civilization" (Modreanu, 8). The post truth era creates certain sensationalism that can easily win over the feeble minded herd of the present day society. There is always a "rise of the misinformation industry" (D'Ancona, 41). No one earns wisdom rather everyone gathers information that remains as a scandalous curiosity.



Social media has become an apparatus that implodes the concept of ‘truth’ and allows the creation of regimes of discourse. “The increasing influence of public figures with a flexible code of ethics decisively contributes to the post-truth era, as well as relativism, the decline of community, or Facebook narcissism” (Modreanu, 8). Ken Wilber writes, “the promoters of Brexit openly admitted that they had pushed ideas that they fully knew were not ‘true’ but they did so ‘because there really are no facts,’ and what really counts is ‘that we truly believe this.’ ... In other words, narcissism is the deciding factor – what I want to be true is true in a post-truth culture” (Wilber, 25). The present day social media is engaged in a political game of creating truth what one wants to be true. “The CEO of *Cambridge Analytica* is proposing that post-truth, as a cultural phenomenon, has rendered objective facts anachronistic and ‘The Real’ as a phantasm” (Sawyer, 67). Facts and figures are unnecessary.

There can be levels of framing the problem of post-truth social media politics. Media and its communicative technological dimension play the crux of this political game of the post-truth era. In the post-truth politics social media reaches to its mainstream in trolling. Social media, the dominant media of our age, faces a dark side in anonymity by trolling. Anonymity assures unaccountability. Trolling has become another crucial political game in the present day social media – ‘trolling ourselves to death’ – that shapes the new politics (Hannan, 214). There is certain incivility and poisoned atmosphere in the social media with the practice of trolling. Electoral victories are the not only the new forms of this truth telling in the present day politics rather the figure of the bullying are the more appropriate metaphors of the post-truth social media political language. Anonymous trolling has become the code of conduct in the social media and the protection of anonymity offered the benefit of the unaccountability. “For those on social media, anonymity dramatically reduces accountability. The buzz of the hive sends the falsehood fizzing into cyberspace to its work” (D’Ancona, 52). Anonymous profiles unleash the worst possible instincts in the present day social media. Irrational hatred, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and the like are by the repressed monsters in the social media.

Anything can be written off, trolled, commented on anyone; and it is done wilfully by villains and it becomes the new political game of the social media in the post-truth era.

“The atmosphere of the social media has become so poisoned by incivility that trolling can rightly be said to be the new normal, as regular to our political atmosphere as the air we breathe” (Hannan, 220). One consumes what one already likes, and shy away from the unfriendly. Disagreements on social media brings out a curious epistemology embedded within their design. It is often done with malicious mind, and truth often remains a popularity contest in the social media in an era of post-truth. It has already become the mainstream political practice too. The peer-to-peer interest is winning the political game to truth. Insulting is the new language of this new mode of speech in trolling; personal attack, moral defacing, personal assassination etc. has become the new frame of reference and whoever insults hardest wins. We witness the birth of a new language game in the social media of the post-truth era. The social aspect of social media decides matters of truth on the basis of popularity and tribal affinity rather than impersonal logic and evidence (Hannan, 224). One could learn that a politicized media cannibalism is brought forth by the social media in the post-truth era, a war between truth and lies. The hardest lie becomes the simplest truth. Surprisingly, I think, the hard-core issue of post-truth era remains authenticity of the human self and the humanity of the humans!

## **Conclusion**

Humans, it seems, are unique in their ability to create and propagate self-reinforcing myths that tell fictional stories, circulate them widely, and persuade countless people to believe in them. Truth was never a top priority for *Homo sapiens*, according to Harari. We belong to a post-truth species. Indeed, humans have perpetually resided in the era of post-truth. The human species relies on generating and trusting fictional narratives in order to maintain its influence in a post-truth world (Harari, 223). Harari asserts that for centuries, it has been true that not only Facebook, Trump, or Putin are leading us into a new era of post-truth, but religions have also been involved in this trend. Many religious myths lack scientific evidence for their beliefs, but billions of people have still believed in them for millennia. Certain false information remains in circulation indefinitely (Harari, 234). While Harari's argument may appear valid, he is not entirely persuasive as fake news poses a significant issue. Harari emphasizes that genuine facts and actual suffering lie within the realm of fake news. In Ukraine, there are actual Russian soldiers fighting, with actual casualties and displaced people in the

hundreds of thousands. Belief in fiction frequently leads to human suffering; however, the suffering experienced is always genuine (Harari, 242). In the realm of social media's manufactured truth, there exists a subtle significance that holds meaning for humanity amidst the abundance of information and illusions created by the media. In spite of the flood of political games on social media, humanity continues to seek meaning that brings hope for the future. Our identities are deeply connected and influenced by specific 'master signifiers' that are fundamental to our lives (Lacan, 647-649, 764). False truths are false truths only; they are never accurate.

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