

Beyond the falsehood: a comparison of post-truth and lies in politics

[Politics](#)



In the wake of Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump to power, numerous intellectuals and media have pointed out the rather disturbing reality that contemporary political events are led by the propagation of misleading information and outright false claims. The term “ post-truth” designated to describe the current phenomenon aptly captures how our era has moved beyond the rules of facts and truths. Political debates are no longer based on factual accuracy. Truth, as the shared ground for discussions, is simply abandoned.

Post-truth and lying often go together. By definition, post-truth contains elements of lying but in some cases, it lacks the intention to deceive, which is a defining element of lying. The indifference to facts is observed in both the addresser and the addressee of post-truth, while in lying, facts (at least believed facts) are given with due respect. Hence, by impact, post-truth insidiously fosters a contempt to truth, which could be more dangerous than lies.

Truth and politics

To discuss post-truth, it is worth starting from the importance of “ truth” in the political field, where the concept of “ post-truth” is most frequently mentioned. I would argue that, in politics, especially in a democracy, truth is not the only value that matters. Opinions constitute the foundation of a democracy more than truth. However, in a healthy and democratic political environment, opinions must be formed with a proper respect for factual truth.

Truth cannot be related to democracy in a simplistic manner for three major reasons. Firstly, the fundamental value of a democracy is the diversity of opinions caused by the diversity of human conditions. Therefore, the pluralism of opinions should receive due respects. “ All government rest on opinion”, as James Madison writes. Secondly, in the real world, political decisions cannot be made solely based on rational proofs. Although social and political scientists are striving to achieve “ approximate truth” through the establishment of social models, such models inevitably simplify the complexities of the real world.

In politics no one can predict, to the full extent, the secondary effects and long-term influences of a policy or reform. There are countless factors to consider and countless values at stake, to the extent that there is no perfectly correct path to choose. Hence the notion that political science is an application of truth is both illusory and dangerous. Thirdly, the idea that politics can be relied on truth is anti-democratic in nature since the quality of “ being true” prevents all types of criticisms and challenges once its adherents are in power.

But does it mean that politics can be simply ruled by opinions? Is it no longer necessary for the opinions to be attached to factual truths? Are impractical opinions such as Trump’s wall proposal equally valid as others and do facts still have a role to play in political conversations? The point must be made clear that although truth is not the whole value which politics is based on, it is an indispensable element for meaningful political conversations to be carried out. The reason is simple in that a complete separation between

opinions and truth would leave the political discussions to a state of absolute relativism, just like what the post-truth politics has presented to us.

Defined as the “ circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”, post-truth has threatened the basis of democracy in a way that meaningful political debates cannot be carried out. Moreover, opinions that disregard factual truths removes the limit on state power. In a democratic political environment, the authority can promote a certain notion of reality through public media or propaganda, but it cannot change the facts. The opposite is the case for totalitarian regimes who can easily deny the historical events or produce “ alternative facts”. This is a tendency that can be observed from the Donald Trump’s recent inauguration. Photos of the ceremony indicated that the turnout was evidently lower than that of Barack Obama’s inauguration. However, on the following day, Trump publicly claimed that he had seen a million and a half people during the event. In this case, the subject perception by the authority has more weight than the objective evidences of photographs, which is a very dangerous phenomenon.

Therefore, it has been established that facts should inform opinions.

Although factual truths are not the only consideration in decision-making, post-truth is certainly not a sign of a normal, healthy political environment. It is hence worth probing into the nature of post-truth and looking for the exact threats that it poses.

The nature of post-truth in comparison with lies

Although post-truth statements and lies often go together, the nature of post-truth has nuance differences from that of the lies. While lies exhibit a quality of being untrue, post-truth statements share a general indifference to factual truth. In other words, in giving a post-truth statement, the speaker often has a lack of care of the truth-value of that statement.

The definition of lying goes as follows: “ A lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it.” In lying, there are at least four necessary conditions. First, a lie is a statement made by a person. Second, to lie requires the person to believe that the statement is false. In other words, the person believes in version of the reality and the statement made by him is untruthful according to that belief. Third, to lie requires that the statement be made to another person, who is the addressee. Forth, to lie requires that the addresser has an intention to deceive the addressee.

In plentiful situations, post-truth statements are outright lies. One notorious instance is that during the Brexit referendum campaign, UKIP claimed that 350 million GBP has been paid to EU per week by Britain and this amount of money will be diverted entirely to NHS after Brexit. The figure of 350 million GBP was soon discovered as inaccurate and was publicly reported. However, the campaigners continued to use the figure across billboards and buses, totally disregarding the factual truth and deliberately propagating the false information.

In other cases, post-truth statements fulfil the first and third condition necessary for lying, while not fulfilling the second and fourth condition. According to the second condition, lying requires the person to give a statement which he believes to be false. The implication is that the person needs to be aware of the truth-value of the statement. If the addresser makes a statement that he believes to be neither true nor false, then the action is not lying.

In some instances of post-truth statements, the sentence refers to events in the future, such as the proposal made by Trump to erect a wall between Mexico and the US. Although this is a statement that crumbles upon any careful scrutiny, that is highly unlikely to become a reality, we cannot deny such a possibility in the future from the standpoint of today, neither can Trump do. Moreover, if statements involving future behaviours can be determined as true or false at the point of now, humans would not have free will. Hence, truth-values to predictions of the future must be denied. Without a truth-value attached to the statement, we cannot define it as a lie.

More often, the post-truth statements exhibit an indifference to truth and hence lack an intention to deceive. Lies have a sharp focus to insert a specific false belief at a specific point in order to avoid the unwanted consequences of that point being occupied by the truth. The person who tells the lie is inevitably concerned with the true belief and aims to manipulate the situation in order to avoid that true belief. In other words, the lie is constructed under the guidance of the truth. However, in many post-truth statements, the person is not constrained by the conditions of the truth. He

is not limited to inserting a particular false belief at a particular point because the focus of the person is not on the specific piece of fact that troubles him, but on the ultimate goal that he wants to achieve.

The person has a lack of care of whether the things said reflect the reality or not. What matters is to pick up pieces of information that are possibly useful to achieve the goal. The intention is not on deceiving others on particular facts, but on leading people to believe in some other impression that he wants to create. For example, in the infamous “ birtherism” theory, the main intention is to lead the public to question Barack Obama’s right to become a president, while his actual birthplace is of secondary importance. Popular intentions in making a post-truth statement includes attracting media attention, constructing public image and gathering public support, mainly by oversimplifying the complex realities to the extent that even the less intelligent group of people are able to understand and embrace. The lack of connection to a concern with truth, the indifference to how things really are, is the essence of many post-truth statements.

The impact of post-truth in comparison with lies

While lies exhibit the danger of violating another person’s moral right of knowing, post-truth is more insidiously dangerous in a way that it fosters a lack of interest to know. The popularization of post-truth pushes the public to subscribe to the notion that there are no facts but interpretations in the world. It pampers the public and feed them with emotional statements to the extent that people gradually give up their capability to reason and to question. In this regard, post-truth poses a greater danger to truth, compared to lies.

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Every lie is a violation of the right of the hearer. It is assumed that, by giving a statement, the listener has the right to expect that the addresser believes that statement. It follows that one can only lie to a person who has the right to exercise liberty of judgement. Lies, although are playing on the opposite side of truths, still respond to the truth. Lies are constructed under the guidance of truth.

However, in the case of post-truth, assertions are made without any regard to the actual facts. One says anything that suits one to say. Gradually, a person's normal habit of attending to facts and become attenuated or lost. A person who gives post-truth statements do not accept nor reject the authority of truths. He simply pays no attention to it. The deeper roots of post-truth assertions may stem from the sceptic point of view that humans have no access to the completely objective reality and all reality are subject to interpretations. Such anti-realist beliefs undermine the value of impartial efforts to distinguish what is false from what is true. The intelligence of objective or scientific inquiry is rejected.

From a listener's perspective, being constantly exposed to such statements that disregard any factual reality, the person will become accustomed to them and giving up the ability of critical thinking, which is often hard to do. The public slowly give in to the psychological mechanism of accepting only things that are similar to their pre-existing beliefs and to listen only what they want to listen. We lose the patience and capability to wait to inform our opinions with facts. We share the " news" we like on social media before checking them. The Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy has described the

undercurrent of post-truth politics in which people “ cheerfully shot the messenger” when provided with the factual information that did not support their stands.

To a certain extent, the public and the post-truth supplier has formed a collaboration. One party provides the assertions with no respect to factual truths but only popular or favourable viewpoints and the other party is willing to give up their rights to question and happily accept them. “ It’s performance art at this point,” said Christopher Robichaud, a lecture in ethics and public policy at HKS. “ It’s true that what Trump is saying is false, it’s just that the post-truth age of politics, we’re beyond criticizing someone for that. It’s like criticizing an actor for saying a lot of false things. He says whatever he needs to say to move people emotionally.”

Conclusion

It is clear that how post-truth differs from lies. While lies operate under the rule of facts and truths, post-truth has constructed a new context where people cannot and do not have the desire to judge and search for truth. It is also clear that why it matters. As Baron puts it plaintively: “ How can we have a functioning democracy when we cannot agree on the most basic facts?”