

Post-truth anthropology

Some era-defining trends are only noticed years after the fact, others announce themselves noisily. 'Post-truth' belongs to the second category. The term seems to have been coined independently on a number of occasions, beginning at least as early as the time of the Watergate scandal, but it took the historic events of 2016 to propel it into the global collective consciousness. By the end of the year 'post-truth' had become a daily topic of concern in comment pieces in the English-speaking media to such an extent that it was declared Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year. OUP's announcement—surely a candidate for press release of the year—was picked up enthusiastically by media around the world, and thus unleashed a further torrent of international reportage and comment on post-truth.¹ By mid-January 2017, China's Xinhua news agency was carrying a prominent story warning that Europe was being remodelled by 后真相政治 (*hòu zhēnxiàng zhèngzhì*: post-truth politics), 'post-truth politics'.² A couple of weeks later, a leader in Argentinian daily *Río Negro* pointed to recent upsets such as the no vote in Colombia's peace-deal referendum, the triumph of Macri in Argentina and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil to demonstrate that Latin America was part of the same *época de posverdad* (post-truth era) that had brought about Brexit and Trump in the Anglosphere.³

Anthropology aspires to tell us something about our changing world—in 2017, that must include having something to say about post-truth. But what would an anthropology, or an ethnography, of post-truth look like? Does the ubiquity of the term indicate the emergence of a genuine new phenomenon, or is the real change the growth of the critical discourse of post-truth itself? Is the category sufficiently well defined to do service in ethnographic description, or is it simply a rallying point for the outraged intelligentsia, one that describes nothing more than their chagrin at the fact that the wrong kinds of people are suddenly claiming authority and having their say?

Given that the topic has emerged so recently, it is perhaps not surprising that anthropologists and other social scientists have had very little to say about 'post-truth' to date. However, much of the commentary in literary and current affairs

¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

² http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-01/12/c_1120297790.htm

³ <http://www.rionegro.com.ar/columnistas/la-posverdad-es-mentira-YA2103753>

magazines has been insightful. In addition, a flurry of well informed and well reasoned editorials on post truth appeared in scientific journals early in 2017, decrying the erosion of scientific authority, in unanimously horrified reaction to the Trump administration's assault on environmental and research spending. In the academic and popular literature, there is great variation in the meaning given to 'post-truth' and in the causes to which it is attributed. Nonetheless, three broad categories of proposed causes feature consistently.

First, writers have pointed to a what they see as a qualitatively new dishonesty on the part of politicians. No longer content to be merely economical with the *actualité*, leaders such as Farage and Trump appear to make up the facts to suit their narratives. Whereas Nixon covered up, and Blair and Clinton evasively span, Trump's so-called 'surrogates' aggressively argue that the facts are contested, or in one notorious case, that there are 'alternative facts'.

Second, many commentators have sought to explain the breakdown of consensus about the truth to dramatic transformations in the structure and economy of information. These transformations are largely the result of technological developments. For instance, information is now superabundant, so consumers suffer from 'information overload'. The ease of publication and broadcast through digital channels means that the distinction between authoritative and amateur news sources has become blurred. Research shows that to an ever greater extent, people rely on social media for their news information. That means that they are predominantly exposed to information that is shared by people in their own social circle and they are trapped in the 'facebook bubble', or 'social media echo chamber'. Meanwhile, some have argued that the quality of information has declined as publishers compete for attention with high salience/low content 'click bait'.

Finally, some commentators have argued that the cause of post-truth is ultimately the nature of the audience itself. It is well established that humans are subject to what psychologists call 'confirmation bias', that is, we tend to believe things that confirm what we already believe sooner than we do things that challenge our views. We also seem able to ignore information when acknowledging it would disadvantage us. An editorial in *American Scientist* blamed this kind of wilful blindness for widespread scepticism about climate change; truly facing up to the truth would require radical social and individual action, so it is much easier to ignore it.⁴ Of course these cognitive weaknesses have not changed or emerged in the past year

⁴ Vernon, J. L. (2017). Science in the Post-Truth Era. *American Scientist*, 105(1), 2.

and a half, but other changes, such as the social media bubble effect, or lack of education in critical thinking, have exacerbated the problems they cause.

The emergence of post-truth as a topic of concern is no doubt partly explained by factors belonging to each of these three categories. However, there is likely to be another important aspect, and understanding it is a way in which anthropologists can make a distinctive contribution to the study of the contemporary situation. In the existing explanations, post-truth audiences are portrayed as purely passive, falling victim to untruths essentially because they lack the proper information and skills to discern the truth. We should be open to the possibility that, as well as passivity and lack, there is also an active or substantive aspect to the situation. Explaining post-truth in terms of fragmentation of authority, cognitive biases, apathy and so on ignores the extent to which the acceptance of post-truth representations may depend on specific forms of knowledge, skills, values, reflection and effort.

For instance, Stewart Lockie, in an editorial in *Environmental Sociology*, has written of the post-truth era that, 'What matters is whether those listening to those [scientific] claims would like them to be true -- truth being judged not by evidence but by consistency with listeners' existing beliefs and values.'⁵ The ability to decide to believe or to refuse for instrumental rather than evidential reasons is something that has intrigued thinkers down the ages. But rather than simply alleging that people sometimes have an ability to do this, an ethnographic approach to post-truth might usefully begin by asking what historically specific theories of knowledge and ignorance, techniques of selective application of attention, relationships and institutions make it more possible for some people than others, and more possible now than before, to believe or withhold belief instrumentally.

One such theory of epistemology has in fact already been blamed for post-truth: postmodernism. Global publics, it is argued, have adopted bastardized versions of relativism and scepticism derived from academic versions of postmodernism. As Peter Pomerantsev has argued in *Granta Magazine*, postmodernism has 'trickled down over the past thirty years from academia to the media and then everywhere else,' and has taught us that, 'every version of events is just another narrative, where lies can be excused as "an alternative point of view" or "an opinion", because "it's all relative" and "everyone has their own truth".'⁶ This relativism is associated with a demotic anti-elitism that casts doubt on information from formerly authoritative sources on the grounds that they serve the interests of power, and not of the truth.

⁵ Lockie, S. (2016). Post-truth politics and the social sciences. *Environmental Sociology*, 3(1), 1–5.

⁶ Pomerantsev, P. (2016, July 20). Why we're post-fact. *Granta*.

Versions of relativism, more or less sophisticated, and of cynicism about those in power, whether or not justified, have of course been around for a very long time. However, if there is anything new about the post-truth era, it may well consist in the specificities of contemporary versions of these attitudes and theories. How do members of specific communities learn to draw the distinction, for example, between the MSM (mainstream media) and independent media, or between activists, lobbyists and 'special interests'? How do they decide whether to trust or distrust specific sources or categories of sources?

These questions concern second-order thought: thought about thought, or what psychologists and philosophers have come to call 'metacognition'. Unlike universal cognitive biases, metacognitive knowledge and experience can be learnt and disseminated; there can be *cultures* of metacognition and, therefore, ethnography of metacognition. It has long been recognized that the Enlightenment proposed, among other things, a new model of knowledge and its relationship to human reason. If the Enlightenment project can be thought of as an attempt to establish a new epistemological settlement, displacing an older one, then perhaps what we're witnessing is a new struggle, or a new phase in an ongoing struggle, over theories of truth, belief and knowledge, in the context of a radically altered information environment. If that is the case, then the critics of post-truth are playing their part in that struggle through the elaboration of the concept of post-truth itself.

The vocation and professional formation of anthropologists means that few of us are likely to be sympathetic to the people, attitudes and ideas associated with post-truth. The strong temptation will be to jump on the bandwagon by dismissing them as no more than the product of technological changes, or the result of manipulation by the powerful, or as the outcome of failed education systems. Engaged anthropologists will ask, and rightly so, what we can do to reinforce the right kind of critical thinking by teaching academic standards of judgment.⁷ However, post-truth anthropology will only make its distinctive contribution if anthropologists are able to overcome their aversion to the politics for long enough to study the phenomenon ethnographically. That means paying attention to people's theories of truth, evidence, belief and ignorance—taking thought about thought seriously.

⁷ <https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/03/16/post-truth-and-the-social-sciences/>