WIKI n°4: The Rise of Post-Truth

Defining Post-Truth

Post-truth describes the phenomenon where individuals are particularly inclined to believe and disseminate information that aligns with their existing beliefs and biases, even when such information is inaccurate or misleading.

Post-truth refers to "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief"[12]. Appealing to emotion,[13] irrationality, and the subconscious to drive populations to accept dangerous and unbearable measures is not a novel practice in politics. Many governments have resorted to it[14] and many still do.

However, this expression, which appears to have emerged in the beginning of the 21st century, requires nuance. As French sociologist Sylvain Parasie notes, post-truth suggests that political debate was previously based exclusively on facts and that a new era has now begun. However, political discourse has always integrated, alongside verifiable facts, a set of values and emotions adapted to the target audience.

Origins and Causes of Post-Truth

The emergence of post-truth in many countries was facilitated by those pushing excessive, illegitimate private interests and authoritarian, even totalitarian ideologies. Even if it may seem marginal, [15] a plethora of articles, books, etc., have been found to lack genuine, factual, and scientific foundation.

These texts—often biased and entirely fabricated—have made it all the way into prestigious publications. Driven by significant monetary rewards or a quest for recognition, their authors have often faced ostracism by the scientific community,

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[12] Faits alternatifs, fake news, post-vérité… petit lexique de la crise de l'information (lemonde.fr) ; Harry Collins, Robert Evans and Martin Weinel, "STS as Science or Politics?", *Social Studies of Science, vol.* 47, 2017); cf. the opposite view, promoted by Sergio Sismondo, 'Post-Truth?'Social Studies of Science 47(1) (2017): 3–6.

[13] Sur le rôle de l'émotion qui anime les groupes, v. par exemple Mireille Fognini « Les forces émotionnelles des groupes selon Bion » ; Les forces émotionnelles des groupes selon Bion | Cairn.info, également Georges Gurvitch, Traité de sociologie, notamment sa distinction dans la société entre masse, communauté et communion et les dynamiques qui les animent.

[14] Les exemples les plus criants sont ceux de Mussolini et Hitler.

[15] La fraude scientifique (openedition.org)

despite prior status (e.g., membership in renowned academies, Nobel laureateship). The falsehoods however live on in the public consciousness.

The credibility of science increasingly depends on public understanding. When ignorance combines with post-truth to undermine credibility, the perception of science as a source of continuous progress and systematic problem-solver for humanity erodes.[16]

Conversely, other stakeholders are working to establish factual and more objective knowledge, essential for good governance. Numerous entities, methods, and techniques are currently employed to distinguish between misinformation and verified information.

Politically, the fallacious argument of possessing weapons of mass destruction justified the 2003 invasion of Iraq[17] by the world's leading power in 2003; subsequent facts have completely refuted the false evidence presented. Since 2016, similar impactful events and actions lacking factual basis have proliferated, culminating in 2021 with events such as the attack on the United States Capitol and various anti-vaccination campaigns.

Beyond the political sphere, the resurgence of post-truth is particularly attributable to the following factors:

- **Social networks** facilitate the rapid global dissemination of unverified information. Their algorithms often confine users within "information bubbles," presenting content aligned with existing interests and beliefs, thereby reinforcing pre-existing convictions, regardless of their veracity.

- **Extreme political polarization** hinders dialogue and consensus-building around a shared understanding of reality.

- **Distrust** of traditional media, experts, and political institutions contributes to increased reliance on alternative, often less reliable, sources of information.

Consequences of Post-Truth

The exploitation of the gap between reality and narrative as a governance tool risks generating profound and far-reaching negative consequences, particularly in economic and environmental terms[18].

By promoting alternative facts, misinformation, and disinformation, post-truth amplifies emotions, inflates egos, and sows uncertainty, thereby undermining the foundational principles essential for sound governance.

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[16] Harry Collins, Robert Evans et Martin Weinel, *Experts and the Will of the People,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

[17] Alterman, Eric. "When presidents lie: a history of official deception and its consequences", New York: Viking, 2004 ISBN: 0670032093

[18] McIntyre, Lee. "Post-Truth", The MIT Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780262535045