

Leadership in a Post-Truth Moment

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Abstract

Leaders may gain power by being honest. They may gain power through dishonesty. But what does it mean when leaders attempt to leverage power in a “post-truth” era?

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary made post-truth its “word of the year,” documenting a 2,000 percent spike in the use of the term over the previous 12 months. Post-truth had journeyed from “a peripheral term to being a mainstay in political commentary, now often being used by major publications without the need for clarification or definition in their headlines.” So we know the term is popular, but what does that mean?

There is no mystery as to why that sudden attention: the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and election of Donald Trump in the US. And of course there is nothing novel in the observation that leaders lie. But the concept of post-truth implies something beyond simply lying, even lying often and boldly. At least it should if we are to grant it any validity as a construct. What seems to be different is that, in a post-truth moment, leaders invite support from followers based on the shared recognition of the lying. Leaders take as their privilege, a privilege granted by followers, the creation of “alternative facts.”

I explore the notion of post-truth not just as a matter of leaders lying to their audience – even frequently and boldly – but as a collusion between leaders and audience, a kind of perverse game in which meaning is co-created. Leaders assume the role of a trickster and spin a web in which the trickster and the tricked enter into a self-reinforcing pact, one strengthened by the identification of a mutual enemy. Sure, it may be a lie, but it’s a lie being told on behalf of my (perceived) interests as a way to attack those who hold (perceived) antithetical interests.

The post-truth leader gains strength from the audience precisely because fraud is taken for granted. I use professional wrestling (in the US) as a prototype. Fans know it’s fake, but they enjoy the spectacle, admire the tricksters for their skill, and co-create the moment with their cheering. It is unsurprising that Donald Trump was an occasional participant in and is a member of the hall of fame of the professional wrestling organization. Professional wrestling is a post-truth entertainment. Of course, post-truth leadership is more than entertainment, but there is an element of performance to it.

Post-truth leadership involves lying of course, but it is different from simple lying. Post-truth lies are told not to deceive but to impress followers with the strength of leader’s commitment to a common foe. The term may be new, but the “trick” is not. In analyzing the 20th century rise of mad authoritarian dictatorships, philosopher-political theorist Hannah Arendt noted a tendency among prominent tyrants (mainly Hitler and Stalin) to engage in a similar ploy. Like other tricksters, these leaders made absurd claims in the belief that their audience “did not particularly object to being deceived.” Join in the trick, they invited followers.

Post-truth claims work to garner support in the presence of two forces. Externally, there is a historical context that creates a blend of gullibility and cynicism. In the 1930s, that was a rich European history of anti-Semitism. In the 21st century, that has been the collapse of global financial markets coupled with the slow and grossly uneven recovery. But there are also individual forces at play in the willingness of people to believe the worse and accept the lie. I find Kant’s use of “immaturity” useful in suggesting that some people have formed self-imposed “inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.” He offered cautious optimism. Enlightenment – that is, the abandonment of the kind of dependency imposed in a post-truth movement – “is almost inevitable.” That’s a powerful almost. Tyrannical leaders, or “guardians” in his vocabulary, may be able to deny “the freedom to use reason publicly” and thereby perpetuate immaturity. Conversely, a climate of freedom, with leaders exerting a guardianship on behalf of public “argument” would encourage a release from “self-imposed immaturity.” Enlightenment could be the antidote for immaturity, offering a path out of post-truth moments.

So, is post-truth a concept separate from a regime of lying? Yes. Is it a new phenomenon? The frightening answer is: not at all. In my presentation, I hope to supplement my points with videos of “key moments” in post-truth leadership:

Sarah Sanders defends use of fake videos:

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2017/11/29/sarah-sanders-north-lawn-response-anti-muslim-sot.ewtn>

Kellyanne Conway on alternative facts:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643?v=raila>

Nigel Farage on false Brexit claims:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cA3XTYfzd1I>

Trump as a professional wrestler:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMKFIHRpe7I>