**Post-Truth: Fake News?**

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Simon Blackburn

Since it was the Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year in 2016, many commentators have lamented our post-truth world. But few have been at all precise about what exactly they were talking about. Let us run through six options.

(1) Is it a problem of how to know what is true and what is not: what philosophers call a problem of epistemology? Perhaps. If you confine yourself to taking your opinions from unnamed and unknown sources on the web, this may well be a problem. But if you don’t then it is easy to know quite a lot about the world, and in many respects, more than ever before (Google street view can show you more about the appearance of places than anyone could know a few years ago). There have always been liars, bullshitters, vctims of illusions and delusions, and snake-oil salesmen lying in wait for the unwary. The cure is to learn to distinguish who or what is trustworthy from who or what is not. Schools ought to pay more attention to this: David Hume’s great essay on Miracles would be a start, although one can’t expect faith schools to cheer for it as they should.

(2) Is it a problem of vocabulary, or finding the right words for things? This was Orwell’s particular fear and he was anticipated by Plato. Indeed according to Aristotle one of Plato’s acquaintances, Cratylus, became so worried about the infirmities of language that he fell silent altogether, and would only communicate by wagging his finger. Words matter: consider the moral, legal and political difference between calling a particular cellular complex an unborn child and calling it a blastocyst. In our hyper-moralistic times words like “harass” and “abuse” have expanded their range enormously. And then christening a problem can offer a false sense of understanding it: “attention deficit disorder” sounds nice and scientific, but whether it offers anything over and above “naughty” or “bored” may be doubted.

For another salient modern example, consider the vocabularies used in the psychiatric dictionary, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder of the American Psychiatric Association. DSM I published in 1952 contained 132 pages; DSM 5 published in 2013 contained 947, suggesting that we now have over seven times as many disorders as a few years ago. Controversies over this inflation include allegations of secrecy, accusations of conflicts of interest, charges of medicalizing normality, and other claims of poor methodology.

A vocabulary is useful only insofar as it supports a theory, both having understood criteria of application, and understood implications. The cure here is to beware of words than enchant us rather than inform us.

(3) Is it a changed moral climate, in which people care less about truth than before? Surely not across the board. Courts of law and other tribunals are charged with caring a great deal about whether one thing or another is true. However, whilst in small communities immediate reputation effects motivate people to scrupulous trustworthiness, the anonymity of the big city, and still more so the anonymity the web can afford, loosens the grip of reputation, so there can be a higher proportion of misinformation about. Perhaps a casual attitude to truth is first born in the Web, and then insidiously spreads over advertising and especially politics. The problem here is the same as that under (1) above: caveat emptor.

(4) Is it a changed set of concerns? Has life become more of a stage, speech more of performance art, so the aim is not the exchange of information but sprightly repartee, just the gathering of likes on Facebook and Twitter? Perhaps more of life, and especially online life, has this aspect. But offline, truth maintains its sovereignty. If you are charged with a crime, you will care soon enough whether the police or the witnesses tell the truth. You care whether your doctor knows the truth, and whether he or she tells it.

(5) Have we become more suspicious of claims to objectivity, or to authority, as Michael Gove so memorably claimed to be? The spirit of “postmodernism” was often characterised as being one of scepticism about truth, reason, and objectivity. Well, caution about people who claim such virtues is often in place. But sometimes it is not. An objective judgment about, say, whether my brake pads are worn is one formed (a) with no ulterior motive or (b) by using only methods adapted to telling whether my brake pads are worn, such as hoisting my car up on a jack and poking around underneath. That what we pay garages, judges, doctors, builders, and many others for. Negligence on their part is dangerous, up to and including lethal. We care about truth as soon as it matters, so perhaps what people call the “post-truth” atmosphere is just a symptom that we are so disillusioned with politics that we can scarcely see it as mattering any more. A dangerous frame of mind, unfortunately.

(6) Have we become suspicious of the very notion of truth itself? Some philosophers, from the ancient sceptic Pyrrho of Elis, to Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, have trodden this path. And many others have found difficulty with definitions of truth. The first thing everyone thinks of is “correspondence with the facts”. But facts are as slippery as truth. Here are some very distinguished recent philosophers:

There is, I think, no theory independent way to reconstruct phrases like “really true”; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory, and its “real” counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle.

Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

The intuition that truth is correspondence should be extirpated rather than explicated

Richard Rorty

The correspondence theory requires not purification but elimination

Peter Strawson

Facts are fictions, spurious sentence-like slices of reality, “projected from true sentences for the sake of correspondence”

W. V. Quine

Probably the most common contemporary view of truth is known as deflationism. This starts with the observation that saying “it’s true that penguins waddle” is not really any different from saying that penguins waddle. Similarly, if you say that penguins waddle, I can signal agreement by repeating it, or by saying “that’s true” or just by grunting assent. This suggests that truth is not a grand contested notion, or one we can do without. It is, as it were, too little to be a target for scepticism. Tidying up deflationism, making it work across the board, is a major enterprise in contemporary philosophy of language and logic.

Of course, if deflationism is right, we cannot live in a post-truth world—not while we need to believe some things and not others, and that means while we have to act in the light of what we suppose about our environment, or in other words, live at all. Pyrrho and Nietzsche are not an option. Post-truth is indeed fake news.

Some references, themselves containing more references:

Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Penguin Books, 2005

*Truth*, in the series Ideas in Profile, Profile Books, 2017

Paul Horwich, *Truth*, Blackwell, 1990