Media, Technology and Education in a Post-Truth Society

From Fake News, Datafication and Mass Surveillance to the Death of Trust

Edited by Alex Grech

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EDITED BY

ALEX GRECH

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Liz and Jacob, who keep me sane in troubled times. Soon, we will find our way back to some hilltop town with a trattoria and a well-thumbed menu with no translation.

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The good people at Emerald.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Media, Technology and Education in a Post-Truth Society

Introduction

Alex Grech

Abstract

This collection of essays has its roots in a collective desire to understand the workings of the post-truth society, and how education, media and technology may contribute to mitigating its worst excesses. This chapter introduces the origins of the book project.

Keywords: Media; education; technology; post-truth; polymath; sociology; social networks

> *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.

> *society*. Noun. A large group of people in a defined territory, who live together in an organised way, and share a common culture.

> "No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations."
> Friedrich Nietzsche (1967). The Will to Power. Section 481.

> "I think we are living through a frightening and deeply uncertain time, and though there are dementing and cynical voices out there, which are being emboldened and amplified by social media – that loony engine of outrage – they do not represent the voices of the many, or the good."
> Nick Cave (2020). The Red Hand Files. Issue #122 October 2020.

Origins

The genesis of this book is on record, in a whimsical video in June 2019[1] and the filmed proceedings of a two-day international conference on the island of Malta in October 2019,[2] convened with media scholars, blockchain experts, film-makers, philosophers, anthropologists, politicians, public prosecutors, data lawyers, bankers, activists, journalists, rock star technology editors and teenage students. The conference was activist by design. Assemble a bunch of brilliant thinkers and doers, get them to spar around the esoteric subject of the post-truth society in a historic building in Valletta and develop a collective manifesto to combat post-truths. By the end of the two days, the plan was to set up an interdisciplinary global network and reconvene in a different geographical context early in 2020 and explore pilot projects for collaboration.

The pandemic shelved many big ideas and plans. When the world closes down, the premise is that the failings of the post-truth society are swept away in the collective, urgent need to secure factual information, survive, adjust to a new age of social distancing and prepare for probable, impending economic collapse. Instead, with the pandemic in its first or second wave,[3] this collection surfaces with contributions from some of the original cohort in far-flung places, and others who reached out after the conference. Perhaps a book is an unexpected but necessary deviation from the intended pathway but nonetheless a more permanent and resilient outcome in the age of the often temporary, fleeting and forgotten outputs in digital format.

From the moment that 'post-truth' became Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year of 2016,[4] the term has been derided by academia. In reviewing a book on the subject, Hardoš (2019, p. 311) writes about a 'vague, but very popular concept in our discourse... a distinct phenomenon that may be a moral panic, a conceptual muddle of lies, propaganda, and bullshit (in the Frankfurtian sense), or merely a discursive shortcut for numerous disquieting social, political, and technological developments'. In opposition to this view, the point of departure for this collection is an interest in deconstruction, disconnects and possible solutions to the 'manifestations' of an ongoing, palpable information crisis through an interdisciplinary lens.

By manifestations, I mean the association of the post-truth society with a raft of social ills: the decline and fall of reason; the disruption of the public square; the spread of false and/or misleading information and fake news; culture wars; the rise of subjectivity; co-opting of language; filter bubbles, silos and tribes; attention economy deficits; trolls; echo chambers, polarisation and hyper-partisanship; conversion of popularity into legitimacy; manipulation by 'populist' leaders and nationalist governments and contempt for outsiders and fringe actors; algorithmic control; big data and personal data capture; targeted messaging and native advertising.

These terms have become part of the vernacular, with the blame for their proliferation frequently attributed to the affordances of social media platforms. Naim (2019) writes of the paradox of trust, where the crisis of confidence in government, politicians, journalists, scientists and experts ('let alone bankers business executives or the Vatican') is countered by 'trust in anonymous messages on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp'. This view echoes a much-critiqued treatise in 2014 by Tom Nichols in *The Federalist* followed by a book in 2017 in which he associated the death of expertise with

> a Google-fuelled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any
> division between professionals and laymen, students and teachers,
> knowers and wonderers – in other words, between those of any
> achievement in an area and those with none at all.

That is quite a departure from the early literature on social media, when the technology was celebrated for its potential for innovation and positive change within the social world, a tool for the democratisation of information and political mobilisation through the wealth of networks (Benkler, 2006); the emergence of horizontally engaged smart mobs (Rheingold, 2002); cultural production (Jenkins, 2006); produsage (Bruns, 2007); a revitalised public sphere (Shirky, 2011) – or at the very least, a private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Castells (2009), a primary promotor of the network society, believed that mass self-communication would empower connected citizens to a personalised soapbox without the permission of information gatekeepers such as publishing houses and powerful intermediaries.

This optimism slowly dissolved into weariness and suspicion of online discourse and business practices on social media platforms. Social media platforms are increasingly associated with defective online mobilisation (Tufekci, 2017), the applications of big data science (O'Neil, 2017; Schneier, 2015), surveillance capitalism (Fuchs, 2017; Zuboff, 2015), black-boxed algorithms (Pasquale, 2015) and a veritable Pandora's box of social ills and the erosion of truth. Writing about the death of truth, Kakutani (2018, p. 88) observes: 'The Internet doesn't just reflect reality anymore; it shapes it'. This has much to do with the permeability of social media and the willingness of platform owners to harvest user data to be made available for targeted marketing purposes to those who can pay, irrespective of who their identity or motives.

Those in power, whom we trust within democratic systems of political representation, or those whom we do not know – from Russian trolls to the Cambridge Analytica of this world – have long invested in new media to disseminate misinformation and undertake targeted mass surveillance of citizens, without risk of impunity. We edge towards a world where reality has become a matter of personal opinion – as opposed to a compendium of informed knowledge – even if we hesitate to call this a compendium of 'facts'. We are losing a sense of shared reality and the ability to communicate across social, partisan and sectarian lines. Baudrillard (2010) might associate this as a 'moment' of stupidity – since he claims stupidity is one of the attributes of power, the accursed share of the social (including stupidity) which would take us back to the 'power figures' of primitive societies, and explain why the most limited, unimaginative individuals stay in power the longest' of primitive societies.

The blame game also extends to old media – to its permeability to lies, to its need to remain relevant to a digital audience and compete with social media, sell advertising and still appear to be 'politically correct'. For instance, LBC gave Nigel Farage access to prime-time radio slots under the guise of providing a platform for alternative voices, irrespective of whether these were the voices of lies and racism. On 7th June 2020, James Bennet, a senior editor at *The New York Times*, was forced to resign amid a furious backlash over the newspaper's publication of a

controversial and unfiltered comment piece penned by a Republican senator, Tom Cotton, a junior senator for Arkansas and a fierce ally of Donald Trump.[5]

In practice, the new media ecosystem has long incorporated old media in its hub, with commentary and repurposing of 'news' not restricted to the online media platform of the news media collateral, but now extending to the personal broadcast systems available on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, blogs and podcasts – to name a few. In the open bazaar of ideas, opinions and chaos, far from the wisdom of the crowd, big data and the algorithms provide an outlet for the post-truth society's worst excesses. For Couldry and Hepp (2017), the social world is a communicative construction, manifested by 'mutual transformations of the media and the social world' (p. 3) where communicative actions, practices, forms and patterns of action contribute to the construction of the social. Media and communication shape the social, and that digital media, digital communication and digital data introduce a new kind of interdependence, where the interdependence comes to depend on the media; media, in fact, becomes constitutive of the social. The dominance of few social media companies as unelected, unaccountable referees of the public sphere makes the problem of regulating attention in an age of information glut challenging, at best (Tufekci, 2020).

In response to this chaotic environment, this collection is based on the following foundation premises:

- *The post-truth problem is real.* It is not an imaginary issue, but a palpable ongoing crisis that is undermining the foundations of society and is getting worse. Yuval Harari (2019) devotes one of his *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* to the subject; the common good, trust, responsibility, ethics and civic engagement are under attack from the actions of unknown third parties. It may not be possible to have consensus on the attributes of 'truth'; but truth *does* matter. The political and socio-cultural landscape we inhabit today is permeable to truth decay, through a regime of misinformation pumped out in industrial volume by trolls and from the mouth and Twitter feeds of populist leaders (Kakutani, 2018). The term 'truth' remains a loaded and contentious term, but the post-truth lexicon of 'fake news', 'fake science' and 'alternative facts' is part of the vernacular.
- *The post-truth problem is nuanced and needs a critical approach.* As an example of contradictions, my own work as a strategist and change agent has regularly traversed technology, new media platforms, education and public policy. The concern is that actors in these specific areas have been contributing to the worst excess of the post-truth society, as much as others in the same areas seemingly operating as forces to provided solutions for the common good. Education systems based on acquiring and transferring knowledge suddenly appear remarkably disconnected from false narratives (Fisher Thornton, 2010), the operations of the networked public sphere and those who seek profit from user-generated content.
- *Unbiased and current knowledge is needed to inform workable solutions that resist the excesses of the post-truth society.* The most powerful antidote to the post-truth society is to have engaged and well-informed citizens who resist and counter the agendas of those who thrive from the erosion of trust. There is a

need for an informed response from those whose actions may provide future leadership and make a difference.

Structure of This Book

The authors in this volume offer very different perspectives on the post-truth society and to the possible solutions for its manifestations. When they were invited to contribute to the book, the editorial signposting was limited to the title of the collection and links to the video footage of the original conference. The end product reflects the interdisciplinary backgrounds of the authors and frequently divergent, even conflicting world views.

The collection is grouped in three interconnected sections, around the topics of education, media and emerging technologies. Some contributions sit more comfortably in the academic tradition than others: in the post-truth world where everything gets hybridised, this is a sign of the times. What the contributions have in common are that they are the product of people with inquisitive minds and an activist bent, questioning the adequacy of the tools of their trade against the ongoing wave of misinformation. There is an undercurrent of a need for social justice and human dignity in many of the essays. There are also tensions between those who believe that the way to solve trust issues is to build solutions on decentralised technologies and those who prescribe an investment in digital literacies and new models for education.[6] Even among those who see decentralisation as an opportunity to kick-start web 3.0 and reboot the aspirations of disillusioned generation, there is no consensus that the blockchain can fix the age of untruths and disinformation in a hurry.

The contributions do not need to be read in sequence. The intention is to hopefully encourage readers to 'join the dots' between subject areas and ideas or proposed solutions to a common problem.

Beyond This Book

The search for facts-based truths has taken a surreal turn in the age of the pandemic. Every claim for the logic of wearing a mask and social distancing is countered by arguments from anti-vaxxers and those concerned about mental health, personal freedoms, herd immunity and the fragile economy. There are fears that nation states will seize the opportunity to invest in 'under the skin surveillance technologies' (Harari, 2020) and more populist policies while citizens are forced into lockdown. As countries begin their COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, geopolitical considerations and conspiratorial thinking are intermingled in controversies regarding the efficacy of particular vaccines.[7] A surge in anti-Asian violence has accompanied the spread of the pandemic.[8] Dr Anthony Fauci, the US Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), believes that we are going through a time that is 'disturbingly anti-science in certain segments of our society'.[9]

Work on this book started in the midst of the Trump presidency. As I write, we are a few months into the term of his successor, a man widely heralded as the

anti-Trump. Yet the intervening period has confirmed that any hope of a return to normality, however conceived, is fanciful. Trump and his associates spent the majority of his final weeks in office attempting to delegitimise the electoral results and riling up his supporters with the mantra 'stop the steal'. On January 6th, 2021, thousands stormed the U.S. Capitol building, an insurgence reminiscent of the armed takeover of democratic institutions (Runciman, 2018). For a while, the Q-Shaman and other followers of social media-fuelled conspiracy theories played out their roles on the Senate floor. Facebook, Twitter and a raft of other social media companies subsequently removed Trump from their platforms,[10] sparking concerns of censorship and the power concentrated in the hands of a handful of tech billionaires.[11] Congressional Democrats continue to lobby the White House about the need to reform Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act of 1996, which protects tech companies from liability over content posted by users on their platforms while also enabling the same firms to continue to shape political discourse. The Department of Justice in the US is pursuing its long-awaited antitrust lawsuit against Google.

Will Big Tech eventually be held accountable for harmful or untruthful misinformation that spreads on their platforms? Can new media models coded for the public good, finally liberated from native advertising, ever be feasible? The doubts that linger about the media ecosystem that propelled Trump to office and sustained him whilst there look set only to grow, and not only in the United States. *The Epoch Times*, the Falun Gong-backed newspaper, uses Facebook pages to create right-wing misinformation and fuel an anti-China agenda (Roose, 2020). Feel-good videos and viral clickbait sell subscriptions and drive traffic back to its partisan news coverage - a global-scale misinformation machine that repeatedly pushes fringe narratives into the mainstream. US-style commercial broadcast media looks set to expand into the UK market with the creation of GB News, a channel that its chairman Andrew Neil claims will address a perceived gap in the market for "the vast number of British people who feel underserved and unheard by their media".[12] It is to feature segments with names such as "woke watch". Schools in many countries remain open, while universities worldwide hang on to the hegemony of their business models by forcing young people move around countries to student accommodation, only for them to be incarcerated and taught online. False narratives remain the order of the day (Fisher Thornton, 2020).

And yet, there is push back. In Europe, data governance reforms and regulation continue to be mooted regularly to address the social ills generated by the technology industry and facilitate the development of alternative solutions in member states. *The Great Hack* and *The Social Dilemma* are streaming on Netflix. The *DeepTrust Alliance*, a multi-industry organisation using a network approach to create standards to combat digital fakes (Harrison, 2020), believes it is still possible to instil trust across the entire internet through robust partnerships between social media giants and large and small innovators capable of fixing the problem.[13] Morozov's *The Syllabus*[14] combines algorithmic filtering, categorisation and systematic human curation across six languages to combat falsehoods and salvage the most thoughtful intellectual output from the ever-mounting great pile of information. Last-ditch effort to change the narrative in

the run up to elections is also countered by the return of the media gatekeepers after a considerable absence, although news continues to rely on storytelling, emotions and feelings.[15]

The world of untruths, fake news and erosion of trust in media, technology, education and governance continues to morph, on the waves of the pandemic, populism and social distancing. The need to resist and question and plan for a better future remains, despite the fear of what tomorrow brings.

Notes

1. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUDjbOflA50&t=44s&ab_channel=Comm onwealthCentreforConnectedLearning
2. See https://connectedlearning.edu.mt/videos-post-truth-conference/
3. There is little consensus on this issue; see https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/ conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/first-and-second-waves-of-coronavirus
4. See https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/
5. Titled 'Send in the Troops', it called for the president to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and use US military forces against citizens to quell unrest sparked by the death of George Floyd. In the days following its publication on 3 June, numerous current and former *Times* journalists criticised the decision to run it and the newspaper added a note to the essay on 5 June conceding it 'fell short of our standards and should not have been published'.
6. As a background to the 'Think vs Build' approach to solving the post-truth problem, watch the panel discussion on technology, conflicts and self-sovereignty at https://connectedlearning.edu.mt/aiovg_videos/panel-2-technology-conflicts-self-sovereignty-qa/
7. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/19/eu-astrazeneca-vaccine-stance-spain-europe-covid
8. https://www.today.com/news/anti-asian-violence-history-anti-asian-racism-us-t210645
9. https://www.ecowatch.com/trump-fauci-coronavirus-science-health-2648404107.html? rebelltitem=4#rebelltitem4
10. https://www.axios.com/platforms-social-media-ban-restrict-trump-d9e44f3c-8366-4ba9-a8a1-7f3114f920f1.html
11. https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/bernie-sanders-thinks-donald-trump-s-removal-from-twitter-was-a-mistake/ar-BB1eSZ9i
12. https://www.itv.com/news/2020-09-25/andrew-neil-announces-24-hour-gb-news-channel-to-rival-bbc-and-sky
13. https://www.deeptrustalliance.org/blog/e88cxlgv3b8wmtgk587ui3dteu9vlv
14. https://www.the-syllabus.com/
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