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INVADING MEDIA AND ERODING TRUST IN THE POST TRUTH WORLD

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Abstract: *In an age where truth is found to be multifaceted and removed from personal reality, the concept of post truth gains importance. This paper is an attempt to trace out a definition of post-truth, its specific characteristics in relation to the human world, and the influence of media, especially social media—how far it creates and distorts truth and the possibilities and prospects of this aspect in the post-truth world. It also discusses the erosion of trust that has taken part as the invasion of media and the ways to be devised to exercise a control over this condition.*

Index Terms -post truth, personal reality, media.

INTRODUCTION

George Orwell has said that “in times of universal deceit, telling truth will be a revolutionary act.” (Lee McIntyre 1) The 1993 romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* states “That’s not true. It’s not true. But it feels true.” and this strikes a keynote of the post truth world. This remark discloses the fact that humans have a complex relationship with the truth, and our evaluation of it is heavily influenced by our desires and emotions. Scripture’s assessment of our desires and emotions, however, is not encouraging. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick,” said the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 17:9). If this is so — if we cannot tell the truth even to ourselves — how can we hope to speak truth in love to others? The biblical statement: Jesus answered, “... for this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world — to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”— John 18:37b-38. The Oxford Dictionaries define “true” as “in accordance with fact or reality.” In popular usage, according with fact does not leave much room for subjectivity since a fact can be proven by observation or deduction. Reality, on the other hand, is far less concrete. Truth or reality experienced by each person is slightly different. The problem comes when preserving one’s “personal reality” requires obscuring or ignoring facts. The unprecedented volume and accessibility of information both true and false has marked a changing phase in the interpretation of truth in accordance with their passions and thus altering the trust placed upon it. With social media flourishing in the backdrop, this has been more impactful, influencing others as they go along. This capacity has paralleled (and probably accelerated) a general decline in trust in what one writer in *The Economist* termed the “truth-producing infrastructure.”

This paper is an attempt to trace out a definition of post-truth, its specific characteristics in relation to the human world, and the influence of media, especially social media—how far it creates and distorts truth and the possibilities and prospects of this aspect in the post-truth world. It also discusses the erosion of trust that has taken part as the invasion of media and the ways to be devised to exercise a control over this condition.

Before stepping on to the invading influence media has exerted in the post-truth world or specifically concentrating upon the social media, the discourse will primarily dwell upon Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, considered as the dawn of print media and the internet. The print media meant written thought and communication, and its wide distribution, whereas the internet and its wide resources has promoted a networking of ideas, which would never have gained voice beyond the four walls of a room. Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed: everything else is public relations (George Orwell). Till 1960s newspapers or the print media was in great demand. It was much later by 1970s people got attracted to Television and turned to be hungry for more news. This could not be afforded without disrupting the hugely profitable entertainment. (Lee McIntyre 65) The voiceless gained a voice, sparking the violent and centuries-long turmoil of the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and the Thirty Years' War, the sort of existential fractures shaping the influential media and the non-existent truth. Our exhausting and constant absorption in a transitory but completely overwhelming media cycle is our own preliterate eternal present. The technologists' operating the internet collectively swears by the algorithm, fancy talk for a recipe of logical steps and maybe some math. Our brains can't parse the jumble of content—part art, part trash—our friends generate on Facebook or the wider web, so an algorithm sorts it for us. Mark Zuckerberg, or really, his News Feed algorithm, is now editor-in-chief of the world's content (for better or worse). For a consumer, the difference between Gutenbergian editorial curation and Facebook's algorithm is that between idealistic prescription and amoral prediction. This being the logic of how the internet and social media invaded the human society, paving little way for the print media itself unravels the state of truth in the present scenario.

The explanation of truth and post-truth gains significance here. Oxford Dictionaries announced their 2016 Word of the Year: Post-truth (adjective): "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Oxford Dictionaries' president Casper Grathwohl said: "Fuelled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time." The accompanying press release further explained that, "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.'" A post-truth world, then, is not one in which the truth has ceased to exist; it is one in which it no longer matters. The political headlines of 2016 catalyzed the selection of "post-truth," including the so-called Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States. Commentators on both campaigns used the term with new frequency as they attempted to explain events that surprised them.

In the United States, the contest between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton produced more than the regrettably typical spin-doctoring. According to FactCheck.org, Clinton made several particularly brazen mischaracterizations of her private email server over the course of many months. For his part, President Trump's Twitter claim of an Electoral College "landslide" (his winning proportion was 46th of 58 historical elections) and popular vote victory among legal voters (even under the most generous assumptions, this is not plausible) hardly seemed serious. He was also untruthful about the Better Business Bureau's rating of Trump University, and he falsely claimed that an audit prevented him from releasing his tax returns. What is notable from the post-truth perspective, however, is not the degree of untruth, but the degree to which each candidate's supporters seemed not to care.

Social media acts as a post-truth player, which is the swiftest way to track news – true, partially true or purely fabricated. A survey of the users of the social media has disclosed the fact that majority of people living in the post-truth era are regular users of twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Snapchat, Reddit, Instagram, Tumblr, and LinkedIn as a platform for news. Social sites are the go-to place for news for smartphone users, as they serve as influential source for politicians, news outlets and propaganda machines. Facebook and twitter account comprise a shared platform for the people to express their opinions and soon mould out social circles and thereby blocking out everything else. The one-sided truth circulated by the friends and followers are held to be of utmost importance and gradually considered trustworthy with the real facts left hovering in the background. This leads to the creation of realities within the social network realities, unmindful of whether it is true or not.

Another important characteristic is the use hashtags brilliantly to create influential viral content and thereby establishing the news circulated as a truth. Social media has become so influential as a news tool that content from Facebook, and in particular, Twitter is picked up by news media sites to create headlines that are believed. These stories are then shared from the very sites they were sourced, and the story goes viral all over again. It's a vicious circle.

Targeting the social media users can be seen as a mirroring of Mark Twain's words: "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." The possibility of targeting the users based on their jobs, relationships, likes, interests, and activity etc through Google's Display Network (Gmail and YouTube) and Facebook provided an added scope to the erosion of truth. Beyond doubt it can be said that the ads we are made to see as facebook users is nothing but a projection and summary of sites you've visited, things you've liked, or even things your friends have liked. Cambridge Analytica (CA), is a company that uses this precise level of targeting, known as psychometrics (the ability to target individuals rather than demographics), to push out propaganda. CA, as described on its Wiki page, combines data mining and data analysis with strategic communication. What this means is that they can collect all of your social media data and use it target you with ads paid for by its clients. In the case of post-truth, two of those clients were Vote Leave and the Trump campaign. CA's success in being able to target and influence social media and internet users will surely only cement post-truth politics as the go-to tactic for getting people on side.

Having said so much on the influence of media, especially social media in building up truths, it is necessary to inquire into why people tend to build up their trust in these news items even while they are aware of the fact it is only partially true or untrue. It has always been the case that there have been politicians who lie to the public to get the results they want, and that there have been journalists prepared to publish spurious stories. But these were deviations from an accepted standard, and the public was angry when the deception became clear. In 2016, the mainstream media in general seems unable or unwilling to fight the tide of post-truth rhetoric, and many people seem to accept it all uncritically. Jonathan Freedland acknowledges the difficulties faced by newsrooms:

Fact checking is laborious, tedious and time-consuming, especially compared with the brio that can be generated by a sweeping (but false) assertion. . . . You can almost hear the nation's inner teenager chant in unison: bor-ing. Broadcast exchanges are especially resistant to such fact-checking, warning interviewees they don't 'want to get stuck in the weeds' or 'lost in the detail'. Katharine Viner, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, writes:

When a fact begins to resemble whatever you feel is true, it becomes very difficult for anyone to tell the difference between facts that are true and 'facts' that are not. . . . When 'facts don't work' and voters don't trust the media, everyone believes in their own 'truth' – and the results, as we have just seen, can be devastating. (*NPR* 23 November 2016)

For many people now, a 'fact' is simply something that someone feels to be true, or wishes to be true. People distrust much of what is presented as fact by authorities – especially if those facts are unwelcome in some way. And yet, people quickly fall for fake news on social media.

The second reason spotted out regarding the spread of false news is that vitality counts over veracity. As Jonathan Freedland writes that "in this era of post-truth politics, an unhesitating liar can be king. The more brazen his dishonesty, the less he minds being caught with his pants on fire, the more he can prosper. And those pedants still hung up on facts and evidence and all that boring stuff are left for dust, their boots barely laced while the lie has spread halfway around the world. (*The Guardian*, 13 May 2016).

This situation is made much worse by the ability of politicians and campaigners to communicate their message directly to supporters through social media – with no fact checking at all. Neetzan Zimmerman, former blogger at Gawker and now editor-in-chief at Whisper, has said, 'Nowadays it's not important if a story's real, the only thing that really matters is whether people click on it.' Viner laments that, 'the new measure of value for too many news organisations is virality rather than truth or quality.' (*The Guardian*, 12 July 2016)

Thirdly, it can be noted that untruth spread so quickly compared to truth. The general tendency among people is to click so frequently on false stories and this acts as an accelerating agent for these lies spread so rapidly. It is certainly true that facts and non-facts circulate at a speed that would have been inconceivable before the Internet and social media. Most people do not have the means, or perhaps inclination, to fact check the things that they see on social media. Psychologists say that all human beings have a strong confirmation bias, which makes us more likely to seek out and respond positively to information that confirms ideas we already have, rather than anything which opposes our ideas. So we will quickly believe anything that meshes with our particular worldview or psychological outlook, and dismiss anything that challenges us. According to a recent study from Stanford University, students have a 'stunning and dismaying consistency' in being duped by fake news stories again and again. (NPR, 23 November 2016).

Information cascades can be seen as another rationale behind the spread of ideas whether true or false. One person shares something with a few friends, who each share it with a few of their friends, and so on. It relies on social proof. Information cascades can take place extremely quickly within social media, and becomes unstoppable. According to Danielle Citron, a lawyer specialising in online bullying and hate crimes, 'Because people cannot know everything, they often rely on what others say even if it contradicts their knowledge. At a certain point, it is rational for people to stop paying attention to their own information and to look to what others know. People forward on what others think, even if the information is false, misleading, or incomplete, because they think they have learned something valuable. The cycle repeats itself, spreading information to many others in an information cascade.¹⁵It's the ideas that connect with us emotionally which we share quickly as part of an information cascade. The boring rebuttal which comes along a little later doesn't stimulate the pleasure centres in our brains in the same way, so we don't share it. It becomes a mere information trickle.

Viner writes that: "the age of relentless and instant information – and uncertain truths – can be overwhelming. We careen from outrage to outrage, but forget each one very quickly: it's doomsday every afternoon." (*How technology disrupted the truth*)

Filter bubbles compounded by the social media channel algorithms are designed to give us more of what these companies think we want. The Facebook news feed algorithm restricts what we see to the kinds of things we have already liked and clicked on. We therefore have our outlook on the world reinforced day by day through the things which appear in our timelines. Eli Pariser, co-founder of Upworthy, coined the term 'filter bubble' in 2011 to describe this effect. He was concerned about how Google's personalised search function results in us seeing information that reinforces our worldview rather than challenging it. Pariser argued even then that social media platforms should ensure that 'their algorithms prioritise countervailing views and news that's important, not just the stuff that is most popular or most self-validating'. But that is not what we have: we're stuck in the filter bubbles.

Facebook disbanded its news feed editorial team in 2016, and left the feed in the 'care' of an algorithm. Immediately, there was a stream of fake news Our goal is to show people the content they will find most meaningful, and people want accurate news. We have already launched work enabling our community to flag hoaxes and fake news, and there is more we can do here. . . . I am confident we can find ways for our community to tell us what content is most meaningful, but I believe we must be extremely cautious about becoming arbiters of truth ourselves. (13 November 2016).

The social media world also seems to offer self reinforcement to people- the freedom to express racist and sexist views in increasingly vociferous terms Within one filter bubble, such sentiments can be expressed freely, and are quickly reinforced by others expressing similar ideas. Meanwhile, in another filter bubble, entirely opposite ideas is circulating. Zeynep Tufekci, academician and journalist, sees this circulation of false news as "the mass media's growing weakness, especially in controlling the limits of what it is acceptable to say." It's a world of wild falsehoods and some truth that you see only rarely in mainstream news outlets, or hear spoken among party elites. . . . the strength of his supporters, united on social media, who believe that the media is a joke. (*Adventures in the Trump Twittersphere*)

This being the reality in the post-truth world, the next step should discuss how to tackle the ‘diminishing status of truth’ in our current media context as stated by Katharine Viner: ‘This does not mean that there are no truths. It simply means, as this year has made very clear, that we cannot agree on what those truths are, and when there is no consensus about the truth and no way to achieve it, chaos soon follows.’ (*How technology disrupted the truth*) This situation brings Isaiah’s assessment of his nation: So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. (Isaiah 59:14) Jeremiah announces a similar verdict: This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips. (Jeremiah 7:28)

Pondering on the ways to overcome the invasion of media and the erosion of trust in the post-truth era John Calvin famously observed, all truth is God’s truth. The present world in which we reside is where truth stumbles and the post-truth information cascades easily sweep us along. Our response is the best way to defend this phenomenon. First and foremost, we should resort to fact checking: verifying whether or not the statements circulating in the social media correspond to facts and informing the public of the actual results. Fact checking is seen as a method of enabling the mass media to fulfill its role as a social watchdog and aspiration for the media to offer professional journalism. The only problem traced in connection with it is that accurate verification of the facts before a falsehood is spread necessitates speed and involves a burden of cost.

If we are passionately committed to truth, even when it is deeply uncomfortable to do so, afford another way to cope up with the falsehoods in post-truth world. Being committed to discovering the truth means exploring the right and sure sources of the information which comes our way. We must question the assertions that come streaming our way via our friends’s Facebook likes and tweets, and not assume that ‘social proof’ means that anything is proved at all. It costs money to employ people to do a job and write to a high standard. This money comes partly from advertising – content which appears for free on your screen needs to be paid for somehow. Getting a subscription to publications you trust (and not complaining too much about the advertising you do encounter) is a good start. (*Christian Today*, 24 November 2016). This also means that we need to commit to escaping our filter bubbles and actively finding perspectives which challenge our default positions.

We must commit to only sharing things in social media that we are confident about. We must not simply contribute to information cascades of emotionally appealing untruth. Instead, we should be prepared to challenge the false assertions and spin, to introduce alternative viewpoints, and to share fresh perspectives.

Andy Walton writes that one way of ‘kicking back against the post-truth world’ is to ‘pay for good journalism’. Some of the already known facts of the social media will help to prevail over the existing untruths. A single viral post being enough to warrant a place among current trends, Facebook now looks at the number of sites publishing the topic and how users engage with it. It’s also started to label suspect posts as “disputed”, adding a tag that other publishers deem it untrustworthy. Advertisers are also no longer able to modify headlines of shared news articles. A small step, but one that might reduce the spread of misinformation. For Twitter’s part, it is set to roll-out fake news flags, with beefed up algorithms to target spam accounts. However, the platform still seems to be a place for bots to thrive, despite even more effort and resources thrown at the problem.

Google’s new Digital News Initiative (DNI) is working with news publishers to support high-quality journalism. In 2016, after receiving criticism for its role as a spreader of bogus news, the initiative gave 150,000 Euros to three fact-checking projects. One of these, Full Fact, is working to produce a fully automated fact-checking tool that allows journalists to be alerted to false claims immediately. For the time being, though, we have to put our faith in the technology companies to get a hold on a problem they helped create. Until they do, it’s up to us to decide what is truth, part-truth or nothing like the truth.

Concluding, the realizations dawned in understanding the erosion of trust and the role of social media in intensifying it denotes cracks in a post-truth edifice. The discussion about ‘post-truth’ is not rejoicing, but rather lamenting the state our society has reached. Could it be that a new desire for truth is just beginning to surface? This reminds us of the old proverb: “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes”? (*Gems from Spurgeon*). The peculiar transvaluation of the falsehood is a hallmark of the post-truth world. The

attraction behind committing errors and challenging the assumptions control the eroding trust in the post truth world. (Fuller) They try to change the rules so as to maximize their overall advantage. Thus, it can be witnessed that *in* the post-truth world or the so-called utopia both truth and falsehood are democratized.

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