

## COMMUNICATION

# 'Post-truth' politics: A threat to American democracy?

Allison Fettes<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada**ABSTRACT**

Since the 2016 United States presidential election, the spread of misinformation, 'fake news', and 'alternative facts' dominating the public narrative seems to have become so prolific that many scholars, news agencies, and world leaders claim that we are living in a 'post-truth' political world, where facts and evidence have become unimportant compared to an individual's feeling on any particular subject. However, in this article I suggest that modern democracies like the United States are constantly being shaped and challenged by technological advances, shifting ideologies, and global events. By analysing these factors one can better understand how Western society, particularly in the United States, has arrived at this post-truth era, what influence this is having on the democratic process, as well as the relationship between the public and social media in order for our democratic system to evolve.

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Address correspondence to: <https://www.cjur.ca/>**'Post truth' politics: the new threat to democracy**

On Tuesday, 8 November 2016, the people of the United States elected Donald Trump as their 45th President amidst accusations by both the Republican and Democratic parties of frequent and outright lies communicated to the public through campaign speeches, social media, and news agencies (Hahl et al., 2018). Four years later, the lack of trust in political messaging has increased across the globe to the point where it seems misinformation, 'fake news', and 'alternative facts' dominating the public narrative have now become the norm (OII, 2019; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Many scholars, news agencies, and world leaders claim that we are living in a 'post-truth' political world (Alcorn, 2014; Fish, 2016; Macron, 2018; Parmer, 2012; Peters, 2018; Suiter, 2016).

**What is 'post-truth' politics?**

Post-truth politics can be defined in several ways. Suiter (2016) describes post-truth politics to be one "where appeals to emotion are dominant and factual rebuttals or fact checks are ignored on the basis that they are mere assertions" (p. 25). Whereas Fish (2016) defines it from the politician's point of view as "a form of politics where there is a willingness to issue warnings regardless of whether there is any real sense of the events being likely to come about, or make promises that there is no real commitment to keeping, or make claims that there is no real reason to believe are true, all for the purpose of gaining an electoral advantage" (p. 211). In like manner, Lockie (2017) adds that:

It is associated with an increasing disregard for factual evidence in political discourse. What matters is not whether the claims of politicians can be proven true. What matters is whether those listening to those claims would like them to be true – truth being judged not by evidence but by consistency with listeners' existing beliefs and values. (p. 1)

The main consensus is that facts and evidence have become unimportant compared to an individual's feelings and beliefs on

a political issue.

Several scholars (Fish, 2016; Parmer, 2012; Suiter, 2016) suggest that post-truth politics are detrimental to democratic practices. However, Farkas & Schou (2020) argue that the term 'post-truth' implies there was previously a "truth era" of politics and democracy, and that democracy has never been solely about an all-encompassing universal Truth, "there have historically been different truths (small t) that have been the product of social and political struggles" (p. 9) and, over time, given shape to our modern liberal democratic system. By building on the ideas of Farkas & Schou, I dispute the notion that 'fake news' and post-truth politics are destroying democracy, and instead argue that modern democracies like the United States are constantly being shaped and challenged by technological advances, shifting ideologies, and global events. To support this, I first discuss the effects a crisis of democracy (Alboim, 2011; Davis, 2010; Taras, 2012) can have on voters. Secondly, I compare two contradicting ideas discussed by Fish (2016) and Farkas & Schou (2020) about the state of democracy in the Western world. I then examine the impact of political marketing (Giasson et al., 2012) and identity politics (Heyes, 2002) during election cycles, and finally I look at the semiotic aspect of political communication through the influences of symbols, indexes, and icons (Maddalena, 2016) and comment on how social media is being used to manipulate voting populations. We need to better understand how Western society, particularly in the United States, has arrived at this post-truth era, what influence this is having on the democratic process, as well as the relationship between the public and social media in order for our democratic system to evolve.

**Democracy in crisis?**

If Western populations are more educated and have more immediate access to information via the internet than ever before, how is it that post-truth politics have become so prevalent? Are low voter turnouts a cause? Is North America, and other countries in the Western world, in the midst of a crisis of democracy? Alboim

(2011) argues that most people are disconnected from political affairs except at election time, so they may not feel that political affairs have any relevance to them. Davis (2010) suggests that many people may believe that neither candidate represents their needs, and many voters may have the impression that their votes won't matter unless they live in key political constituencies (Suiter, 2016). In addition, "political 'spin', 'lies', and media management" (Davis, 2010, p.152) have had a disenchanting effect on the voting public, which could cause many to make a conscious decision not to vote. Davis also proposes that United States politics is so embedded in international political, financial, and industrial systems that national sovereignty is eroding; the public may feel that their vote will have little impact on global issues. For example, by advocating stricter border controls, anti-globalization, and American nationalism, Trump's election victory may have been a public response to a disenchantment with globalization and a hope for personal economic betterment (Suiter, 2016).

### The conflict of truth, consent and democracy

Since at least the 19th century, politicians in the United States have been accused of stretching the truth for their own political gain (Dallek, 2010). However, if politicians themselves are idolized while they are speaking lies, and if the media repeats these lies, will an average citizen be able to make a free and consensual choice on the voting ballot? According to Fish (2016), they cannot. A democratic vote – as outlined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, para. 2 (1776) – indicates that a majority of citizens have given their consent to be governed by an elected leader. Consent is critical to legitimate democratic governments as "the powers of a government are justly exercised because they derive from the free exercise of their citizens' autonomy" (Fish, 2016, p.212). However, citizens cannot exercise their right to choose if they are provided with false or misleading information (Fish, 2016). Traditional news media play a role in this issue as they try to retain their audience by covering political stories involving conflict and scandal rather than platforms and policy, and they may not be providing the electorate with enough suitable information to make an informed political decision (Taras, 2012; Small et al., 2014). This is the danger of post-truth politics and the core aspect of 'illusory democracy,' "in which what appear to be consensual free choices – the marking of particular options on ballot papers, for example - do not count as free choices after all" (Fish, 2016, p.212). Fish argues that, for these reasons, without legal and ethical frameworks in place to make sure the core requirements of consent are met, Western democratic systems are moving more and more towards being illusory democracies.

Farkas & Schou (2020), on the other hand, argue that the debate over what truth and lies are "is an entirely one-sided framing of the problem" (p. 10). They contend that democracy has never been about truth and has never been stable, yet much of the discourse on the idea of a 'post-truth' era "equates the idea of democracy with the ideas of reason, rationality, and truth in an a priori fashion" (p. 5). For as long as people have voted, minority groups have struggled even in democratic systems to gain recognition and legitimacy of their needs and issues regardless of whether facts and truth have been presented by political leaders (Farkas & Schou, 2020). This assumption that democracy is synonymous with truth disregards the fact that the word 'democracy,' originating from the Greek *dēmokratía*, "means a form of government in which,

in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule" (p. 5). To Farkas & Schou (2020), democracy is a product of the will of the people through popular sovereignty, rather than what is and isn't the truth.

### Political marketing and identity politics

The use of political marketing in campaigning is when "a political organization uses business techniques to inform and shape its strategic behaviours that are designed to satisfy citizens' needs and wants" (Giasson et al., 2012, p.4) and this can have a significant impact on who people vote for in an election. Theoretically, political marketing can be thought of as a way for political actors to help citizens make informed voting choices. However, in recent years (and especially during the 2016 U.S. election) political marketing has swayed voter opinion without necessarily providing accurate, factual information (Small, 2012). Donald Trump used market-oriented techniques of political marketing in his campaign by addressing consumer needs, then designing provocative messages around them (Giasson et al., 2012). In this way, he recognized voter anger, then tapped into it to present himself as the candidate for 'the people' (Stein, 2016), positioning himself as being diametrically opposite to his competitor, Hillary Clinton (Dufresne & Marland, 2012). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Vote Leave campaign of the Brexit referendum used social media messaging to disseminate emotionally charged and frequently non-factual information to the British public, which influenced many to vote based on their emotions rather than fact (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). The Trump and Vote Leave campaigns focussed strongly on using attack discourse to denigrate all opposing candidates and groups rather than outlining a detailed political platform, appealing mainly to emotions over rationality (Small, 2012; Keaveney, 2016; Ramiro Troitino et al., 2018).

'Identity politics,' the political activity of a demographic that has been neglected or suppressed in a specific regional area (Heyes, 2002), is a major factor in determining the actions of certain demographics during an election. As Suiter (2016) argues, the accelerated pace of globalization and the impact of deregulation in the form of multinational corporate tax arrangements and government bailouts of deregulated banks has had a major impact on certain overlooked demographics of Western society, specifically the rural White working class and under-educated who, as a result of rapid globalization, have seen (1) frequent cuts to their government pensions; (2) decreased wages relative to the cost of living; and (3) an influx of so-called "job-stealing" immigrants in their countries. In the United States, this, along with a loss of over 3.2 million jobs between 2001 and 2013 due to the growing trade deficit between the U.S. and China, has led to an all-encompassing fear of losing control of one's country (Kimball & Scott, 2014).

These notions have given rise to feelings of economic unfairness, fear, and class inequality that reached a breaking point in 2016 (Suiter, 2016). What was evident was that Trump and Vote Leave's tactics harnessed the disgruntled energy from this mainly White working-class demographic in a strong emotional manner and shaped it into a group identity (Suiter, 2016). In this way, instead of feeling overlooked and dissociated from political action, this group could band together behind leaders who appeared to

champion their needs for social and economic reform (Smith, 2014). It could be said that these politicians tapped into the populist ideas of social and economic justice so that their speeches would “resonate with sentiments and views already held in some form by a significant part of the population” (Zaller, 1992 in Spruyt et al., 2016, p. 335).

#### Communicating through symbols, indexes & icons

The method through which political messaging is delivered can heavily influence voting populations. Maddalena (2016) describes political communication as a series of “symbols, indexes, and icons” (p. 246). Before television became a popular medium, complex political discourse was trimmed down to a symbolic political slogan. For example, a slogan from post-war Italy – “In the electoral booth God sees you and Stalin does not” – communicates elements of Christianity, pro-U.S. democracy, anti-surveillance, and anti-communism (Maddalena, 2016, p. 246). The rising popularity of television meant that the main feature of political communication then shifted from symbolic discourse to a visible image of the politician, known as index signs (Maddalena, 2016). As a way of communicating, index signs are simply a visual (sensory) connection between the politician and the viewer (Atkin, 2006). It gives the viewer the ability to base voting preferences on the visual image of the candidate. The television acts as a one-directional medium where the viewer receives an image of a politician on their television set (the sensory feature), which can influence their voting choice (Maddalena, 2016).

Today, the rise of participatory mass media has shifted the focus of political communication into the realm of icons, which hold a physical resemblance to what they represent, but whose meaning can have many interpretations depending on who the receiver is (Maddalena, 2016). For example, a male politician can share images of themselves playing sport with their children through social media. A family-oriented man could then feel that the politician respects the same interests and family values as they do and may be more likely to vote for them. This was particularly evident during Barack Obama’s 2008 U.S. presidential candidature and subsequent terms of office where his online and social media presence set him apart from his competitors to certain voting demographics (Hannan, 2018). He used social media to share his taste in everything from television to popular music, and his many public celebrity friendships gained him credibility with young voters: “Voting for Obama was like voting for class president, a candidate whose sheer coolness and hipness certified his political ethos. Indeed, Obama’s coolness was his credibility. It mattered more than the actual substance of his political platform” (Hannan, 2018, p. 218). In a like manner, Donald Trump has become a media icon with his “make America great again” slogan to appeal to many in the working-class sectors of America who have been hardest-hit by globalization and the huge flight of manufacturing jobs to China (Kimball & Scott, 2014; Suiter, 2016).

This is not to say that one type of sign - symbolic, indexical, or iconic - is the only type for a particular time period, but one type will dominate depending on the social, economic, and technological atmosphere of a given time and place (Maddalena, 2016). Our current reliance on icons and iconic politics, enhanced by instantaneous news coverage and social media, can be dangerous because the messages conveyed through these icons

can be vague and therefore open to personal interpretation that may not truthfully reflect the situation (Maddalena, 2016).

#### Manipulation through social media

Another worrying development that has arisen from iconic politics is the rise of organized social media manipulation, which “has more than doubled since 2017, with 70 countries using computational propaganda to manipulate public opinion” (OII, 2019, para. 3). When voters base their voting decisions on their emotional connection to a specific political candidate rather than on an informed evaluation of political policies and platforms, they are opening themselves up to potential manipulation by third parties with their own motives (OII, 2019).

The almost ubiquitous trend of social media has played a huge role in the spread of misinformation. In a 2019 survey of 6,127 U.S. adults conducted by the Pew Research Center, around 60% of participants who received their news through social media admitted they had shared fake news at least once (Pew Research Center, 2019). These misleading articles are normally either spread by fake social media profiles run by artificial intelligence (AI) bots or are posted as comments on real social media users’ profiles (Panke, 2019). They amplify information in order to sway public opinion on certain issues (Shao et al., 2018). One of the most famous culprits is the Russian Internet Research Agency, who used their digital propaganda to influence not only U.K. and U.S. politics, but also major political movements in other parts of Europe (Tsipursky et al., 2018). In 2016, the media played an instrumental role in the U.S. election by frequently repeating untruthful statements as headlines rather than challenging them (Azari, 2016). However, in recent years, social media powerhouses like Twitter and Facebook, along with traditional news agencies like the Washington Post, are developing algorithms and policies in place to fact-check, identify, and remove false or misleading information from their platforms (Kessler, 2017; Shu & Shieber, 2020). Corporate actions like these are creating the basis for new models of accountability that could help restore faith in the democratic system.

#### Conclusion: a question of responsibility

If the media and political actors do not perform due diligence in providing truthful statements about policy to the electorate of a country, can they make informed voting decisions? Alboim (2011) believes that each side - the media, political actors, and citizens - has a democratic responsibility to balance one another: the politician to speak the truth, the citizen to be well-informed, and the media to proportionately balance wild statements with factual evidence. This is especially relevant in times of crisis when people are directly affected, as we’ve seen in the recent CoVID-19 pandemic. Companies like Twitter, Google, and Facebook, pressured by “academics, activists, lawmakers, employees, [and] journalists” (Newton, 2020, para 6) have put new policies in place to decrease the amount of misinformation being spread through their platforms. For a democratic system to evolve, new models of accountability and media intervention will be required. It is up to the people, whom democracy serves, to demand these changes.

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