# Psychological Underpinnings of Post-Truth in Political Beliefs

**Rose McDermott,** *Brown University*

**ABSTRACT**   Although both the idea and the reality of so-called fake news or disinformation campaigns long precede the Trump administration, the frequency and intensity of the discussion around its prevalence and influence have increased significantly since Donald Trump took office. In an era when technological innovations support increasingly inexpensive and easy ways to produce media that looks official, the ability to separate real from artificial has become increasingly complicated and difficult. Some of the responsibility for public manipulation certainly rests with those who present false or artificial information as real. However, their relative success depends on, at least in part, universal psychological processes that often make humans susceptible to believing things that are not true. For example, people often weigh emotional feelings more heavily than abstract facts in their decision making. This discussion examines the psychological foundations that render individuals susceptible to a post-truth media environment and allow it to emerge, escalate, and persist.

Although both the idea and the reality of so-called fake news or disinformation campaigns long precede the Trump administration, the frequency and intensity of the discussion around its prevalence and influence have increased significantly since Donald Trump took office. The recent Mueller indictments explicitly cite specific Russian individuals for interfering in the 2016 American presidential election, but the implicit indictment for manipulating the election was placed at the door of Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media. In an era when technological innovations support increasingly inexpensive and easy ways to produce media that looks official, the ability to separate real from artificial has become increasingly complicated and difficult.

As much as the public discussion has focused on so-called fake news, the underlying political and social challenge involved in separating truth from fiction and correcting misinformation results from natural psychological biases. This discussion examines the psychological foundations that render individuals susceptible to a post-truth media environment and allow it to emerge, escalate, and persist. After clarifying definitional terms, the sources of susceptibility follow. A discussion of exacerbating factors precedes the conclusion.

## DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

"Post-truth" as a term was first used by Tesich (1992) in *The Nation* to refer to earlier political scandals, including Watergate,

the Iran-Contra affairs, and the First Gulf War. Keyes (2004) took up the term more explicitly in *The Post-Truth Era*. Thus, the term originated long before the current administration and, given its increasing prevalence, likely will endure long after Trump leaves office.

"Post-truth" can be defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (*Oxford Dictionary* 2016). Thus, post-truth is distinct from the concept of fake news, which involves the deliberate portrayal and spread of false information, whether through traditional broadcast or print media or via the Internet and other forms of social media (e.g., Twitter). To qualify as fake, the story must be generated with the conscious intent to deceive or mislead the reader to achieve a financial or political goal.

However, "post-truth" represents a much broader phenomenon than fake news, which only comprises one element of the larger reality. The foundation for post-truth is laid when people consider opinion to be as legitimate as objective facts, or when they weigh emotional factors as heavily as statistical evidence. When these tendencies hold sway among even a significant minority of the public, they can exert a strong influence on public-policy debates as well as on behavioral outcomes (e.g., voting).

"Post-truth" was the *Oxford Dictionary* 2016 International Word of the Year, which is given to the word that the editors believe most defines "the ethos, mood, or preoccupation of that particular year and to have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance." According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, there was a 2,000% increase in its usage during the course of one year,

**Rose McDermott** *is the David and Marianna Fisher University Professor of International Relations at Brown University. She can be reached at Rose_McDermott@Brown.edu.*

www.manaraa.com

in 2016. In Great Britain, post-truth was most evident in the debate surrounding the Brexit vote; therefore, this phenomenon clearly is not restricted to American political discourse. Indeed, it has emerged as an international political pandemic. In the United States, it has become most closely related to the style of communication characterized by Trump. As Frum (2016) wrote, Trump and his campaign were "qualitatively different than anything

discussion does not delve into the first two sources because they are not primarily psychological phenomena—but they still merit mention. The final point provides the basis for the remainder of this examination.

For the majority of academics and other elites, scientific truth constitutes the gold standard on which belief is supposed to be formulated. If beliefs do not derive from this source, the

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before seen from a major-party nominee." Cillizza (2016) argued, "[t]here is no doubt that even in the quadrennial truth-stretching that happens in presidential campaigns, Trump has set records for fabrication." Yet, despite what elites were writing and warning, voters saw Trump as more honest than Clinton by an eight-point margin in the November 2, 2016, *ABC-Post* poll. This was despite an analysis by Polifact, which showed that 129 of 169 statements made by Trump in that week were false, whereas 59 of Clinton's 212 statements were false (Clement and Guskin 2016). In other words, what voters believed ran exactly opposite to the facts. This was at least partly the result of people responding emotionally to the style more than the substance of what the candidates were saying.

Several features characterize this concept of post-truth. First, it relies heavily on appeals to emotions (e.g., fear and anger), which may be instigated in response to one incident but later brought to bear against another wholly unrelated incident—simply because both events are united by the identity of the opponent or the emotion of the perceiver. This hostility often revolves around political ideology; for example, Democrats may characterize Republicans as racist and then easily transfer that anger onto other aspects of Republican ideology. However, there are myriad divisions around which it is possible for individuals to coalesce outrage, including race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation, among many other possibilities.

Second, post-truth arguments separate fact from specific details of a policy. Therefore, feelings about one issue (e.g., abortion) are used to inform debates about other issues (e.g., tax policy) in ways that are unrelated to any substantive connections between the topics. Third, in a post-truth world, repetition reigns. Talking points, irrespective of any given question, come to serve as a substitute for more nuanced debate or discussion. Fourth, in post-truth discussions, rebuttals are ignored or dismissed, thereby refusing the benefits of repetition to the opposition. In all of these ways, facts no longer weigh as heavily as the emotional triggers that politicians can elicit. Through these mechanisms, partisans can choose to believe that the world is only as they see it, on both sides.

### ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF BELIEF

The susceptibility that people have to accepting feelings as facts does not constitute a new phenomenon, and neither is it restricted only to news items or objective issues. However, before discussing structural factors that tend to exacerbate underlying psychological dynamics, it is worth noting the foundational psychological and cognitive sources of belief (Lupia 2013), which are not simply restricted to scientific facts. To be clear, the current

burden of proof lies with the person who disputes them to prove why another standard might be substituted. However, for many people in the world—and most non-elites in the United States—facts are not assumed to provide the default standard by which beliefs are established. For most people, other sources of belief are understood to hold equal legitimacy to scientific facts. First and most common, religion and faith provide the guiding principles by which people live their lives. From this perspective, for many people, just because they cannot see and measure God does not mean that God does not exist. Indeed, faith in the absence of facts is taken as a demonstrable sign of piety and status in many religions. This means that believing things they cannot see or prove is not alien to many people; therefore, applying these habits to the political realm would not feel alien or unusual.

Second, history matters. Our own legal system relies on precedent or custom in making decisions about guilt and responsibility, even when modern neuroscience may cast serious doubt on issues such as free will (Landes and Posner 1976). Third, and most critically for our purposes, many people rely on their emotions as the most readily accessible, accurate, and immediate source of truth precisely because analysis of abstract knowledge requires so much additional effort (Robinson and Clore 2002; Schwarz, Newman, and Leach 2016).

The natural, common tendency for most people is to rely on these other factors instead of or in addition to facts to negotiate their daily life, especially in areas that seriously matter to them, such as religious faith and family. This means that most people are used to evaluating important experiences independent of objective scientific facts and methods. As a result, approaching news and political issues from a similar perspective would seem easy and normal. Indeed, it is most effortless for people to rely on basic and universal psychological biases that serve to reduce cognitive load. Everyone must process too much information every day; therefore, easy, familiar, and natural processes quickly become default strategies, regardless of whether the task is political in nature (Kahneman and Egan 2011). In an effort to negotiate the tasks that we all must accomplish every day, we rely on those intuitive psychological shortcuts that prove effective and efficient most of the time. However, that means that we may not notice the ways that these biases render us prone to systematic error or susceptible to systematic manipulation by others.

### WHY ARE PEOPLE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SUCH BIASES?

Contrary to popular scientific opinion and bemoaned by many policy makers, people do not necessarily or naturally seek or

gravitate toward scientific truth. In fact, on average, people tend to try to avoid it (Ariely and Jones 2012). Humans show a proclivity to accept wholesale whatever information they are exposed to in a surprisingly gullible manner. In short, the natural human default is to accept what others say is true. Moreover, if claims do not contain specific aspects, it is less likely that people will seek

themselves to echo-chamber enclaves. Finally, support reflects whether the claim has much evidence in its favor, although which evidence is available or considered credible can be influenced by the other forces.

According to the Schwarz, Newman, and Leach (2016) model, people can evaluate information in one of two ways (Lewandowsky

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to test their accuracy, whereas specific claims induce skepticism, making them more likely to generate close critique (Schwarz and Clore 1996). In general, individuals must work diligently to resist believing lies. This means it takes much extra effort for most people to resist rather than believe a lie. Believing simple lies is simply much easier than evaluating complex facts.

Why would this be the case? The enormous energy required by basic brain processing explains most of it. To discern whether something is a lie, the brain must first treat it as true. Only once we assume that something is true can we try to compare a statement against all other existing knowledge, information, and feelings to determine whether it is a lie (Gilbert 1991). This also means that several strategies can easily defeat the brain's lie-detection system—primary among them the power of repetition (Hasher, Goldstein, and Toppino 1977), which generates a sense of "illusory truth." Repetition simply overwhelms our cognitive resources. Moreover, when information is retracted, it exerts the opposite of the intended effect (Seifert 2002), serving simply to reinforce the previous falsehood through repetition.

So, how do people decide whether something "feels" true? Schwarz and colleagues (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Schwarz, Newman, and Leach 2016) put forward a powerful and persuasive model of factors that influence these truth-validation decisions. When people seek to judge the truth, they assess five basic factors: compatibility, coherence, credibility, consensus, and support. Compatibility assesses whether the information fits not only with what people already know and feel but also whether it is consistent with their worldview. Compatibility thus illustrates one way in which social identity can influence evaluations of the truth of a message by shaping whose evaluation counts and which messages matter. In this way, compatibility explains how emotion can serve as a source for evaluation of the truth: people are more likely to believe things that fit with their preexisting feelings and beliefs in a process often referred to as "biased assimilation" (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979).

Coherence refers to whether the story is internally coherent and plausible. Does it make sense? Simple stories have an inherent advantage on this dimension because stories that are easy to process are interpreted as more coherent (Johnson-Laird 2012). Credibility evaluates the source of information. Consensus asks whether other people share the view under consideration. If many people believe it, it is assumed more likely to be true. This mechanism shows how social media can quickly enforce and magnify false information, particularly when individuals restrict

et al. 2012): they can rely on (1) relevant facts and details, which takes significant effort; or (2) how easy, or "fluent," it is to process the information. Note that these two models align with the Type I versus Type II information-processing model put forth by Kahneman and Egan (2011) in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Because it requires so much less effort, people find it much easier to believe things that only require easy processing. For example, if people were to evaluate the dimension of consensus from an analytic standpoint, they would have to figure out and track who believes what and why. This would require significant effort, especially if this effort had to be repeated for every piece of information they encountered. Or, they could instead rely on the intuitive assessment of whether many other people believe it. Indeed, Festinger (1954) pointed this out in his seminal work on social comparison in noting that people assume that if most people believe something, there must be some element of truth in it—in a "where there is smoke, there must be fire" kind of way. However, it is important that fluency, or ease of processing, also can be influenced by many factors unrelated to objective facts. Repetition, for example, can make things more familiar and thus easier to process, but so can various aspects of visual presentation, including something as simple as a font size. In this way, highly fluent stories can circumvent even the need for repetition. However, the flip side means that things that are not fluent and more difficult to process will inspire greater scrutiny, explaining why sometimes complex arguments may instigate greater skepticism than easy-to-process simplistic claims.

Importantly, the Schwarz, Newman, and Leach (2016) model illustrated why attempts to correct misinformation often backfire. Because of memory effects, the repetition of false information will only strengthen its mental association because the source is quickly forgotten but the content remains active and reinforced. People remain quite sensitive to their feelings but relatively ignorant or insensitive to their source, especially if it lies in subtle or background areas such as color, rhyme, or smell (Weaver et al. 2007). Rather than making people realize the earlier information was false, retraction often simply reinforces it through repetition of the misinformation while refuting it, producing blowback or sleeper effects.

Of course, these are not the only factors that can influence an individual's evaluation of truth claims. Those mentioned previously fall under an area often referred to as unmotivated biases, which proceeds from the assumption that if people knew that they were making errors they would want to change. However, more

motivated factors also can influence the assessment of truth and credibility. Cognitive dissonance forcefully demonstrated that people often change their beliefs to align with behavior that may be shaped by entirely irrelevant forces, particularly under conditions of high perceived choice and low objective justification (Festinger 1962). Indeed, other forms of motivated reasoning can encourage individuals to espouse beliefs for various reasons, including self-interest, that they may be unwilling to openly acknowledge (Taber and Lodge 2006).

These psychological tendencies certainly are not restricted to less-educated people. Rather, they represent universal aspects of human information processing. We all share basic biases in information gathering and we all suffer from biased reasoning and biased recollection. These dynamics evolve for good reason; cooperation and social support constitute an essential advantage for humans and, indeed, are much more important than knowing the objective truth.

interest, relevance, and attention. It also increases a sense of false consensus because fewer people are exposed to information with which they disagree. Search algorithms also clearly exacerbate this tendency because they are designed to reduce the likelihood that people will see what they rarely see, thereby drastically reducing the incidence of oppositional messages. Moreover, as the recent Cambridge Analytica scandal that indicted Facebook clearly illustrated, social-media platforms allow strategies developed by professional advertising agencies to be applied to political campaigns through processes of micro-targeting, in which partisans only have to preach to the converted (Plasser and Plasser 2002).

### CONCLUSION

Humans possess universal psychological strategies that make it difficult to detect lies for a reason. Storytelling is one of the most ancient forms of communication and entertainment. For millennia, it allowed for the transfer of massive amounts of information

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### EXACERBATING FACTORS

If these underlying psychological dynamics were not enough, other aspects of the modern political environment make individuals even more susceptible to treating opinion and feeling as fact in a post-truth world than previously may have been the case. First, there is an overall loss of trust in institutions, including the media (Malone 2016). The public also does not trust experts, at least partly because they so often contradict one another on all types of issues (e.g. diet), making people likely to dismiss all experts rather than sort through arguments on their own (Nagler 2014). In addition, denigration of experts provides an easy way for coalitions to organize against opponents, just as increasing self-selection in media diets reduces the likelihood that people will encounter information with which they disagree. In striving for balance, the mainstream news media sometimes bestows false credibility on one side of a debate that actually lacks strong scientific support (e.g., climate change). Indeed, recent polls show that the most well-educated conservatives are those who are most likely to disbelieve climate change (Pew Research Center 2017); source identification stating that information is provided by "Exxon" or "the National Science Foundation" makes little difference in perceived credibility (Kim, Park, and Schwarz 2009).

In addition, there is no question that there have been massive changes in the way that we obtain information in this century. The rise of social media in particular means that—for good or bad—there are no longer any central gatekeepers to vet the information that reaches the mass public. User-generated information—as well as the democratization of information facilitated by the emergence of the Internet as a global commons—supports the emergence of echo chambers. The vastness of the Internet encourages selective sorting. When news is curated by friends and personalized, it immediately and directly increases

across generations in preliterate cultures. Storytelling produces strong social bonds in a community and provides cohesive explanations and expectations. It also provides shared knowledge, history, and a sense of collective future within a community. That is why stories can become such powerful tools of deception. In a contest between propositional logic and narrative that is rich with emotion, there is no contest in power or persuasion (Bruner 1991). Narrative wins every time. Emotion provides the foundation for myth, history, ritual, and social relationships. Narrative flow makes us receptive both emotionally and behaviorally to the information contained therein, which is why it constitutes such a powerful recruiting tool for all types of extremism. Visceral emotional states induce intense attentional focus because the information in stories proved crucial for generations.

Falsifiability may provide the cornerstone of the scientific method (Popper 1957) but believability constitutes the hallmark of a good narrative. When a fact is plausible, scientists still need to test it; that is the purpose of hypothesis generation and testing. However, when a story is plausible, most people will believe it is true. This process of believing stories potentiates cooperation among those who might not have anything else in common except their belief. The benefits offered by this cooperation far exceed the costs associated with believing lies.

Inoculating against these tendencies is exceedingly challenging. Retractions and corrections may work in the short run but fail over time because memory retains content and forgets the source, strengthening the false belief. Confronting falsehoods with facts only strengthens the lie by exposing more people to it and making it more fluent and believable through repetition and familiarity. We certainly can increase suspicion through warning prior to exposure, but instilling widespread distrust easily can

backfire in other ways. The strategy most likely to be effective lies in striving to make the truth as fluent, simple, and easy to understand as a lie. ∎

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