

Chapter 12

Post–Truth Politics as a Threat to Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Politics for long has been associated with mendacity, disinformation, manipulation, and at odds with the truth. In recent times, the term post-truth is used to further characterise politics, which implies a fresh phenomenon in the conflict between truth and politics. The chapter examines the concept of post-truth and post-truth politics. The chapter argues that the application of post-truth rhetoric in politics implies a novelty in politics and in the relationship between truth and politics which undermines democracy. It is arguable that post-truth condition negatively impacts individual ability to discriminate between what is true or false taking into consideration the volume of disinformation on the one hand and on the other hand the need to make informed decisions and choices without having to consult experts at the critical time that the stakes involved in such decisions and choices are urgent and crucial.

INTRODUCTION

The term post-truth does not mean or imply that the idea and concern for truth is a thing of the past. Instead, post-truth describes and denounces the trending manner of communication that reflects a disregard for truth and deflect from reliable means of knowing what is true. Arguably, people's readiness to discover and accept the truth correlates with their overall development: the ability to stand up for what is right, the capacity for social critique, and the capacity to stand up to power. The post-truth condition is counterproductive because misinformation and manipulation negatively affect people's decision-making process at a time when the stakes involved in these decisions and choices are becoming increasingly high (McIntyre 2018, Block 2019, and Kalpokas 2019).

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In 2016 the term “post-truth” was declared the word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) following a hike in its usage (cf. McIntyre 2018, 1). The declaration further popularised it, leading to “a rise in its use in a growing number of domains as its original meaning becomes stretched and mangled” (Block, 2019, 3). As a result, it has caught the interest of the Media and intellectuals. That is evident in the growing number of literature and media coverage on the phenomenon of post-truth, which has resulted in a more precise conceptualisation and description of its manifestations, consequences, origin and relations to various domains such as philosophy, religion, psychology, economy, science and technology, particularly the Internet, media and specifically the social media.

Earlier characterisation and conceptualisation of the idea of post-truth appeared in the year 2004 by Ralph Keyes in a book he titled *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. Keyes in this publication offers a broad critique of the lack of sincerity and the prevalence of deceit in contemporary society. A year later, Harry G. Frankfurt, in his essay *On bullshit* (2005), offers a similar critique of modern society. He says that “one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share” (2005, 1). However, the term “post-truth” has been used increasingly to describe the contemporary era (McIntyre 2018, Lockie 2017, Block 2019, and Kalpokas 2019). The close association of post-truth with populist politics and new communication technologies coupled with the understanding of it as manipulative and relying on misrepresentation gives post-truth the status of being both familiar and strange, old and new. However, this does not undermine the fact that “there are still differences between old-style lies and conspiracies, and post-truth manipulation” (Yilmaz 2019, 240).

The paper analyses the contemporary association of politics with post-truth and defends the thesis that this association not only denigrates politics but undermines the value and trust in democracy (cf. Suiter 2016, 17-25). The argument is developed in three steps. The first section explores the concept of post-truth and post-truth politics to argue that the phenomenon of post-truth politics poses a significant threat to democratic politics in particular. These threats are illustrated by explicating the consequences and implications of post-truth rhetoric in the recent political campaigns as manifestations of post-truth politics. The second section situates the challenges of post-truth and post-truth politics in the broader context of the crisis of truth to argue that post-truth politics poses a threat to democracy in general by undermining the value of truthfulness in democratic politics. The final section concludes with a proposal on countering the challenge of post-truth and post-truth politics.

THE CONCEPT OF POST-TRUTH

According to McIntyre (2019, 123 -125), post-truth has its remote origin within the academic discussions concerning the “standard of evidence, critical thinking, scepticism, cognitive bias, and so on” but in connection with postmodernists’ approach that questioned everything. That ended up in perspectivism that denied the possibility of objective truth and indirectly attacked evidence-based reasoning. However, the term “post-truth” was meant to describe the kind of political rhetoric known today as post-truth politics. Hopkin and Rosamond (2017, 3) described the contemporary context in which post-truth emerged as word of the year as follows: “The rise of populist and anti-elite movements and the rejection of basic principles of reason and veracity characteristic of much of their political discourse.” That was evident in the political discourse that characterised the Brexit campaign, the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2016. We may place the change campaign in Nigeria in 2015 in the same category. The politi-

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