

● THE POST-TRUTH ERA: AN ANALYSIS WITH REFERENCE TO CONTEMPORARY POLITICS



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Abstract

At one time we had truth and lies. Now we have truth, lies, and statements that may not be true but we consider too benign to call false. This is post-truth. In the post-truth era, borders blur between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction. Deceiving others becomes a challenge, a game, and ultimately a habit. Sometimes Post Truth is also posited as a social and political condition whereby citizens or audiences and politicians no longer respect truth but simply accept as true what they believe or feel. The present article will analyse how this post truth concept affects the political system of India as well as of world.

Key words

Truth, Post Truth, Emotions, Objectivity and Politics

I. INTRODUCTION

Post-truth is not a new phenomenon. What we call post-truth today, in other decades was called propaganda. Alternative realities are not based on facts, but on emotions. Alternative realities based on perception and not on data. The difference compared to other eras is that we now have a double-edged tool within our reach. First, they do not allow access to the sources of information required to point out and combat lies. And at the same time, they give lies an unprecedented boost, spreading like wildfire and floating on the surface for years. It is possible and impossible at the same time.¹

After Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, no Prime Minister of India has perhaps displayed the talent to deliver words in an impassioned and rhetorical manner that Modi has in recent years. But the problem arises when an orator becomes a demagogue. When the word demagogue was first used in ancient Greece and Rome, it simply described a leader who championed the cause of common people. Over time, the word acquired a distinctly negative connotation to mean a political personality who plays up to popular prejudices rather than use rational arguments to seek support and gain power.² Perhaps during the gradual development of the society the term “post-truth” has took place of “Demagogue” in the post-modern era.

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¹Albert Medran, In The Kingdom of Post-Truth, Irrelevance is the Punishment, , www.uno-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/UNO_27_ENG_alta.pdf, p. 33

²Editorial, Post-truth India, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol. 52, No. 1, P. 7

I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF POST-TRUTH

The compound word post-truth exemplifies an expansion in the meaning of the prefix post- that has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event – as in post-war or post-match – the prefix in post-truth has a meaning more like 'belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant'. This nuance seems to have originated in the mid-20th century, in formations such as post-national (1945) and post-racial (1971).³

Post-truth seems to have been first used in this meaning in a 1992 essay by the late Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in *The Nation* magazine. Reflecting on the Iran-Contra scandal and the Persian Gulf War, Tesich lamented that 'we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world'. There is evidence of the phrase 'post-truth' being used before Tesich's article, but apparently with the transparent meaning 'after the truth was known', and not with the new implication that truth itself has become irrelevant.⁴

A book, *The Post-truth Era*, by Ralph Keyes appeared in 2004, and in 2005 American comedian Stephen Colbert popularized an informal word relating to the same concept: truthiness, defined by Oxford Dictionaries as 'the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true'. Post-truth extends that notion from an isolated quality of particular assertions to a general characteristic of our age.⁵

The term "post-truth politics" was coined by the blogger David Roberts in a blog post for [Grist](#) on 1 April 2010, where it was defined as "a political culture in which politics have become almost entirely disconnected from policy".

II. POST-TRUTH IN 2016

Long ago, six curious Hindu wise men gathered to discover what an elephant was like. They were blind, and decided to search for this pachyderm to dispel any of their doubts. After a long walk, they found an enormous and tame elephant. Each wise man approached the animal eager to touch it. The first caressed its trunk, and immediately compared it to a snake. The second touched its tusks which made him think of a spear. The third rested his hand on the hairy tail, believing it to be a brush. And so forth until six different descriptions of the same animal were given. They all believed that they knew an elephant's true appearance but without managing to come to an agreement. By changing positions, they realized that there was more than one way of looking at the animal.⁶

³Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>, (visited on 23/03/2018)

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Anthony Gooch, *In Pursuit of The Truth*, available at: www.uno-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/UNO_27_ENG_alta.pdf, p. 14



The moral of this short story is to illustrate and remind us that the notion of truth and the search for it are complex and inherent to human beings. In fact, truth requires the analysis of objective facts and a discussion of the evidence-requirements that bestow it with great value which professionals in any field have a duty to preserve.⁷

The Oxford Dictionary chose the term “post-truth” as Word of the Year for 2016, affirming that it is used to refer to “circumstances where objective facts have less influence over public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs.” This should come as no surprise to many people, with 2016 being a year of controversial surprises and unexpected events. The political and social panorama during the next few months will be marked by this post-truth climate, where objectivity and rationality give way to emotions, or to a willingness to uphold beliefs even though the facts show otherwise.⁸ Albert Medrán says that post-truth is nothing more than a kingdom of lie.

Since August 2016, before the start of the U.S. presidential election debates and up to the eve of voting day, checking platforms were busy performing what is referred to as “fact-checking”. They counted up to 217 untruths in the candidates' speeches and statements-79 percent of which were attributed to Donald Trump and 21 percent to Hillary Clinton. Univision News' Data Unit in Miami determined that, a week prior to the presidential election, for every lie told by the Democrat candidate, the Republican candidate told four. Journalist Borja Echeverría systematically and comprehensively provides the statistics in the latest edition (January 2017) of Cuadernos de Periodistas. He is currently the Managing Editor of Univision Digital News, which is based in Florida. Borja has become a reference in the sector of communication and journalism by calling for a relatively new activity to fight against fake news, alternative truths and hoaxes. All of these concepts take refuge under the semantic umbrella of post-truth. However, fact-checking would be the antidote against the word-better described as a concept-that the Oxford Dictionary has considered as 2016's newest and most utilized expression.⁹

Post-truth is not synonymous with lying; however, it describes a situation where, when creating or manipulating public opinion, the objective facts have less influence than emotions and personal beliefs. Post-truth consists in the relativization of truth, in the objectivity of data becoming commonplace and in the supremacy of emotional speeches. It is far from being a new phenomenon. Eric Alterman conclusively defined it as a “political weapon of disinformation”. This author quotes Noam Chomsky who, avoiding the term post-truth, developed a famous list: 10 Manipulation Strategies. This includes emotionally softening message techniques, aiming at short-circuiting citizens' critical and analytical senses.¹⁰

I. EFFECTS OF POST-TRUTH

We live in an era when people have less patience for facts, data and truths. This era, when emotions and “statements that 'feel like the truth' but are not based on reality” prevail over what is objective and real, is an enormous challenge.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Id,p.9.

⁹Id,p.11.

¹⁰Ibid.

Post-Truth distorts the basic principles of human coexistence, such as the cult of truth and honesty, favoring misleading and lying behavior in order to promote its own interests and greed. It is either the truth or it is not. Half-truths do not exist, and neither does subjective truth. To speak of “my truth” is an assault on reason. Opinions can exist, and in this sense, every person has every freedom to express their own, and on any subject. But when dealing with objective facts, such as, for example, the number of inhabitants in the country, its gross national product, its citizens’ level of education, a company’s financial situation, public debt, or the budget deficit, only the objective reality counts—and there is only one. Everything that is disguised as the truth, whether grossly modifying it such as the manipulation of statistics, hiding facts that misinform the reader, or leveraging devices that distort accounts, are adulterations of the truth.¹¹

Populist trends require that power be obtained as an end in itself, regardless of the methods used. The British have decided to leave the European Union believing or accepting as true affirmations that are false or probable at best. Similarly, Americans have given credence to gross untruths because with them, they have challenged the power of the ruling classes, bringing them down. This theory is also by Luis Meyer. Indeed, in politics, lies or half-truths are resources that have always been handled with aplomb. But now, the response to the political and economic status quo has been to introduce sentimental and emotional elements, with their false messages carrying a sweeping force.

In the post-truth era, filled with major developments such as Great Britain’s exit from the European Union and the contentious American electoral campaign, it is clear that warriors of “truth” and warriors of “lies”—both switching positions—prosper in highly flammable and radicalized situations. The dispute between those that shout “it is a coup” and those that shout “it is constitutional” in Brazil, during the fall of Dilma Rousseff, gives shape to the idea that the world revolves around passions and beliefs; where truth is no longer needed.¹²

I. POST-TRUTH AND INDIA

Current political events are shaped by the spread of misleading or utterly fake information, particularly operated by alternative news channels, mainly through the internet. Political debates are therefore no longer based on any truth or factual accuracy, but on “post-truth”, whereby truth is simply abandoned as a shared ground whereon opinions should successively be constructed. The right sense has been lost, and so the sensitivity to questions of truth, with all the political consequences. Unfortunately the matter is far more complex than it appears, and this

way of framing the issue of post-truth is problematic at best.¹³ However, by the rules of the game in democratic contests, politicians generally only bend the truth. When caught lying outright – for example in attempts to escape responsibility for their actions – they provide complex justifications and near-apologies.¹⁴

¹¹Id p. 49

¹²Id, p. 23

¹³Raberto Orsi, *The Politics of Post-truth*, blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2017/05/05/the-politics-of-post-truth/, Visited on 26/12/2017

¹⁴Editorial, *Post-Truth?*, *Social Studies of Science* (2017), Vol. 47(1), p. 3



The 31 December 2016 address to the nation by Narendra Modi was a classic case of Post-truth. The 45-minute speech, delivered first in Hindi and then in English, was filled with half-truths that were clearly aimed at assuaging the huge hardships that had been caused to virtually each and every citizen of the country by his arbitrary and sudden decision to cancel the legal tender status of high-denomination currency notes on 8 November. The series of announcements that the Prime Minister made towards the end of his speech, almost akin to a “mini budget,” is clear evidence of his unstated intentions. By announcing rebates and waivers for low-cost housing and farm loans; credit limit increases and tax incentives for small businesspersons and traders; the doubling of the corpus of funds to be used for irrigation projects under various programmes of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development; the move to deposit cash directly into the bank accounts of pregnant women; and the higher interest rates to be given to senior citizens on their bank deposits—all point towards the segments of the population that Modi was seeking to target in his New Year eve speech. His address thus tacitly acknowledged that those who have been hurt the most by demonetization and the continuing shortage of currency notes across the country are farmers, women, the elderly, the homeless and those running small businesses.¹⁵

The demagoguery came in the form of a strong dose of unsubstantiated statements. Modi claimed that excess cash in the system was fuelling inflation. He alleged that “nations similar to us do not have the amount of currency that we had.” He also claimed that “over the last 10 to 12 years, `500 and `1,000 currency notes were used less for legitimate transactions and more for a parallel economy.” None of these claims stand up to close scrutiny, as any of Modi's economic advisers will tell him. The half-truths were in the form of claiming that the government is “introducing” a scheme for depositing `4,000 into the bank accounts of pregnant women and the conversion of three crore Kisan Credit Cards (or KCCs that can be used only in a bank) to RuPay Debit Cards (that can be used anywhere). The facts are different. There is already a pilot project in place to deposit funds in the bank accounts of pregnant women (named after Indira Gandhi, much to Modi's chagrin) under the National Food Security Act which is yet to be universalized due to inadequate budgetary support from the union government. Moreover, the scheme to convert KCCs into RuPay cards is four years old.¹⁶

In fact, the slowdown in the functioning of the economy has already destroyed livelihoods—a fact that President Pranab Mukherjee has conceded and which the government is trying hard to

play down. Instead of creating new employment opportunities through its much-touted “Make in India” programme, the rate of growth of the index of industrial production has fallen for seven out of the 12 months between November 2015 and October 2016. Since then, the state of the country's economy has not improved. There is every reason to believe that the situation has deteriorated on account of demonetization with economic activities having declined in many sectors.¹⁷

The short point is that the Prime Minister's rhetoric cannot conceal the grim reality on the ground. It suits him to paint the picture in binary terms. Either you are corrupt or you

¹⁵Editorial, Post-Truth India, Economic & Political weekly, Vol. 52, No. 1, p. 7

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Ibid.

are honest, and if you have not supported demonetization then you must be corrupt. This is in keeping with his past record of reinforcing popular prejudices by dividing the country into people who are either good or bad, patriots or traitors.

I. CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

The idea of democracy is in a state of flux. An ordinary citizen doesn't know how to read the events that unfold around him. He knows that democracy is a relationship between knowledge and power. But what does he do when the power of truth confronts the truth of power?¹⁸ Post-truth is a traumatic word, a word that pigeonholes beat changes in the democratic society, especially in terms of politics and electoral institutions.

For a decade now, politics has become more backstage, more managerial and more technologically fixated. Once sacrosanct idea such as transparency of information, necessity of participation, power of the public-ideas that made democracy an act of faith and trust-have been eroded. Elections, rights, governance and leadership are becoming empty words. Facts seem like illusions while the latter become facts. The charisma of political leadership is now nothing more than propaganda. It is as if Watergate politics has become the DNA of all politics.¹⁹

Shiv Vishvanathan says that a sense of trust has led to unprecedented political solidarity. Politics is unpredictable and new interpretations overturn old facts. Trust is no longer a habit but a cultivated alertness demanding more from the regime and even more from citizens. He is of the opinion that sometimes when a word is born, a world is born with it. Post-truth might be one such word. A performative word that one senses might enact the politics of the future.

The social consequences of post-truth may be disturbing. In politics, the deterioration of the notion and value of truth is a danger to society. The most likely script indicates increasing intolerance and stimulation of totalitarianism. Some post-truth era thinkers are of the opinion that Post-Truth could prove costly.

¹⁸Shiv Visvanathan, *The Year We Reinvented the Truth*, *The Hindu* (Dec. 3, 2016).

¹⁹*Ibid.*