

## Post-Truth Society and the Social Media in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### **Abstract**

*Post-truth theory or media concept, which silently crept into the global media space in the recent past, is fast gaining prominence and elevating itself to the forefront of media discourse. Many scholars and writers have even concluded that the society has slipped into post-truth condition because of the invasion of the media space by fake news and misinformation. It is believed that as the influence of post-truth becomes widespread across the media spectrum, those on its path, may be swept along without raising the necessary flags that negate the assumed power and lifeline of the rising new media concept. Upon this therefore, this work used qualitative research method to deploy media theories from books and journals to deconstruct the invincibility of post-truth. This is particularly so as there are classical theories such as Uses and Gratification, Individual Differences and Social Categories typologies, which prove that individuals do not consume media products the same way and are never affected the same way by any single media output as they are able to choose and pay attention to media offerings that meet their needs and carefully reject those that do not meet their desires. The research therefore, concludes that post-truth does not possess the pervasive power to disorient or obstruct media users from recognising and using objective facts or truth in making critical decisions about their lives. Individuals are not lumped together in making critical media decisions whenever and wherever the need arises no matter the strength and frequency of fake news that they encounter. It is therefore, safe to state that post-truth is incapable of influencing media users to the extent that they jettison truth and objective facts and embrace 'alternative facts or lies in forming public opinion. For this reason, the research makes the point that the frenzy about post-truth society arising from the menace posed by fake news, is a misplaced apprehension given the fact that each media consumer possesses a 'thinking cap' that enables them to decipher what is truthful and useful and what is false and undesirable.*

**Key words:** Post-truth, misinformation, fake news, manipulate, social media

### **Introduction**

One of the undesirable consequences of the wide deployment of the internet in human activities is the rapid invasion of the global media space by fake news, a negative tendency that seems to belittle the positive gains of free flow of information and communication in modern society. The world appears somewhat hapless with the continuous spread of fake news in all facets of human endeavours, leading to the emergence of the Post-truth theory, which is predicated on the notion that the prevalence of fake news, disinformation and manipulation of information using the social

media has resulted in the relegation of truth and facts to the background while lies or ‘alternative facts’ have taken the front seat. In other words, the theory posits that facts do not really matter anymore in the contemporary society as long as people get things done based on their feelings, emotions and beliefs.

The post-truth attempts to fittingly illustrate the extent to which consumers, users and audience of fake news have been charmed by its overriding influence to ignore the strength of facts and reality to accept with enthusiasm and conviction falsehood, lies and deceit as long as it satisfies their personal goals, interests and ambitions. To drive home how powerful post-truth condition has become, two global examples of the success of post-truth condition have been cited in the case of Brexit and the United States presidential election both in 2016. Proponents of post-truth theory such as McIntyre (2018) and Sumpter (2018) argue that facts were clearly ignored by voters in the two countries as they relied more on fake news to vote for the success of Brexit and President Donald Trump thereby exhibiting their reliance on personal beliefs and emotions rather than the obvious facts. During the campaign, “Brexiters” were sending out fake advertisements claiming without any evidence that Britain was sending €350 million weekly to the European Union while politicians in Hungary, Turkey and Russia were deploying fake news campaign against their citizens without attempt to resist the falsehood. Post-truth has since then become a new face of media research, discussion and focus of academic searchlight.

### **The Oxygen of Post-truth**

Post-truth theory found both its currency and validity in 2016 when it was named as the “Word of the Year” by Oxford Dictionary. The dictionary defines post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. Sumpter (2018) has written a book with the ambitious title “*Outnumbered*” apparently to emphasise the fact that the society has been overwhelmed by social media influence and fake news and consequently thrown into a post-truth era. Thus, as far as the protagonists of post-truth are concerned, truth and objective facts are no longer relevant to political leaders, citizens and the society at large as long as they can deploy the media of their choice to create and share fake news, lies and propaganda; and get things done. The assumption here is that with fake news branded as real and with the inability of consumers of such information

to decipher it as false, they willingly give their support, goodwill and cooperation to government, issues and actions as long as such information tallies with their beliefs, feelings and equally satisfy their yearnings and aspirations. Thus, with fake news presented as the oxygen of life in modern society, many who support the post-truth typology underscore the point that truth and objective facts play no serious role in contemporary society. The protagonists of post-truth society are certain that the era when the mainstream media dominated the media space with truthful, accurate and factual information to influence public opinion is long gone with social media and big technology companies now dictating the pace in churning out information that may be nothing more than fake news, disinformation and misinformation just for pecuniary gains.

This theory has found strength apparently due to the way in which many social media users or consumers continuously promote, share and like information no matter its falsity or dubiousness and are audacious in persuading others who may not ordinarily want to assimilate same to accept as the truth. The propensity to share and spread fake news in a bid to strengthen the fabric of post-truth has been imbibed by many citizens across the world. Interestingly, their disposition to shading the truth depends largely on their political, economic, religious and social leanings. Until he was eventually barred from using Twitter, President Donald Trump was actively and boldly creating and sharing fake news and conspiracy theories claiming that he was rigged out of the 2020 election he had won, notwithstanding the gamut of overwhelming evidence that Joe Biden won with a huge margin of both majority and Electoral College votes. Trump supporters apparently acting on the fake news spread by him, threw all caution to the wind and embarked on the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, which claimed some lives and recorded many serious injuries.

### **Post-truth's controversy and confusion**

Consequently, since its validation as a new theory in the media space, post-truth has triggered not only confusion but also threatens trust and ability to decipher truth from lies and who to trust (Chinn et al., 2020, p. 51). Jandrić (2018) submits that post-truth mixes data, information, knowledge, wisdom, but also, facts and emotions, reason and instinct, while Barzilai and Chinn, (2020) posit that post-truth is a social condition that threatens people's abilities to distinguish true or more accurate statements about the world, eroding personal and collective

decision-making in health, environmental, political, social, or economic issues. Thus, with a preponderance to tinker with people's confidence in key socio-economic issues, post-truth does not only pose a serious threat to social media audience and the media landscape, but also has the potential to distract social media consumers from constructive and critical reasoning on contemporary societal issues.

Fuller (2020) has however made the point clear that those behind the theory do not dispute the existence of facts let alone 'objective facts' but merely want to dispel the mystery in which the creation and maintenance of facts is shrouded. This condition, according to Feinstein and Waddington, (2020), as cited by Valladares, (2021) tends to grow due to the heavy reliance of society on digital facilities which permit the diffusion of huge amount of information via the social media and the interest of political elements in manipulating information for partisan gains as well as companies seeking to jerk profits.

Regardless of the conditions, which post-truth is said to have fulfilled and manifested in order to be labeled as a theory of modernity, (Watts, 2000 and Calcutt, 2016 as cited by Peters, Rider, Hyvonen and Besley, 2018) have described post-truth as nothing but a condition of despair caused by the erroneous belief that it is impossible to know the truth and by extension what is right and wrong. In this regard, the foundation of post-truth is therefore shaky and unsure and can therefore, not be taken seriously as condition that drives social media operations in modern society. The fact that some political and social leaders in some instances have deployed digital deception to manipulate the psyche of their people in a bid to attain certain goals, cannot and should not be dressed up and presented as a media theory that weaponries people and institutions to abandon truth and objective facts and embrace falsehood.

The reason is that even a cursory examination of the post-truth theory gives the erroneous impression that the world has already slipped from the era of truth and objective facts to an age where falsehood, lies or alternative facts dominate and everyone is a captive or victim of misinformation, disinformation and fake news. But the reality is that; the foundation of truth and objective facts remains as solid as ever just as there are media consumers who relish in emotions and personal beliefs. It is therefore, premature to latch on the post-truth theory as if it is an all-

conquering, all-powerful and invasive instrument that nobody can resist. It is equally unhelpful to ascribe the power of invincibility to post-truth as if the intervening elements in the source-receiver process, which condition both the mainstream and social media have all been broken down irretrievably.

Indeed, any attempt to infer that post-truth theory is so powerful and has impacted the over four billion users of the internet and social media users across the globe (Singer and Brooking 2019) in the same fashion and propensity without any empirical data to back same, amounts to a mere conceptual variable or wishful thinking. Conferring post-truth theory with the emblem of invincibility would amount to reinventing the outdated and demystified Hypodermic Needle or Magic Bullet theory (McQuail, 2005), which was initially thought to be so powerful that it could just render its recipients powerless and compel them to do whatever the propagandist in control of the media message wanted.

### **Post-truth: A return to the past**

In spite of this position and the passage of time, it now appears as if the acceptance and glorification of post-truth theory has obliterated both the well-known and time-honoured classical audience-filtering theories of Individual differences, social categories (Defleur and Ballrockeach, 1975), Uses and Gratification theories which place limitations on mass media effect such as fake news, disinformation and misinformation and by extension the post-truth condition.

It is important to note that no matter how social media spread lies, misinformation and disinformation; truth cannot be eliminated in the scheme of things. The world needs truth and objective facts to run its course successfully. And, as pointed out by (Pomerantsev 2019, p, 127), facts are useful even if they are unpleasant. In the same vein, Pomerantsev argues further that:

You need facts especially if you are constructing something in the real world. There are no post-truth moments if you are building a bridge, for example. Facts are necessary to show what you are building, how it will work, and/or why it will not collapse. In politics, facts are necessary to show how one could be pursuing some rational idea of progress: here are our aims, here is how we prove

we are achieving them; this is how they improve your lives and so on. Indeed, the need for facts is predicated on the notion of an evidence-based future.

Perhaps, to be taken seriously as a dynamic and applicable theory, it is imperative for the promoters of post-truth to establish with empirical data the proportion of social media users who have been passively captured by the post-truth influence and where they are located and the proportion of those yet to be plunged into the murky waters of the phenomenon. Of a truth, no single media effect such as post-truth can in one fell swoop capture the world and its citizens without any form of resistance and mediation.

In dismissing post-truth as non-existent, (Benkler et al., 2018) have established from a study done by them that “there is no single effect the internet has on democracy, or on new media, or on people’s ability to tell truth from fiction” (p. 383). The authors argue that although the Russians are said to have used data mined from Facebook users to influence the United States election in 2016, they found no serious evidence that the attempt made any significant impact in the election and that it is unjustified to attribute so much power to the internet-enabled social media. “There is no echo chamber or filter bubble effect that will inexorably take a society with a well-functioning public sphere and turn it into shambles simply because the internet comes to town,” the authors submit in an outright rejection of the power of the social media to induce post-truth.

In the same vein, Block (2019) also dismisses the notion that it was social media manipulation and rejection of objective facts that brought about the election of Donald Trump and the success of Brexit in 2016, which have been severally cited as the origin and foundation of post-truth condition. Block argues further that:

The ‘objective facts’ assumed to be ignored by voters in the two cases cited are perhaps not important, or in any case it was not ignorance of them that swayed voting. There is ample evidence to suggest that many Brexit voters had made up their minds about the direction of their vote long before they came into contact with false promises about National Health Service funding or sending Eastern Europeans back where they came from. Similarly, Donald Trump’s victory was arguably due more to political party tribalism—that is, Republican Party voters who self-identify as such and therefore will always vote for the Republican Party candidate—than it was to Donald Trump’s powers of persuasion through his construction of a parallel universe of alternative facts. Nevertheless, there is

some element of truth in the arguments made about manipulation of public opinion through uses of the social media.

Indeed, after analyzing the whole concept of post-truth, Bufacchi (2021) jettisoned the theory as a mere concept that is still evolving and requires further work, cautioning that while the subject matter poses serious threat to the society, it is important to take solace in the fact that truth is not easily defeated and that the perceived gains by the ‘priests’ of post-truth are merely temporary.

For this reason, Sim (2019) adds his voice to the argument, pointing out that:

Post-truth has turned into a critically important factor in contemporary life, therefore, and it gives every impression that it will remain so for the foreseeable future. It furthers the aims of the unscrupulous, and these types are much in evidence in the political arena at present, becoming ever more skilled at manipulating the public through the multitude of media formats now available to them, and constructing a formidable power base in the process.

Certainly, Sim, is however worried that even with the fact that no strong foundation has been laid for post-truth to flourish, its protagonists have become unrelenting in attempting to appeal to prejudice rather than facts. In that circumstance therefore, Lewandosky, Ecker and Cook (2017) have downplayed the power and impact of post-truth, warning that it has failed to establish such potency in modern society with a strong argument. They posit that most other post-truth claims do not seek to establish a coherent model of reality but merely seek to erode trust in facts and reality, to the point that facts do no longer matter or are not even acknowledged to exist.

It behooves on us to believe generally that; the protagonists of post-truth have failed to recognise the fact that many concepts and features of the social media such as ‘echo chamber and ‘filter bubble’ as espoused by Cass Sunstein (2001, 2009b, 2009a) and Eli Pariser (2011) actually place serious limitations on social media effects as they are similar to the well-established concepts of individual differences and social categories theories in that they classify audience of social media into ideological, thematic and social groups based on their needs, expectations and disposition, thereby shielding them from the mass effects of social media. The reality of the situation is that those in the echo chambers and filter bubbles only accept, share, tweet, like and re-tweet information that meet their confirmation bias and reject outrightly anything that does not meet

their expectations just as they do under the individual differences and social category theories. This has further disarmed and discredited post-truth's assumed power of mass affection and invincibility.

In advancing our argument further, we realized that; the concept of filter bubble as enunciated by Eli Pariser refers to the personalised algorithm that search engines and social media platforms use to selectively present contents to users based on their browsing histories and preferences. It is the algorithms that actively create a personalized "bubble" around individuals, limiting their exposure to diverse viewpoints, and potentially reinforcing their existing beliefs and biases. By so doing, social media users are 'fixed' in echo chamber as propounded by Cass Sunstein (2001, 2009b, 2009a) and it refers to an environment in the digital media, where people are exposed to only information and opinions that confirm their pre-existing beliefs and opinions. Here, individuals within an echo chamber are insulated from alternative viewpoints and perspectives, thereby creating a narrow and biased worldview. Without a doubt, social media platforms, news outlets and the filtering algorithms that personalize contents, can contribute to the creation of echo chamber. As a consequence, the formation of echo chamber can lead to the spread of misinformation, polarization and a lack of critical thinking. This occurs largely because the media users 'captured' or 'isolated' in the 'chambers' are somewhat cut off from political, economic and social realities of the society and left in their own secluded world, forcing them to frame their own thinking, belief and reality, which may be at variance with the truth.

Be that as it may, Bruns et al., (2012) as cited Salaudeen and Onyechi, (2020), have said that the proliferation of both mainstream and social media platforms do not limit the ability and choices of the audience to select the media and messages that meet their personal needs and expectations, thereby knocking off the attempt by post-truth theory to take us back to the era of outdated media theory such as the magic bullet theory which says that the audience of mass media are passive, captured and at the mercy of the media messages (Hiebert et al 1988).

The array of literature on studies debunking the power of the media to eclipse and capture the users of both mainstream and social media such as uses and gratification by McQuail and Windahl (1981,p.74) selective exposure (Cassata and Asante,1979, p.87) and cognitive dissonance (Hebert



et al., 1988, p. 631; Mackenzie et al.,1986, p.130) all lend credence to the fact that no amount of misinformation, disinformation, manipulation and fake news can force or compel a social media user or consumer to accept and spread what does not meet their physical and psychological needs as being pushed by the authors of post-truth theory. This is so because even the society in which we live places some restrictions on the way one receives, assimilates and consumes information either from the mainstream or new media. This has succinctly been made clear by Mcquail (1972, p. 25), who argues that: “Even the most potent of the mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no use for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives”.

In furtherance of the discourse, Defleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975, p.276) have submitted that the power of the media to overwhelm its users and blight the truth as pushed by post-truth theory, is a hoax. The two authors argue that:

This general societal system sets important limitations and boundaries on the media system and has considerable impact on its characteristics, information delivery functions and operating procedures; it gives rise to mechanisms that inhibit arbitrary media influence, such as individual differences, membership participation in social relations. The societal system also operates to create needs within persons that facilitate media alteration effects, namely, the needs to understand, act in and escape in fantasy from one's world.

It is clear therefore, that the notion that the society has slipped into post-truth era where truth does not matter and where alternative facts or lies take the front burner is not only a ruse but an attempt to empower and weaponise the social media with the power that it does not currently possess. It is rather hasty for the promoters of post-truth to try to fashion out a new theory based principally on two isolated political events of 2016: Brexit and United States election; and attempt to foist it on the political and media landscape as if social media users are helplessly confined to a stake and hypnotised with disinformation and fake news that they all accept lies in place of truth without any form of reasoning and resistance. As Farkas (2020) argues, facts are not in any way becoming obsolete but are only being highly politicised by political actors for their interest.

It is important to state that although the internet-enabled social media has become so powerful and influential in spreading both truth and lies with ease and rapidity, yet it does not have the power to

turn social media consumers into malleable instruments as the post-truth condition has tended to portray. It is against this backdrop that Sumpter (2018, p. 153) has dismissed the post-truth theory as a provenance of fake news and manipulation as untenable, arguing that we do not live in a post-truth world as claimed by its protagonists. Sumpter points out further that there is no concrete evidence that the spread of fake news changes the course of election just as there is no proof that the increasing use of bots has negatively impacted the way people discuss politics, citing the work of Hunt and Matthew (2017), which suggests that following and sharing fake news is an activity for the few, rather than the many. In the same vein, Pennycook and Rand (2021) have also drawn attention to some studies, which concluded that contents from known fake news sites represent a small proportion of most people's media diets, and that the average social media user was exposed to little fake news during the 2016 election based on data from Twitter, Facebook and web browsing.

These submissions have succinctly blighted the assumed strength of post-truth. In this circumstance, it is better and safer to side with the classical submission of Bernard Berelson (1948) as cited by (Hiebert et al., 1988, p. 629), which admits rather neutrally that “Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people, under some kinds of conditions, produce some kinds of effects”. It is therefore, reasonable to submit that although the drift towards social media is gaining momentum, reasonable consumers or users of the new media cannot forget their ‘thinking cap’ while perusing information and be hoodwinked and taken captive to the extent that they begin to ignore objective facts and embrace falsehood as a way of life. To do so, would simply take us back to the notion that humans cannot reason and make choices concerning their communication behaviours.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the post-truth debacle appears as an orphan who has received numerous handshakes from sympathisers but has nobody to own him up and take him home. Overall, what emerges about post-truth is that while some commentators and scholars are quick to blame the information disorder in contemporary society triggered by misinformation and fake news on the theory, others have become more circumspect by simply drawing attention to the potential influence of the

phenomenon and refusing to draw any conclusion about the purported efficacy of post-truth so as to maintain their neutrality while a few others have dismissed it as non-existent altogether. Indeed, post-truth does not appear to have reached the gestation level to be taken seriously as any of the communication or media theories backed by empirical data to give it the needed global validation and acceptability. The point is that though our contemporary society is on a daily basis being inundated with misinformation and fake news orchestrated by social media and other digital platforms, it is obvious that individuals still have the ability to decipher what is right for their consumption while rejecting what is a false or alternative fact.

For this reason, it is apt and helpful to perish the idea that the present society has slipped into a post-truth era where truth does not matter anymore as a result of the overbearing influence of fake news. It is to be noted that unlike a Tsunami or a contagion, which can cause instant death and destruction, fake news is neither a death sentence nor an epidemic that can instantly wipe off a generation of people. As it stands, while the furor over the power of fake news continues to rage on across the global media space, many studies have proved that the negative phenomenon may not be able to trigger the kind of monumental distrust in media users across the globe. This simply means that fake news may not be able to dampen the trust and confidence of social media users in Nigeria and many other African countries and trigger post-truth situation for the simple reason that their media systems leave out majority of the citizens and cater for a few powerful and influential elites. Besides this fact, there is no uniformed or fixed global pattern of fake news and media trust as the disposition continues to shift according to a country's peculiar political and media system. In this case, it is evident that the ways in which media users in Africa and the global South respond to fake news is different from the way social media users respond in Europe, America Asia and the global North (Tully, Madrid-Morales, Wasserman, Gondwe and Ireri (2022).

This differentiation has been amply demonstrated in the case study done on fake news perception and media trust in Portugal by Quintanilha, da Silva and Lapa (2019), which shows that despite the prevalence of fake news in the Portuguese media system, the citizens still demonstrate a high level of trust in the media primarily because of a free media market and low political control by the state. Moreover, fake news, which promotes alternative facts, mainly generates more of entertainment for consumers in the form of satire, parody and comedy. This is why McClennen

(2020, p. 316) has made the distinction that all fake news is not equal, pointing out that there is ‘good’ fake news, which is satirical and funny and gets people to think while there is ‘bad’ fake news, which threatens to cut off any form of thinking whatsoever. Given all of this, it is improbable for our society to have fallen into a post-truth condition when media consumers are still actively equipped with their ‘thinking caps’ and all other safeguards available to them to use in the communication environment so as not to fall into the pit of the post-truth syndrome.

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