

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

## The emergence of a post-fact world

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One of the more striking developments of 2016 and its highly unusual politics was the emergence of a "post-fact" world, in which virtually all authoritative information sources were called into question and challenged by contrary facts of dubious quality and provenance.

The emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web in the 1990s was greeted as a moment of liberation and a great boon for democracy worldwide.

Information constitutes a form of power, and to the extent that information was becoming cheaper and more accessible, democratic publics would be able to participate in domains from which they had been hitherto excluded.

The development of social media in the early 2000s appeared to accelerate this trend, permitting the mass mobilisation that fueled various democratic "color revolutions" around the world, from Ukraine to Burma (Myanmar) to Egypt. In a world of peer-to-peer communication, the old gatekeepers of information, largely seen to be oppressive authoritarian states, could now be bypassed.

While there was some truth to this positive narrative, another, darker one was also taking shape. Those old authoritarian forces were responding in dialectical fashion, learning to control the Internet, as in China with its tens of thousands of censors, or through the recruitment of legions of trolls and unleashing of bots that could flood social media with bad information, as in the case of Russia. These trends all came together in a hugely visible way during 2016, in ways that bridged foreign and domestic politics.

The premier manipulator of social media turned out to be Russia. The Russian government has put out blatant falsehoods like the "fact" that Ukrainian nationalists were crucifying small children, or that Ukrainian government forces shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014. These same sources contributed to the debates on Scottish independence, Brexit, and the Dutch referendum on Ukraine's EU membership, amplifying any dubious fact that would weaken pro-EU forces.

Use of bad information as a weapon by authoritarian powers would be bad enough, but the practice took root big time during the US election campaign. All politicians lie or, more charitably, spin the truth for their own benefit; but Donald Trump took the practice to new and unprecedented heights. This began several years ago with his promotion of "birtherism," the accusation that President Barack Obama was not born in the US, which Trump continued to propagate even after Obama produced a birth certificate showing that he was.

In the recent US presidential debates, Trump insisted that he had never

supported the Iraq War and never called climate change a hoax. After the election, he asserted that he had won even the popular vote (which he lost by more than two million), because of fraudulent voting. These were not simply shadings of facts, but outright lies whose falsehood could be easily demonstrated. That he asserted them was bad enough; what was worse was that he appeared to suffer no penalty from Republican voters for his repeated and egregious mendacity.

The traditional remedy for bad information, according to freedom-of-information advocates, is simply to put out good information, which in a marketplace of ideas will rise to the top. This solution, unfortunately, works much

producing factual information that we trust. Americans get crime statistics from the US Department of Justice, and unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times* were indeed biased against Trump, yet they have systems in place to prevent egregious factual errors from appearing in their copy. I seriously doubt that Matt Drudge or Breitbart News have legions of fact-checkers verifying the accuracy of material posted on their websites.

In Trump's world, by contrast, *everything* is politicised. In the course of the campaign, he suggested that Janet Yellen's Federal Reserve was working for Hillary Clinton's campaign, that the

democracies are headed for real trouble. In the US, there has in fact been real institutional decay, whereby powerful interest groups have been able to protect themselves through a system of unlimited campaign finance. The primary locus of this decay is Congress, and the bad behavior is for the most part as legal as it is widespread. So ordinary people are right to be upset.

And yet, the election campaign has shifted the ground to a general belief that *everything* has been rigged or politicised, and that outright bribery is rampant. If the election authorities certify that your favoured candidate is not the victor, or if the other candidate seemed to do better in the debate, it must be the result of an



less well in a social-media world of trolls and bots. There are estimates that as many as a third to a quarter of Twitter users fall into this category. The Internet was supposed to liberate us from gatekeepers; and, indeed, information now comes at us from all possible sources, all with equal credibility. There is no reason to think that good information will win out over bad information.

There is a more serious problem than these individual falsehoods and their effect on the election outcome. Why do we believe in the authority of any fact, given that few of us are in a position to verify most of them? The reason is that there are impartial institutions tasked with

election would be rigged, that official sources were deliberately underreporting crime, and that the FBI's refusal to indict Clinton reflected her campaign's corruption of FBI Director James Comey. He also refused to accept the authority of the intelligence agencies blaming Russia for hacking the Democratic National Committee. And, of course, Trump and his supporters have eagerly denigrated all reporting by the "mainstream media" as hopelessly biased.

The inability to agree on the most basic of facts is the direct product of an across-the-board assault on democratic institutions – in the US, in Britain, and throughout the world. And this is where

elaborate conspiracy by the other side to corrupt the outcome. The belief in the corruptibility of all institutions leads to a dead end of universal distrust. American democracy, all democracy, will not survive a lack of belief in the possibility of impartial institutions; instead, partisan political combat will come to pervade every aspect of life.

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