J. McKenzie Alexander   June 17th, 2025

What future for truth?

It's become a cliché that we live in a post-truth era in which emotions triumph over facts. But J. McKenzie Alexander argues that a better way to understand the increasing disregard for the truth is by appreciating the social role of belief. Believing in something, these days, is often a way of conveying which social group one belongs to, rather than the result of evidence weighing. Coupled with the ruthless business model of the attention economy, we have arrived at this new era.

On 4 December 2016, Edgar Welch arrived at Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C. and fired three shots from an AR-15 rifle, striking a wall, a door, and a desk located inside. Welch was investigating the "pizzagate" conspiracy theory (which later evolved into the QAnon conspiracy theory), which claimed that a human trafficking and sexual exploitation ring, associated with the Democratic party, was using the restaurant as its base of operations. After firing the shots, Welch demanded to explore the interior in order to see if there were any victims being held. Police officers arrived at the incident and Welch surrendered to them, peacefully, and after reaching a plea bargain with prosecutors was convicted of assault with a dangerous weapon in March of 2017. Curiously, in a later interview with *The New York Times*, Welch said "I regret how I handled the situation" but did not disavow the conspiracy theory.

The post-truth era and the dual nature of belief

One of the interesting features of the past few years is how many conspiracy theories have taken root in the minds of people and spread like wildfire over social media. Some have started referring to our time as the "post-truth" era, and also speak of "post-truth politics". The psychological underpinnings of the post-truth era are readily appreciated: complex problems have complex solutions, and complexity tends to overwhelm rather than excite the human spirit. In addition, many truths about the causes of social problems are mundane or boring, and fail to engage with people on an emotional level. Post-truth politicians recognise this, and use it to their advantage. In his book *Post-Truth: The new war on truth and how to fight back*, Matthew d'Acona quoted Aaron Banks (a co-founder of the Leave.EU campaign), who said "The Remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You've got to connect with people emotionally".

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Banks' identification of the importance of establishing an *emotional* connection with voters, rather than providing a sound *argument*, relates to a theory I develop in my book *The Open Society as an Enemy* on the dual-nature of belief. When discussing the nature of belief, the vast majority of time, philosophers concentrate on *epistemological* aspects of belief: what counts as evidence for a belief, how should a person adjust their beliefs in light of new evidence, and so on. While these issues are undoubtedly important, the exclusive focus on these aspects of belief overlook an entirely different set of aspects — ones of at least equal, if not greater, importance — which Banks's comments identify: the *sociological* aspects of belief.

Beliefs can convey information and propositional content, but can also serve to signify one's membership in groups or communities. In some cases, there is no clear requirement about what one *must* believe in order to be a member of a group, but there will be a family of beliefs which more-or-less roughly cohere, and one must endorse a suitable subset of them. Political parties are perhaps the most obvious example of this case: while conservatives are generally viewed as favouring lower taxes, there's no conceptual inconsistency if a conservative supports the expansion of the welfare state (done "in the right way", of course). The converse is also possible, of course, with some liberals supporting lower tax rates and less nanny state interventionism (again, if done "in the right way"). In some other cases, stricter criteria apply, in that holding certain beliefs

becomes a *requirement* of membership in a community. Here, certain core religious beliefs provide the most clear-cut example of the phenomenon, but by no means the only.

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When beliefs serve as signifiers of a person's social identity, this signalling function can — from the person's point of view — become more important than whether the belief is *true* or not. If the benefits generated by the signalling function of belief, for the person, are large enough, that belief can persist when false and *even when it is shown to be false* because the psychological costs, for the individual, of relinquishing the belief are too great. Although the sunk-cost fallacy is a fallacy, it also has a powerful grip on human psychology. Post-truth politicians know this and use it to their advantage. But post-truth politicians are not the only utilizers of this phenomenon: social media influencers utilise it, too, as do numerous self-organising, uncoordinated groups which form via the internet.

That said, one might wonder how *novel* this phenomenon is. Twas it not ever thus? Consider, for example, the European wars of religion, which raged from the 16th to the 18th centuries. In those wars, millions of people were killed over metaphysical beliefs whose literal truth-value is at best debatable (and, to many physicalist atheists, completely false). Those beliefs were signifiers of one's religious community and, when acted upon, led to far worse outcomes than shooting up the walls of a pizza parlour. What's different about the present?

A new era for belief

I think there are two important differences between the way the sociological function of belief operated in the past and the present era. The first difference is that we are now living in an attention economy. Yes, during the European wars of religion, people's attention was captured, and demanded, by the Church or competing religious movements, but that was not coupled with the incredible profit motive that the contemporary attention economy provides. When the business

model demands people's attention and the easiest way to capture people's attention is by providing emotionally engaging content featuring misinformation, concern for truth goes right out the window. Misinformation is built into the business model.

The second difference concerns the ever-accelerating news cycle, which demands new content *all the time*. In the past, when life moved at a slower rate, there was time to give content a good going-over to eliminate mistakes. Nowadays, though, the never-ending pressure to publish often means that there simply isn't the time to fact-check content to the same extent as before, which allows misinformation to be released even by organisations which try to do the right thing. (Add to that the economic point that fact-checking is costly, at a time when media budgets are pinched, and the problem is exacerbated.) When you take into consideration my first point regarding the value of misinformation for the attention economy, the ever-accelerating news cycle means that misinformation is now generated at a much faster rate than ever before, and it becomes too difficult and expensive to combat it.

How to recover a future for truth

These observations paint a pessimistic picture for the future of truth. Are there reasons to be optimistic? Given the factors I've identified above, altering the course of society will certainly be difficult, but not impossible. What we need to recognise is that there will be no technological solution to these problems: deepfake pictures and videos will become increasingly hard to distinguish from the real thing, and large language models will become ever-better at generating reams of false content to grab people's attention.

Banning the use of technology for these purposes is, I suspect, unlikely to work as it will simply drive such uses underground. What we need is a change in social values, and those kinds of changes are hard to engineer. We need a return to certain Enlightenment values, such as concern for the truth and the appreciation of reason and evidence. We also need to reject the attention economy and its provision of endless distraction and entertainment. In the 2000 film *Gladiator*, Maximus Decimus Meridius called out to the spectators "Are you not entertained?" Yes, we are. To our detriment.

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