European Parliament

From post-truth to post-trust?

Is the 'very concept of objective truth' fading out of the world, as George Orwell wrote in his *Homage to Catalonia* in the 1930s? Or is truth even 'dead', as *Time* magazine asked in 2017? Can we draw clear lines between objective facts, spin and lies? What are the consequences of 'truth decay' for trust, democracy and multilateralism?

Background: definitions of 'post-truth' and 'truth decay'

Oxford Dictionaries chose 'post-truth' as word of the year 2016, defining the adjective as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. Announcing the choice, Oxford Dictionaries explained that – whereas the concept of post-truth has existed for decades – the use of the word increased by 2 000 % in 2016 compared with 2015. This trend was fuelled by the 2016 UK EU referendum campaign, as well as by Donald Trump's violations of the norm of truth-telling, and his endorsement of debunked conspiracy theories before and after he was elected US President in November 2016, including claims that climate change is a hoax. In 2017, Trump withdrew the US from the 2015 United Nations Paris Agreement to combat climate change.

A crisis of truth amid a crisis of legitimacy?

Researchers from the US RAND Corporation use the notion of 'truth decay' to capture four related trends: growing disagreement about facts; blurred lines between opinion and fact; increasing influence of opinion over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. The philosopher Lee McIntyre has argued that 'post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not'. Public support for a political leader who is obviously lying may seem counter-intuitive. However, recent research has shown that voters – regardless of culture, gender, information access and language – are more likely to perceive a lying candidate as 'authentically appealing' if they regard the political system as flawed.

The roots of the erosion of truth

Whereas the focus on the erosion of truth has spiked in recent years, the underlying trends – the questioning of scientific evidence and the erosion of established facts – are not new. Waves of blurring lines between fact and opinion, as well as increased influence of opinion, have appeared in the 1870s-1890s, the 1920s-1930s, and the 1960s-1970s. In the 1950s, the booming advertising industry was a key amplifier when major US tobacco companies – facing scientific evidence linking smoking to cancer – decided to counter the science with their own 'research'. They created the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to cast doubt on the scientific consensus that smoking causes cancer; to convince media that there were two sides to the story; and to dissuade policy-makers from damaging their economic interests. Recently, corporate-funded lobbying to fight the scientific consensus has affected decisions on climate change and breastfeeding.

Astroturfing: faking grass-roots campaigns

Aggressive lobbying is not new, but the techniques evolve over time. 'Astroturfing' – the deceptive practice of an orchestrated marketing or public relations campaign presented in the guise of unsolicited comments from members of the public – became well known in the US in the 1990s. In astroturfing, interest groups engineer campaigns, paying specialised firms to mobilise people who agree with their clients' causes. The firms identify supportive citizens and actively connect them with policy-makers, for example by transferring calls to their offices. This procedure masks the sponsor of the campaign, making it appear to be a genuine grassroots movement. Accusations of astroturfing can, of course, also be used to discredit opposing interest groups. Digital rights activists have coordinated mass-email campaigns in Brussels in recent years, for example ahead of the European Parliament's 2014 vote on the General Data Protection Regulation. Parliament was targeted by similar 'very aggressive' tactics in the context of the votes on the copyright directive in July and September 2018. The UK Electoral Commission in July 2018 found that outreach groups claiming to be independent were backed by the Vote Leave campaign, some tied to lobbying organisations.

The impact on democracies: from post-truth to post-trust

The blurring lines between interests and evidence, opinion and fact are arguably affecting journalism, academia, courts, law enforcement, science, and intelligence. This poses a fundamental risk to democracy's core structures and processes and thereby to democratic governance, contributing to political paralysis and deadlock. From a citizen's perspective, declining confidence in the government's ability to protect people's interests affects confidence in democratic processes, leading to alienation and disengagement.

Low trust in government weakens the authority of government institutions and boosts the role of other players, such as interest groups. Dis- and misinformation can further fuel this vicious circle. In a recent example of instrumentalisation of scepticism towards official recommendations, a study found that Kremlin-sponsored bots and trolls active during the 2016 US election had been sowing discord in the debate about vaccines. They posted strong views, both anti-vaccine and pro-vaccine, exacerbating concern over the rise in measles deaths while at the same time peddling anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.

Figure 1: Most extreme changes in trust in institutions, 2017-2018

Trust losers		Trust gainers	
-37%	United States	China	+27%
-21%	Italy	United Arab Emirates	+24%
-17%	Brazil	South Korea	+23%
-17%	South Africa	Sweden	+20%
-13%	India	Malaysia	+19%
-13%	Colombia	Poland	+17%

Source: 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer.

The potential impact of 'post-truth' on multilateralism

The inability to take quick decisions on important topics can create significant foreign policy risk. Traditional ties between leading liberal democracies are increasingly questioned and strained, The 2017 Munich Security Report asserted that 'post truth' has a clear security dimension: if politicians lie, 'can citizens and allies trust them on national security issues?' In addition, some observers warn that multilateral diplomacy risks entering a reality in which diplomats neither agree on basic facts nor believe in one another's security commitments. There is reportedly mounting concern at United Nations headquarters that the general pushback against human rights, combined with decreasing trust and transparency, could result in a 'secretive international environment in which multilateral institutions lack both the political credibility and technical proficiency to establish the facts of major security incidents'.

The role of the European Union (EU) and the European Parliament (EP)

Declining trust in facts is a complex, cross-cutting phenomenon that affects democracy as a whole and is interlinked with a wide range of policy areas. EU and EP responses to disinformation – which fuels and thrives on the erosion of truth and trust – are explicit in the field of online disinformation, hybrid threats, and the securing of free and fair European elections. In the EP, the new European Science-Media Hub aims to build bridges between policy-makers, scientists, journalists and citizens to boost trust in expertise, improve communication on scientific developments, and strengthen evidence-informed policy-making.

Outlook: competing narratives in a post-truth world

In April 2018, the Commission called on online platforms to 'dilute the visibility of disinformation by improving the findability of trustworthy content'. However, there is a lack of trustworthy, publicly accessible general-interest knowledge about history, society, geography, culture and religion in a number of European languages today. Combined with the attention-based business model of online platforms, declining trust in media, online platforms and institutions, the importance of emotions in political culture is likely to grow. The perceived legitimacy of current political systems has been dented by the 2008 financial crisis, the 2014 migration crisis and the referendum on UK EU membership, the lessons of which still seem unclear. Against this complex background, we are witnessing an increasing focus on narratives based on abstract beliefs, myths and religion – appealing to emotions rather than rationality – and a situation where trust is only extended to those who also believe in the same narratives. Experts have warned that the departure from rationality opens 'such ring-fenced communities to manipulation and their societies to attack', reinforcing the narrative by demonising outsiders. Authoritarian actors are arguably more adaptive in the post-factual environment. Against this backdrop, there are growing calls for free democratic players to increasingly 'put such narratives to our own uses'.