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**Social Media and the
Post-Truth World Order**
The Global Dynamics of
Disinformation

Gabriele Cosentino

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Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order

“If the post-truth order is primarily marked by a generalized loss of trust in traditional sources of authority and information as well as a growing fragmentation of the media sphere, this book convincingly argues that the truth of the post-truth condition is not to be found in the details but within a global discursive space where state and non-state actors, established powers and emerging political networks, build surprising alliances to hegemonize the public sphere and upend the post-1989 world order.”

—Marco Deseriis, *Assistant Professor, Scuola Normale Superiore Florence, Italy*

“Finally, we have a theory of post-truth that emerges from an international or global analysis. In this excellent development of empirically-grounded post-truth theory, Cosentino moves from well-known cases such as Pizzagate and Russian trolls in the U.S. 2016 presidential election, to cases that have received little to no attention in media and political communication studies, such as the “White Helmets” rumors amplified by Russian media in the Syrian civil war, the Facebook hate speech campaign against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, and the disinformation apparatus that propelled Bolsonaro to power in Brazil. Cosentino’s analysis is also unique in its attention to the use of an array of platforms and spaces of media that are exploited for disinformative and misinformative purposes, including 4chan and 8chan, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, in addition to traditional news media. His work engages with the problems of international political economy in the post-truth matrix, especially how the agents of post-truth exploit the weaknesses of media laws. Finally, he does not shy away from drawing lessons from his case studies for technical, educational, regulatory and political intervention. *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order* is a welcome contribution to a growing body of theory and empirical analysis in post-truth studies.”

—Jayson Harsin, *Associate Professor and Chair, Global Communications Department, The American University of Paris, France*

“In this book, Gabriele Cosentino masterfully addresses perhaps the greatest lacuna in post-truth studies by demonstrating its global nature. By dedicating a substantial portion of the text to cases beyond the West, he manages to not only broaden our geographical scope of understanding post-truth but also to tease out the latter’s preconditions and characteristics that remain constant across national, political, and cultural contexts and can, therefore, be seen as the phenomenon’s core traits. Ultimately, this timely book demonstrates that post-truth

is not some isolated manifestation of fakery, but a collective domain that spans the world as an alternative self-sustaining universe. The result is a must-read book that lays bare the emergent post-truth world order.”

—Ignas Kalpokas, *Senior Lecturer, Department of Public Communication,
Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

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ISBN 978-3-030-43004-7 ISBN 978-3-030-43005-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43005-4>

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Cover illustration: © John Rawsterne/patternhead.com

This Palgrave Pivot imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature
Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Berke Alikasifoglu for turning a class research project into the unexpected and enlightening inspiration for this book; Edwin Nasr for helping me navigate the murky waters of the on-line conversations on the Syrian Civil War; Gabriel Martin for being the most reliable and relaxing presence an academic could wish for during lunch breaks; Waddick Doyle and Ted Magder for being consistent friends and mentors during the twists and turns of my academic career; Bani Brusadin and Jorge Luis Marzo for allowing me to present part of this work at a fun and interesting conference in Barcelona; Marco Deseriis for sharing a few brilliant insights when the theory part of this book was struggling to take shape; Matteo Montaguti for showing me an exciting and unsettling perspective on the world of on-line subcultures; Oriol Andres for the numerous inspiring exchanges on Middle Eastern politics; Luigi Anzivino for demonstrating, despite the geographical distance, true and unyielding friendship; I would also like to express my gratitude to my editor at Palgrave Macmillan, Michelle Chen, for believing in this project and for supporting me throughout the writing process. I am also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for offering me valuable and constructive criticism of my book proposal. My wife Vera was there constantly to help me through the hurdles of researching and writing, giving me courage and motivation when I needed them the most. My son Michele always reminded me that having fun should be everyone's life priority, even when

working. My daughter Anna was born in Beirut a few months before the breakout of the 2019 Lebanese protests, and she brought with her the most joyous revolution one could ever wish for. This book is dedicated to the memory of James Le Mesurier, founder of the White Helmets.

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CHAPTER 1

The Post-truth World Order

Abstract This chapter posits the post-truth condition as a phenomenon with a global reach causing significant geopolitical effects, and it locates its discussion within the academic debate on cultural and political globalization. The epistemic crisis ushered in by postmodern relativism is discussed in the chapter as being inherently related to the trust crisis suffered by gatekeepers and truth-arbiters of twentieth-century modernity, such as mainstream media and mass parties. Changes in the political economy of media, the hybridization of entertainment and information and the rise of populist politics are also regarded as conducive to the current post-truth condition. The broader state of crisis of the Western liberal democratic model and of neoliberal market capitalism are identified as the conceptual perimeters within which post-truth acts as a catalyst of ideological tensions and geopolitical power struggles.

Keywords Post-truth · Disinformation · Misinformation · Fake news · Postmodernism · Propaganda · Populism

1.1 POST-TRUTH GOES GLOBAL

During a speech at a New York summit of the Anti-Defamation League in November 2019, the comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, known for his outrageous impersonations such as that of Borat—“the first fake news journalist in history”—for once put on a stern face and delivered a scathing

attack against “the greatest propaganda machine in history” created by a handful of Internet companies that he blamed for facilitating hate and violence around the world.¹ Baron Cohen criticized the algorithms that curate the information delivered by Internet companies such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, which “deliberately amplify content that triggers outrage and fear.” For the British entertainer, by giving a platform to demagogues and bigots who appeal to humans’ worst instincts, by allowing conspiracy theories to be watched billion of times and to travel from the fringes to the center of public discourse, and by letting hateful speech against minorities to run rampant, social media companies are upending the very democratic order of our societies. “Democracy, which depends on shared truths, is in retreat”, lamented Baron Cohen, “autocracy, which depends on shared lies, is on the march.” In a blow to Facebook decision not to fact-check political advertisements and against Mark Zuckerberg’s claim that the main goal of his company is to protect people’s right to free speech, the comedian bitterly joked that “If Facebook were around in the 1930s, it would have allowed Hitler to post 30-second ads on his ‘solution’ to the ‘Jewish problem’.” He concluded by advocating the need for holding Internet companies responsible for their content: “It’s time to finally call these companies what they really are – the largest publishers in history.”

Baron Cohen’s tirade against global social platforms was as timely as it was provocative, and it encapsulated many of the grievances and anxieties that over the past few years have emerged in public conversations discussing the relation between social media and politics. After years spent celebrating these technologies as empowering and liberating, the public opinion has now come to realize that when giant private companies give a platform to millions of people worldwide with the main goal of generating engagement, dire consequences can ensue. More broadly, the concerns voiced by the creator of Borat, who knows very well the power of lies and fabrications having made a career on satirical hoaxes and fakes, address one of the most disorienting realizations about the current historical period, increasingly shared by journalists, politicians, academics and

¹Pulver, A. (2019). “Sacha Baron Cohen: Facebook would have let Hitler buy ads for ‘final solution’”. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/nov/22/sacha-baron-cohen-facebook-would-have-sold-final-solution-ads-to-hitler>.

concerned citizens alike: we now live in a post-truth² world, where emotions and beliefs trump evidence-based arguments, where the distinction between truth and lies has become increasingly blurred, and where the very notion of truth seems to have all but disappeared. Such world, primarily operating on social media, is taking more and more dystopian contours.

In the aftermath of the upsetting outcome of Brexit referendum, which has plunged the UK into prolonged political disorder, and the even more shocking result of US 2016 presidential elections, which propelled Donald Trump, a controversial businessman with a dubious financial record and penchant for lying,³ to the highest political position in the world, scholars and media observers were taken aback by what they saw as an epistemic crisis that had struck at the heart of Western democracies and media systems. Since then, a plurality of analyses and theoretical arguments has been offered to identify and make sense of what has been defined as a ‘post-truth condition.’ Post-truth as a cultural and political condition can be observed in several phenomena that have recently emerged in Western countries, such as the circulation of intentionally or unintentionally misleading or false information via the Internet by and among an increasingly polarized and emotional public opinion; the political communication and influence strategies based on manipulation and deception by State and non-State actors by means of trolls,⁴ political bots⁵ and other forms of computational propaganda⁶; and also in the

²Following the now standard definition of the Oxford Dictionaries, which in 2016 awarded ‘post-truth’ the title of word of the year, the term can be defined as a social and political condition in which appeals to emotions and beliefs supersede rational or fact-based arguments, thus leading citizens and politicians to no longer respect objective truths. See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>.

³Kessler, G., et al. (2019). “President Trump has made 10,796 false or misleading claims over 869 days”. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/10/president-trump-has-made-false-or-misleading-claims-over-days/?utm_term=.fa1bf3f96ff5.

⁴“Trolling can refer to relatively innocuous pranks, but it can also take the form of more serious behaviors. (...) In practice, however, trolling has grown to serve as an umbrella term which encompasses a wide variety of asocial internet behaviors” (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 4).

⁵“Political bots are software agents used to generate simple messages and ‘conversations’ on social media” (Woolley and Howard 2018, 3).

⁶“Computational propaganda describes the use of algorithms, automation and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks” (ibid., 4).

industry of political marketing relying on cognitive-behavioral science, big data analysis and micro-targeting. These examples of post-truth communications occur in a media and political context, increasingly centered on social media, that has evolved to incentivize such forms of strategic manipulations of citizens and of the public opinion.

However, post-truth is not simply a Western phenomenon, but it is also affecting multiple parts of the world. On-line rumors, Internet hoaxes, Facebook fakes, inflammatory memes, conspiracy theories via anonymous imageboard and disinformation campaigns by Twitter shape and affect political discourses and events across the globe, from Myanmar to Russia, from Syria to Brazil. Still, most discussions of post-truth tend to have a Western-centric focus. British journalist D'Ancona (2017) decries the 'declining value of truth' in a political era where emotional narratives are reclaiming primacy in public conversations at the expense of factual and verifiable arguments. In his analysis, D'Ancona locates the source of the problem in the 'fragility' of Western democratic institutions and in a crisis of trust suffered by traditional sources of authority and information, such as political parties and the press, which accelerated after the emergence of new media technologies, particularly social media, and was compounded by the 2008 economic recession. American literary critic Kakutani (2018) is equally wary of the emergence of the post-truth era and laments the 'perfect storm' of political, cultural and technological factors that have created the condition for the rise of a post-truth politician such as Trump. In her discussion, post-truth appears as a broader societal malaise whose causes are to be traced back to the sociopolitical transformations of the 1960s, to the culture wars that ensued afterward, to the postmodern sensibility questioning grand political narratives, which has now spread from the left to the right of the political spectrum, as well as to the rise in the importance of subjectivity in public conversations, to the detriment of objective truth.

Academics have also grappled with the polymorphic nature of the post-truth problem for a while now. The complex phenomenon is often discussed by analyzing a set of interrelated aspects which recur in many of the accounts and theoretical arguments offered by the scholarly community. Social media are often placed at the center of such discussions, with scholars such as Vaidhyathan (2018) offering a rather critical assessment of the disruption caused particularly by Facebook on public discourse and political communications. The platform's economic model, the logic of

its algorithm and the psychological incentives it generates are seen as culprits for the problems of political polarization, the ‘siloining’ of users into cognitive and cultural echo-chambers and the circulation of various forms of false information. McIntyre (2018) and Salgado (2018) also engage with the role of social media as drivers of post-truth politics, but through analyses which include, among other things, a discussion of postmodern cultural relativism as antecedent to the current post-truth era. Harsin (2018) also discusses the postmodern epistemic fragmentation of truth as a precondition to the current post-truth era, but similarly to D’Ancona, he emphasizes the declining trust in mediating authorities as the ultimate causal factor behind the deterioration of truth in public discourses.

Academic discussions on post-truth also identify its preconditions in the broader historical transformations of the media systems and of journalism since the 1990s, which have led to increased fragmentation of news outlets along ideological orientations in order to compete for demographic segments and audience attention, to the hybridization of information and entertainment and to the rise of opinion journalism at the expense of factual and investigative reporting. The unique brand of partisan and opinionated journalism that emerged over talk radio (Cosentino (2017) and the ‘pernicious objectivity’ pursued by cable news programs hungry for ratings are considered by D’Ancona (2017) as conducive to the trust crisis currently plaguing legacy news media.

Discussing the issue of political polarization from an American perspective, Benkler et al. (2018) and Bennett and Livingston (2018) identify an asymmetry in such polarization whereby the traditional right-wing media, such as Fox News, and alternative media outlets affiliated with the ‘alt-right,’⁷ such as Breitbart News, have a much greater responsibility in the spreading of false or inaccurate information than their liberal competitors. Contributing to such asymmetry is also the emerging ecosystem of sub-cultural practices that fall under the umbrella term of ‘trolling’ (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Nagle 2017; Hannan 2018), which have spawned out

⁷The term alt-right was coined in the US context to identify a loose aggregation of right-wing and far-right political movements standing in opposition to the authority of the Republican establishment and to liberal and progressive politics. The main feature of the alt-right is to operate primarily on-line, relying on a sophisticated knowledge of the technological, political and cultural dynamics of the Internet. While alt-right members distance themselves from traditional neo-Nazism or racism, the movement is considered to be a media savvy rebranding of the traditional White supremacist ideology (Marwick and Lewis 2017).

of imageboard platforms and discussion forums such as 4chan,⁸ 8chan and Reddit and have given shape to a far-right on-line political discourse through a wild mixture of hoaxes and memes.⁹

The emerging conceptual framework on post-truth politics also includes discussions on the crisis of democracy and the rise of populism, as per the already mentioned work by Bennett and Livingston (2018) and Kakutani (2018), as well as by Waisbord (2018). Populism as both a political project and political language (Kazin 2016; Judis 2016; Revelli 2019) has proved permeable to a tendency of “elevating appeals to fear and anger over reasoned debate, eroding democratic institutions, and replacing expertise with the wisdom of the crowd” (Kakutani 2018, 14). Established trends of political communication embracing self-branding and ‘promotionalism’ (Harsin 2018; Kalpokas 2018), so-called celebrification (Corner and Pels 2003) and entertaining politics (Baym and Jones 2012) are also considered at the roots a gradual deterioration in the political discourse.

In the theoretical contribution offered by Kalpokas (2018), ‘promotionalism’ is not only confined to the political realm, but it is instead seen as a part of a broader societal tendency toward the self-promotion and self-branding practices that are incentivized by the operational logics of social media. Kalpokas pushes this idea further conceptualizing post-truth as being based on narratives or ‘escapist fictions,’ which are imbued with affective and aspirational values. Contrary to most academic accounts, Kalpokas doesn’t consider post-truth as an inherently negative phenomenon. While at times his analysis appears politically ambiguous, falling short of denouncing falsities and manipulations, he nonetheless recognizes agency in the publics who participate to post-truth, a position which is best summed up by the following quote: “Post-truth is not manipulation of some sort—it is collusion” (Kalpokas 2018, 18).

⁸4chan and 8chan are Internet forums or discussion boards based on the sharing of images and comments by mostly anonymous users. 4chan and 8chan are credited for having popularized terms, jokes and memes which have become staples of on-line subcultures as well as of the broader popular culture. Since the mid-2000s, 4chan has also been the breeding ground and meeting place for the notorious group of hackers and activists that gather under the collective pseudonym Anonymous, whose name is derived from the ability of users to post messages anonymously on the imageboard.

⁹“In modern internet parlance, a meme is a visual trope that proliferates across Internet spaces as it is replicated and altered by anonymous users” (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 36).

Finally, contributing to the broader definition of post-truth politics, there is also the academic literature on disinformation and computational propaganda, which focuses on the role of political parties and movements, on the activities of agents officially or unofficially affiliated with State actors, as well as on the actions by terrorist organizations, in the production and distribution of false or misleading information for manipulative and propagandistic ends, often with the help of software automation. The most widespread and advanced forms of social media manipulation at the service of influence operations are to be credited to Russian hackers and trolls, especially in the carefully orchestrated strategy aimed at interfering with the 2016 US elections (Benkler et al. 2018; DiResta et al. 2018; Woolley and Howard 2018).

While the theory on post-truth is beginning to find coherent systematization as per the ideas and the works mentioned above, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next sections, there are nonetheless some aspects of the phenomenon that haven't been adequately addressed. What appears to be missing in the current literature on post-truth is a discussion of the problem that adopts a comparative global perspective, and which uses, tests and, if necessary, develops the existing theory through the analyses of different global case studies. This book aims at filling this gap, and to this end, it presents a comparative critical discussion of a series of examples that bear witness of the global diffusion of post-truth politics via social media and the Internet.

This research project aims at investigating patterns of continuity and correlations in global post-truth practices and to flesh out broader geopolitical trends engendered by post-truth politics, by looking at the co-production and circulation of false and manipulative narratives across multiple world regions, while at the same time appreciating the specificity of each case study. In particular, I am interested in unearthing the flows of disinformation enabled by the networked relations among State and non-State actors across multiple platforms, regions and continents, as seen in multiple recent examples such as Kremlin-backed Russian news networks amplifying the contentious views of alt-right American activists, and vice versa, or American and European youths circulating memes in support of Middle-Eastern dictators. An important comparative work on disinformation was recently compiled by researchers of computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard 2018), which, while presenting a rich selection of empirical analyses, doesn't, however, locate the problem of disinformation