

Chapter 6

The Post-factual Democracy



6.1 The Word of the Year 2016

In 2016 “post-truth” was the word of the year in *Oxford Dictionaries*. Post-truth is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹ Oxford attributed the nomination to the fact that post-truth went from a peripheral concept to exploding in popularity in 2016 pace the British vote on the EU leading to Brexit and with the American presidential election.

Post-truth also reached Davos and the agenda of the World Economic Forum. The forum’s considering “misinformation” a global risk back in 2013 was followed up 4 years later in their *Global Risks Report* warning that post-truth political debate undermines the efficiency and legitimacy of democracies.² Democracy itself, as well as the political capacity to efficiently address and solve social problems, including the global challenges facing the world, is threatened by political debate in which facts matter less than emotions and opinions.

¹ Oxford Dictionaries (2017): “Post-truth,” Oxford: Oxford University Press. Verified February 4, 2017: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>

² World Economic Forum: *Global Risks Report* 2017: 23. Verified June 11, 2017: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2017>

6.2 Post-factual Democracy

Post-factual democracy points to the same phenomenon as post-truth politics: the tendency for facts obtained and verified by reliable methods to play second fiddle or worse in politics. To rehearse: *A democracy is in a **post-factual state** when politically opportune but factually misleading narratives form the basis for political debate, decision, and legislation.*

The “factually misleading narratives” may be lies and tall tales; false, fake, or distorted news stories; or populist or conspiracy us-versus-them narratives with cherry picking or strong framing of facts to support the narratives. When facts are cherry-picked according to their political convenience or facts are replaced by false alternatives or simply denied, they lose their authority as the basis for discussion, debate, and decision. Then facts are reduced to strategic armaments in a political power struggle and are employed or deployed, regarded or disregarded, and accepted or denied according to tactical and strategical needs (Fig. 6.1).

The phrase “sometimes we (The White House) may disagree with facts” uttered by former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer while debating crowd size and the

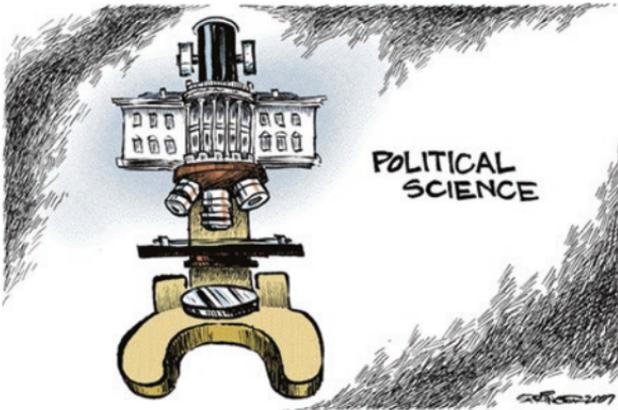


FIG. 6.1. When facts are politicized, reliable inquiry is undermined by political interests.

weather during the Presidential Inauguration 2017 illustrates a selective perception of facts. Such an approach relegates facts to political instruments in debate rather than being the common foundation securing and qualifying deliberation. If verified facts obtained by reliable methods become politicized and reduced to partisan contributions, political debate loses its anchorage in reality. In extreme cases, even the question as to whether the sun shines or not becomes a question, the answer to which depends on your political point of view. In that rabbit hole, everything is relative.

George W. Bush infamously noted after the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001 that in the war on terror all countries must chose side: “You’re either with us, or against us.” Neutrality was out of the question. In a post-factual democracy, the same principle seems to go for facts and the institutions uncovering and handling them. Everything is political. On the battlefield, all standpoints are perceived as, and suspected to be, nothing but veiled political interest. Neutrality is not an option. If you try to stay neutral, you still risk becoming cannon fodder. Science, journalism, and law are politicized and categorized as friends or foes. You are either with us or against us, and if you are against us, then you are fake news.

In a post-factual democracy, respect for and acknowledgment of the real has disappeared in the heat of battle. Reality, or rather what counts as real, is produced and constructed by those who have the power to do so.

Journalist Ron Suskind has described a situation dating back to 2002 in which he spoke to an adviser of George W. Bush later identified as neoconservative Karl Rove giving voice to post-factual politics:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things

will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."³

A state in which facts are replaced by a constructed reality formed by an empire's actions and narratives is rather extreme. But the post-factual democracy is indeed an extreme situation at the limit.

The concept of post-factual democracy is to be understood as one extreme (or a limit point) of a graded scale on which the purely factual democracy is a limit point on the other end of this teeter-totter.

6.3 Democratic Beacons

If a democracy at any given time and place is categorized as either factual or post-factual, you risk losing sense of the diverse social tendencies pulling in several directions all at once and creating a nuanced picture of what is real rather than a simple either/or situation. Societal development is not unambiguous. In order to navigate in a forever changing and messy reality and understand the tendencies and phenomena at play in our time, there is a need for maps with guideposts and beacons to navigate properly. With such beacons it will be possible to gain understanding of a complex and changing world that may form the foundation for further study of the political landscape. The concepts of factual and post-factual democracies are such beacons; they are *ideal types*. Sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) introduced the ideal type as a conceptual instrument to compare different singular phenomena (Cosser 1977). According to Weber, ideal types are methodological tools to analyze the world, not describe it in detail:

³Suskind, R. (2004): "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times*, October 17, 2004. Verified June 11, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>

“In its conceptual purity, the mental construct cannot be found anywhere empirically in reality. It is a utopia.”⁴

Ideal types, among them factual and the post-factual democracy, are not realistic one-to-one mappings of political reality. They are beacons assisting in delineating tendencies and developments in a complex social reality. In a normative sense, both ideal types are more dystopian than utopian. Neither post-factual nor factual democracy is especially democratic.

Ideally, a democracy is based on a division of labor between uncovering facts much up to journalists, legal bodies, and scientists, and the democratic deliberation and debate carried out between politicians and citizens fully equipped with values and visions for the good life and the just society. In both post-factual and factual democracy, this division of labor is all but a lost tale.

6.4 Division of Labor as Ideal

There are political opinions about facts: opinions as to whether or not they are fair, whether or not they should be changed, and in what direction and what way they should be changed. But questions about whether facts are indeed facts are not political questions; they are determined by consulting science, law, or journalism. If factual matters are made political, the division of labor has broken down. Upholding the division of labor requires a certain amount of respect from politicians for the institutions and methods that reliably deliver knowledge. It is imperative not to discredit scientific results and researchers simply because they run counter to political interests and agendas.

The division of labor is not absolute: Knowledge about society is not disjoint from political discussions about what society ought to be. Both scientists and journalists have a limited amount of attention at their disposal. Attending to

⁴Weber (1949: p. 90).

one thing you are not attending to another in the zero-sum game of attention allocation. It is a choice of what is considered important—and that is not value-neutral. Pure “positive science” (Friedmann 1953) and value-free journalism are impossible. But objectivity and neutrality are ideals to aim at.

On the one hand, researchers and experts have a certain authority regarding facts. On the other, this does not imply that researchers and experts are always right. They make mistakes, research may be poorly executed, and research methods may be dissociated from facts and reality. In wake of the latest financial crisis, movements of students and researchers have come together, including well-known experts, critical of the hegemonic paradigm in economics. Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman is accusing economics of having lost touch with reality mainly by promoting *the best of all possible worlds* where markets operate ideally and where mathematical beauty has been mistaken for truth.⁵ The movement is working for reforms of theories, methods, and education in economics.⁶

There is a fundamental difference between critique that is coming from within a scientific field and the rejection of objectivity and expertise based on disbelief and distrust in researchers and experts. The latter might develop into an outright conspiracy theory vis-à-vis the rejection of the findings in climate research. Even though experts and institutions that produce knowledge are fallible, it doesn't mean that the ideal of a division of labor is outdated. But the fallibility calls for scientific humility and openness.

⁵Krugman, P. (2009). “How did economists get it so wrong?” *New York Times Magazine*, October 2nd 2009. Verified February 4th 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06Economic-t.html>

⁶By way of example, *Institute of New Economic Thinking* (<https://www.ineteconomics.org/>) and its worldwide student network *Young Scholar's Initiative* (<https://www.ineteconomics.org/community/young-scholars?p=community/young-scholars>), the international movement *Rethinking Economics* (<http://www.rethinkeconomics.org/>) and *Economics* (<http://evconomics.com/>).

Division of labor requires scientists and experts not to turn political issues into mere matters of a scientific or technical, i.e., factual and kind. In the extreme case of an entirely fact-based democracy, there are no political issues and no room for differing, but legitimate, opinions. All issues are instead made to be a question of facts simply requiring a response from a scientific expert. Factual democracy is not very democratic either; it is a technocracy.

6.5 The Factual Democracy Is Technocratic

For Enlightenment philosopher Francis Bacon, it did not suffice that knowledge in itself is power and puts man in the position of mastering nature; those who possess knowledge must also rule politically. Bacon's utopia is described in *The New Atlantis*⁷ from 1627, with its enthusiastic story about the invented country Bensalam. Even though a king is mentioned in the story, the country is run by a council of scientists, the Fathers of Salomon's House. Bacon's ideal state was ruled by scientists and experts and had no real political processes (Burriss 1993); Bacon dreamt of technocracy.

In a technocracy, all issues are turned into questions of facts. If even normative, value-based matters related to how society ought to be are turned into factual matters for science and experts to decide upon, there is nothing to debate democratically and nothing to have a political opinion about. Citizens have but to follow the experts' directions. If they do not, they not only disagree, they are wrong.

The European Union (EU) demonstrated technocratic tendencies as to the harsh austerity policies that it, and especially Germany, used as forced means of addressing the debt crisis in troubled countries such as Italy and Greece. These countries were furnished technocratic governments to implement the austerity deemed necessary. Turning political deci-

⁷ Accessible at *Projekt Gutenberg*, verified June 14, 2017: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2434/2434-h/2434-h.htm>

sions into technical directives based on membership in the eurozone, making them exempt from political debate, undermines democracy, not least when the resulting policy has considerable economic and social consequences for those affected, primarily low-income groups of people:

Technocrats can be very apt at saying how much [economic] pain a country may endure, how the debt level may be made endurable, or how to solve a financial crisis. But they are not good at finding out how to spread the pain, whether to increase the taxes, or if it is necessary to cut down costs for one group or another, and what the consequences of the chosen policy are on the distribution of income. These are political questions, not technocratic.⁸

Public anger may arise from the tendency for years on end to employ somewhat too factual and technocratic policies that lack the sense and acknowledgment of the pain they cause to publics. Post-factual tendencies and symptoms may be partially motivated by anger, and the anger might be for a reason. “Britain has had enough experts” was the slogan with which Michael Gove, UK Environment Secretary and Brexit supporter, phrased the general distrust of the political system up to the Brexit vote. As German philosopher Jürgen Habermas said in 2013, the EU is caught between “the economic policies necessary to keep the Euro on the one hand, and the political steps towards a closer integration on the other. This means that necessary steps create resentment and meet spontaneous popular resistance.”⁹

Even though post-factual tendencies have succeeded too factual democracy, it does not mean that the factual democracy deserves our nostalgic longing for it. The factual democracy is not some democratic Golden Age. If post-factual symptoms and situations become more permanent, however,

⁸“Have PhD, will govern,” editorial, *The Economist*, November 16, 2011. Verified June 11, 2017: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/news-book/2011/11/technocrats-and-democracy>

⁹Traynor, I. (2013): “Habermas advarer: Tyskland sætter Europas liberale demokrati på spil,” *Information*, April 30, 2013. Verified June 11, 2017: <https://www.information.dk/udland/2013/04/habermas-advarer-tyskland-saetter-europas-liberale-demokrati-paa-spil>

a decay of democracy may occur, where the powers that be are not accountable even if they are caught lying through their teeth.

6.6 Lies and Deceit

It is not breaking news that politicians twist or conceal the truth, playact, deceive the public, talk bullshit, and lie. Those are standard elements in the political game. Also, no Golden Age ever existed in which the politicians were all honest, authentic, and always truthful. Nevertheless, being caught lying or deceiving used to be something to avoid at all costs. The father of modern political theory, Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1525), harbored no rose-tinted illusions regarding politics and the brutal game in the fight for power. All is fair in raw power politics. Machiavelli’s protagonist, the Prince, in his book entitled the same, needs to be able to act both as lion and fox, to show the raw power, brutality, and strength of the former but also be sly and avoid traps like the latter. Deceit is necessary to obtain and hang on to power (Machiavelli 1999). However, it is important not to get caught; one’s lies must resemble truths. The Prince must therefore hone his skills at playacting, deceit, and hypocrisy. Machiavelli thus instructed a politically ambitious diplomat in a correspondence: “Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts. But let this happen in such a way that no one become aware of it; or, if it should be noticed, excuses must be at hand to be produced immediately.”¹⁰

This is usually a very good advice. Getting caught lying or being untruthful has traditionally cost politicians their careers or at least cost them *something*. But, caught being untruthful is not very damaging if your voters do not see, read, or believe

¹⁰ Machiavelli, N. (1882): *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolo Machiavelli*, tr. from the Italian, by Christian E. Detmold. Vol. 4. Boston: J. R. Osgood and company. Pp. 422. Verified February 5, 2017: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/777>

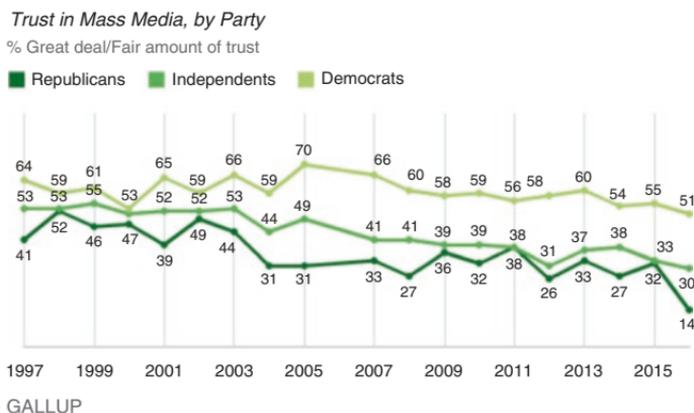


FIG. 6.2. The amount of trust that American citizens have in the mass media, divided by partisanship. (Swift, A. (2016): “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low,” *Gallup*, October 14, 2016. Verified June 11, 2017: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>).

the media or fact checkers that reveal it. Or if you have sufficiently strong loyalty from your constituency, and the polarization is deep enough for the media to be seen as nothing short of the enemy to whom it is only fair to tell blue lies. Or if the news media are declared to be fake news when their coverage does not suit you, and your constituency has so little trust in the media that they accept your claim (Fig. 6.2).

Facts become secondary to political success if enough people do not trust what is reported to be facts. When the distrust reaches a certain threshold, the result is skepticism that undermines the fact-based evaluation of the politicians in power and the capacity to hold them accountable accordingly. *If everything is a lie anyway, then one liar is not worse than the other, and I prefer my liar to yours.* Distrust at this level undermines democracy.

6.7 Accountability

In a democracy, the people rule. The term itself is witness. A necessary condition for democracy is that representatives of the people, the politicians in power, are accountable to the people. If the citizens cannot at the very least hold the politicians accountable by firing them, then the people do not rule, and it is not a democracy. In a minimalist model of democracy, the population's political preferences may be seen as input, and the chosen policies and legislation as output of the democratic system (Fig. 6.3).

When politicians do not rule according to the population's political preferences, and if they are not responsive to them in their policies, they are poor representatives for the population in question. In that case, they may be held accountable and might even be replaced by the voters. Election day is the day of reckoning.

Alongside the public's possibility to hold the politicians in power accountable on election day, the politicians in power are subjected to an institutionalized checks and balances across the bodies of governmental power and electoral periods. The Danish invention of the Ombudsman has been an export success, and this is such an institution. It was established to keep an eye on the politicians' actions pertaining to best practice and legal administration practice (Kriesi et al. 2013). Control mechanisms vary from country to country and democracy to democracy. In the USA, the principle of the division of power takes the form of three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial—with an institutionalized system of checks and balances.

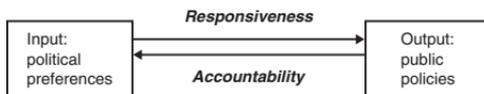


FIG. 6.3. A minimalist model for representative democracy. (Source: Kriesi et al. 2013).

In addition to the judicial power's ability to overrule laws, the legislative power (in the USA, the Congress) may seek to impeach the President if there is a suspicion that the President is guilty of "high crimes and misdemeanors," the standard articulated in the US Constitution. However, holding a president legally accountable in this manner, except in extreme cases like the Watergate scandal that led to President Richard Nixon's resignation (when it was clear that even the Senate Republicans would not vote to prevent his conviction), may well depend upon the political makeup in Congress. Generally, then, if there is no majority in the legislature to hold the executive power accountable, offenses may receive no consequence, even if discovered. And checks and balances only work if the political majority is more loyal to the law or the Constitution than to the party, the secretary, minister, the government, or the President. If these checks don't work, the voters may settle the score on election day and ensure a new majority. But whether voters actually hold the politicians in power accountable for what they have done, failed to do, and have promised to do depends on:

1. Factual information about what they have done or not done being circulated sufficiently to reach the voters
2. The voters having, for good reason, sufficient trust in the media that bring the information
3. The voters acting accordingly on election day

If the democratic institutions making it possible to hold the politicians in power responsible based on facts (i.e., the media, Congress, and the courts) are undermined, that in turn undermines democracy. Undermining the legitimacy of the media and the courts is to undermine the trust in the control mechanisms put in place to avoid democracy devolving into an authoritarian regime. If the politicians try to fire the watchdogs and the gatekeepers in order to stay in office and not be held accountable, that is the equivalent of breaking democracy's basic contract.

6.8 Totalitarian Propaganda

On May 26, 2017, President Trump sent an e-mail to all who had registered for his mailing list. The subject was “Stop the FAKE NEWS.”

Drafts ▾

Date: 26. maj 2017 8:09 PM
 Emne: Stop the FAKE NEWS
 Til: "carolinehaabye@gmail.com" <carolinehaabye@gmail.com>
 Cc:



Friend,

I've said it before and I will say it again: ***the Fake News Media is the real opposition.***

It's a 24/7 barrage of hit jobs, fake stories, and absolute hatred for everything we stand for as a movement.

And the same talking heads that said Hillary Clinton had a 99% chance of winning the election now think they can speak on behalf of the American people. It's time to once again release our Mainstream Media Accountability Survey to show the that the American people are fed up with the Fake News Machine.

[I need you to take the MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY SURVEY to do your part to fight back against the fake news attacks and deceptions.](#)

They don't care about the truth. They don't care about what's right. They only care about propping up the liberal Democrats they worship.

There is nothing they won't do to stop us.

This is a fight we can't afford to lose. The future of America hangs in the balance. Our country is at stake.

[Please take the Mainstream Media Accountability Survey to do your part to fight back against the media's attacks and deceptions.](#)

It is already subversive for democracy as a President declares the media, holding politicians and leaders accountable to the public, a sworn enemy, and makes that very same public hold the media accountable instead. When you add that the supporters are labelled “a movement” and presented as central for an existential and epic struggle for America’s future and survival, with the media on the side of the enemy, the rhetorics begin to show traits of totalitarian propaganda.

According to Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), the propaganda of a totalitarian movement striving for power employs

simple and coherent identity forming and meaning creating narratives. Such narratives offer the otherwise stigmatized and alienated supporter of the totalitarian movement a role to play and have a purpose in a thus existentially meaningful, albeit fictitious, “alternative” pseudo-reality. Totalitarian propaganda feeds on *us-versus-them* narratives and utilizes distrust, tribalism, polarization, and conspiracy theories as weapons in the struggle for power. Narrative coherence, a sense of purpose and meaningfulness, belonging to a group and playing a role in the struggle between good and evil, may in extremis make us ignore even what our own senses tell us. And, according to Arendt, the propaganda serves exactly that purpose:

The propaganda of the totalitarian movement also serves *to emancipate thought from experience and reality*; it always tries to inject a secret meaning in every public, tangible event and to suspect a secret intent behind every public political act. Once the movements have come to power, they proceed to change reality in accordance with their ideological claims. The concept of enmity is replaced by that of conspiracy ...¹¹

Creating a media and information environment of distrust and conspiratorial suspicion may make way for immunizing oneself to legitimate critique and avoid being held democratically accountable. When the public’s trust in the sources providing reliable information is sufficiently low, an authoritarian figure can define what is real and make up the facts suited for gaining necessary support for seizing and consolidating power. If facts and evidence have lost all authority, as a limiting post-factual state, it may contribute in giving way for a rule where self-determination is replaced by loyalty to the leader and identification with the movement:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not rule is not the *convinced Nazi* or the *convinced Communist*, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experi-

¹¹ Arendt 1951: p. 585. Our emphasis.

ence) and the distinction between *true* and *false* (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.¹²

To be epistemically emancipated from reality may be a step toward the opposite of emancipation in a political context, toward dominion and oppression. Post-factuality may be a prelude to tyranny. To set oneself free from the real world is a step toward being more easily controlled. This stems not only from the new opportunities of creating and spreading mis- and disinformation and creates distrust which digitalization of the media and information have made possible. A factual society may be an even bigger threat to freedom and autonomy than post-factual relativism and distrust. The dream of digital emancipation may turn into a nightmare of digital totalitarianism.

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¹²Arendt (1951: p. 591).