

Post-Truth, a new Phenomenon, or an already existing one: An Investigation into the Phenomenon of Post-Truth

Ukpaka Paschal

University of Johannesburg – Johannesburg – South Africa

E-mail: paschal.ukpaka@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The phenomenon of post-truth has its roots in the timeless connection between lies and politics, but in the early 21st century, certain conditions have allowed this relation between lies and politics to evolve into a new form, which is the phenomenon of “post-truth” which has become part of the contemporary political vocabulary. The article gives an account of this relation as described by Hannah Arendt, traces the specific changes this relation has undergone, and explores the historical conditions that precipitated this evolution, namely social media and its role in the decline of institutions that traditionally safeguarded truth. Finally, it poses the question of what solutions are possible. For example, are “facts” as stubborn as Arendt suggests?

Keywords: Post-truth, Organized Lying, Social Media, Politics, Epistemic Rules.

[PÓS-VERDADE, UM NOVO FENÔMENO, OU ALGO PREVIAMENTE EXISTENTE: UMA INVESTIGAÇÃO SOBRE O FENÔMENO DA PÓS-VERDADE]

Resumo

O fenômeno da pós-verdade tem suas raízes na conexão atemporal entre mentiras e política, mas no início do século XXI, certas condições permitiram que essa relação entre mentiras e política evoluísse para uma nova forma, que é o fenômeno da “pós-verdade”, que se tornou parte do vocabulário político contemporâneo. O artigo faz um relato dessa relação conforme descrita por Hannah Arendt, traça as mudanças específicas pelas quais essa relação passou e explora as condições históricas que precipitaram essa evolução, ou seja, a mídia social e seu papel no declínio das instituições que tradicionalmente protegiam a verdade. Por fim, ele levanta a questão de quais soluções são possíveis. Por exemplo, os “fatos” são tão teimosos quanto Arendt sugere?

Palavras-chave: Pós-verdade, Mentira Organizada, Mídia Social, Política, Regras Epistêmicas.

Introduction: The Rise of Post-Truth

The term “post-truth” first appeared in academic and public debate during the 1990s. The Serbian American playwright Steve Tesich was the one who coined the phrase “post-truth” in its modern use. Tesich lambasted the American public in his 1992 piece “*A Government of Lies*” for passively submitting to the falsehood of the Bush (Sr.) government and for intentionally choosing to remain in a post-truth society, that is, a society where the truth is no more significant or even essential. In the 2000s, *The Post-Truth Era*, a book by Ralph Keyes published in 2004, once again brought attention to the concerns of the phenomenon and lamented the lack of public awareness towards this phenomenon of post-truth. Keyes (2004) asserted the onset of widespread dishonesty, which has diminished trust in society. Since then, the term was barely used until 2016, during the United States presidential elections and the same year when the United Kingdom referendum on leaving the European Union (Brexit) was publicized, and more recently during the COVID 19 vaccination period. As a result, its usage in the social debate and political context increased dramatically.

The Oxford Dictionary describes post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. Lee McIntyre (2018) refers to post-truth as a kind of ideological dominance in which its proponents attempt to persuade someone or some people to accept something despite the facts. Micheal Lynch (2017) explains that post-truth is perpetuated by socially or politically powerful people aiming to distort the truth. Given the understanding of how post-truth is perpetuated and how it treats facts, one could conclude that post-truth is powerful and abrasive to truth. This is because more than just lying to the public or deceiving the public, the post-truth phenomenon replaces facts with already determined alternative information and pushes people into believing that. It does not just hides or denies facts, it creates new ones that are not verifiable and pushes people into believing them. Other understanding of this concept exists, which I will explore later in this paper.

But while there are different understandings of the post-truth phenomenon, one consensus regarding these definitions is that post-truth has been deployed in our political environment to manipulate the facts and control the narrative. The idea that post-truth creates facts to replace the existing ones implies that in a context where facts guide the day-to-day running of affairs, post-truth would threaten such context. An example of such a context is a democratic society. For instance, in a democratic context, truth and transparency are the foundations of its existence, and they are what guides its continuous operation. However, when it is possible that someone or some organization or some group of elites wants to manipulate the public by controlling the flow of information by discarding or distorting facts and replacing them with their own version of what should be, the aim is not just to sway our perception of what is true about a particular thing but also to disprove the idea that we can know the truth apart from the political context. Such conditions make it challenging to preserve democracy. When such an attack on truth becomes possible in our political context, democracy becomes unsustainable in a post-truth world.

Post-truth appears to be a new concept, but where it is used, which is in the political context, and what it threatens, which is our democracy, are old institutions that have existed since the dawn of human civilization. Since these institutions have existed for

a long, it then implies that either that post-truth is a new challenging phenomenon that our democracy currently faces or that this phenomenon has always been there, attacking our democracy, but this time around, it has taken a new name, a new strategy and has even evolved into something more powerful and could be more detrimental to our democracy. This article, therefore, explores whether this phenomenon is a new phenomenon or an already existing one.

To put it more clearly, where and how “post-truth” is used raises several concerns: whether it refers to a brand-new phenomenon or an old one that received a new name because it became more well-known under certain conditions. If it is a recent occurrence, it is critical to comprehend the innovation it represents compared to earlier phenomena and the circumstances surrounding its emergence. If post-truth is not a recent phenomenon, it is crucial to comprehend why it became well-known and was given a new name that only applies to the present. There are, therefore, two key inquiries: whether the term “post-truth” refers to a new phenomenon or an old one and how and why it has evolved and achieved notoriety now in particular.

Using Hannah Arendt’s understanding of how lying has been part of politics, I argue, in this paper, that the post-truth phenomenon has its roots in a perennial relation between lying/truth/politics, and consequently, it is not a new phenomenon, but an already existing one. Although post-truth is not a new phenomenon, I will further argue in this article that our understanding of post-truth and the effects of the post-truth phenomenon has evolved thanks to the decline of traditional truth-teller institutions and the rapid rise of the use of social media for disseminating information.

I structure this paper as follows; the first section will explore how lying has always been part of politics, using Arendt’s explanation of the relationship between lying and politics as the foundation of this explanation. The second section will explore how this phenomenon’s term and effect have evolved to what we understand it to be now. This section will focus on providing a detailed description of how our understanding of post-truth has improved and what we understand it to mean now. The third section will evaluate the factors that powered this evolution, factors like the decline of truth-teller institutions and the rise of social media technology. Then the last section will explore whether a solution is possible. This section will seek to answer whether truth is as stubborn as Arendt suggested and to know whether upholding truth will be sufficient to combat the post-truth phenomenon.

1. Lying and Politics: A Perennial Problem

Politicians consistently assert their commitment to speaking the truth. They believe whoever is lying is their political rival (the other party or state). Hannah Arendt offers a unique perspective on lying and politics that explains how lying has historically been a component of politics and why political leaders are considered liars by their peers and the public.

Arendt began thinking about lying in politics as early as the 1940s when she authored *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She describes the emergence of totalitarian ideology and how it was tied to lying in her book. In Arendt’s opinion, totalitarian ideologies explain what must be, what has been, and what will be. Totalitarian ideology is like establishing absolute logicity, dominance, and independence from experience and reality. Arendt explains that totalitarian ideologies aim to create an environment of propaganda where people cannot discern what “the real thing” is. However, totalitarian ideology is merely untrue, its ability to combine aspects of reality and truth, and spin it to fits their agenda, makes it successful. For Arendt, this

totalitarian ideology explains what we understand today as organized or systematic lying.

An essential feature of the 20th and 21st centuries has been the devastating consequences of organized lying on the citizenry and their political body. Arendt demonstrates how lying is continually a fundamental aspect of politics in her two essays, "Lying in Politics" (1969) and "Truth and Politics" (1968). In both of her works, lying in a political setting is covered, and she explains why politicians can lie to achieve their political objectives. Arendt claims that lying has always been counted as a legal strategy in the political space and that stating facts or siding on the truth has never been considered one of the political virtues (Arendt 1968: 223, 1969: 4).

For Arendt, lying has always been a component of politics because the idea that politics is just about taking action has prevented truthfulness from ever being recognized among the political virtues. She states, "He (the Liar) is an actor by nature; he says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are – that is, he wants to change the world" (Arendt 1968: 246). Arendt thinks that whatever their motivations, politicians want to make a difference in the world. They cannot develop anything new from nothing, so they seek to acquire the space required to bring their thoughts to life. Arendt explains that politics was born from the belief that the world might be different from what it is today. And that it takes creativity for them (politicians) to go beyond current circumstances and refuse to accept the way things are. This implies that something else must cede for them to achieve our ambitions. Nothing would be possible without having the capacity to reject or confirm existence. That is why Arendt states that "in other words, the deliberate denial of factual truth – the ability to lie – and the capacity to change facts – the ability to act – are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination" (Arendt 1969: 5). Therefore, for Arendt, why lying has always been a part of politics is because politics is all about making changes, and the best way to make those changes is not to confirm the existence but to reject it, and establish what they want the public to believe. When such measures become a political norm, lying will always exist and thrives there.

Another reason why lying has always been a component of politics, in Arendt's opinion, is because half of politics is the art of creating images, and the other half is the art of convincing others to accept those images (Arendt 1969: 8). For a politician to be effective, they must persuade the public of their agenda. And since they approach people from a communications standpoint, politicians must project a unified, consistent image to persuade the public. And as Arendt noted, "Since the liar is free to fashion his 'facts' to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were since the element of unexpectedness – one of the outstanding characteristics of all events – has mercifully disappeared" (Arendt 1968: 247). Arendt suggests that a liar is always in a better position since they can shape the facts to make them fit the ideas they perceive so that when they present their ideas and their version of facts to the public, they will come off as more believable and sensible. Arendt claims that politicians also resort to additional support-building measures if their image-building plan fails. However, to replace reality is always the objective. As Arendt noted, "It is equally true in image-making of all sorts, in which again, every known and established fact can be denied or neglected if it is likely to hurt the image; for an image, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, is supposed not to flatter reality but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it" (Arendt 1968: 248). Therefore, since politics is about creating an image and convincing people to believe in it, politicians always have the space to create false

images of themselves or their policies. As such, lying is and will always exist in a political space.

Arendt considers that politics is constantly about the debate, which is another reason she believes that lying has long been a component of politics. She states, "The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life" (Arendt 1968: 237). Arendt argues that since politics is constantly about debates, uncomfortable factual truths are frequently changed into debatable views. However, although they are not permitted to alter facts, politicians are free to view the facts in light of their beliefs. That is why Arendt claims that "factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion" (Arendt 1968: 239). For Arendt, facts are not indisputably true, therefore, politicians might find it very simple to dismiss factual truth as merely another viewpoint. The problem with facts is that they require evidence from reliable witnesses. However, eyewitness accounts are notoriously untrustworthy, and records that describe events may contain forgeries. Factual truth is perpetually extremely susceptible because of this dependent character. Because of this, lying in politics has always been there and will never go away.

Last but not least, the connection between deception and self-deception is another factor that suggests that lying may always be a component of politics. According to Arendt, "the more successful a liar is, the more people he has convinced, the more likely it is that he will end by believing his own lies" (Arendt 1969: 34). Remember, Arendt argued that politics is all about image making and image projection, and since politics is all about image making, politicians always find it easy to lie in order to gain people's support. Arendt now claims that this type of image-making poses a risk since it may easily lead to self-deception, which is accomplished by widespread influence to make people believe the picture. If others believe the politician's created image to be true, the politician can also grow to believe more and more strongly in his vision. Consequently, successful politicians are vulnerable to succumbing to self-deception. Arendt thinks that "only self-deception is likely to create a semblance of truthfulness, and in a debate about the facts the only persuasive factor that sometimes has a chance to prevail against pleasure, fear, and profit is personal appearance" (Arendt 1968: 250). Arendt's argument here is that it is considerably simpler to persuade others of a particular false image, and once the politician becomes convinced of their own false image, then self-deception kicks in. And since this phenomenon exists in the political space, it implies that it has always been there and will always be there.

There are two important points to note in this section. First is how Arendt's claims that lying has always been part of politics imply that post-truth has always existed. Arendt argues that "lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician's or the demagogue's but also of the statesman's trade" (Arendt, 1967:295). Hence, since Arendt claims that lies have always been part of politics, and since politics has always existed, it follows that post-truth has long existed. Secondly, and more importantly, Arendt draws our attention to an evolution of this post-truth phenomenon already happening when she writes her essay on the topic, particularly her notion of "organized lying". Arendt explains that "deliberate falsehood, the plain lie, plays its role only in the domain of factual statements no one, apparently, ever believed that organized lying, as we know it today, could be an adequate weapon against truth" (1967:297). Harry Frankfurt further explained this post-truth evolution in his analysis of bullshit and lying.

In his book *On Bullshit* (2005), Frankfurt aims to show that there is a greater enemy of truth than lies. This means that there is a way lying has evolved to the point that its attack on truth has become fierce. He highlighted bullshitting as one that he is sure is more of an enemy of truth. Frankfurt (2005) argues that in contrast to lying, bullshit shows a straightforward contempt for the veracity of one's truth claims. Between lying and bullshit, Frankfurt draws a clear line (2005:2). The bullshitter and the liar both want to get away with something. Bullshitting is not associated with a desire for the truth, whereas "lying" is regarded to be a deliberate act of deceit (2005:33). The problem is that bullshitters do not care about the truth and try to disguise it by using rhetorical flourishes (2005:56). For Frankfurt, the bullshitter aims to manipulate the other with information that lacks content, ultimately hollow and meaningless (Frankfurt, 2005:2). This suggests that the bullshitter is not even aware or concerned with the truth value of their assertion. The simplistic difference between bullshitting and lying then rests on the notion that a liar is aware of the truth but tries to hide, whereas a bullshitter is not even aware of the truth, but aims to manipulate the other.

Harry Frankfurt's (2005) description of lying explains better what Arendt proposed to be how lying has always been part of politics. Usually, politicians lie because they know what truth is, but they want the audience to believe what they want them to believe. At the same time, Frankfurt's understanding of bullshit connects to what Arendt suggests as a way lying is evolving. Bullshitting does not even care what truth is, for it lacks the truth value of the circumstance. However, it seeks to manipulate the audience by creating images that do not even exist. For Arendt (1967), lying has evolved because politicians most times, are not even aware of the truth or the facts but seek to create their own truth, the one that fits their agenda. This act of manipulating reality is what Arendt recognized as a way lying is evolving in the political space, and she named this evolved concept "organized lie" (1967:297). For Frankfurt, this phenomenon has evolved to the point that politicians do even care to know what the truth is, they just create what they want the public to believe in order to manipulate them. In our contemporary terms, we refer to it as post-truth. Therefore, Arendt recognized the evolution already happening, and Frankfurt pointed out this evolution in his analysis. In the next section, I will show how the concept has evolved and how we understand the concept now.

2. From Truth and Lies to Post-Truth: The Evolution of a Relation

In this section, I show that post-truth, as we understand it now, has evolved into a phenomenon that is more abrasive to truth. I contend that post-truth is more than just rejecting the reality of truth and facts. But instead, the subordination of facts to human assumptions and the act of creating alternative unverifiable facts is what makes post-truth, as we understand it these days, different. I will then examine how McIntyre, Fuller, and Lynch explain this evolved phenomenon.

There are various ways people in authority can manipulate the masses, either by lying to them, bullshitting them, or wilfully ignoring the facts. By lying, I mean "when we tell a falsehood with intent to deceive" (McIntyre, 2018:8). In other words, when we lie, we are basically persuading an individual to believe what we know to be false. Bullshitting is a bit different from lying. As explained previously, the individual aims to manipulate the other with information that lacks content and is ultimately hollow (Frankfurt, 2005:2). This means that the bullshitter is unaware or concerned with the truth value of their assertion. The bullshitter is not even aware of the truth, but aims to manipulate the other. Willful ignorance, on the other hand, is "when we do not really know whether something is true, but we say it anyway, without bothering to

take the time to find out whether our information is correct" (McIntyre, 2018:7). When someone is willfully ignorant the person is aware that there is some reality or truth out there from which they wish to be protected from. This could be because they do not want to believe the truth since it contradicts their personal goals and beliefs. When the truth is presented to them, they feel they are being coerced into believing false information. So, like bullshitting, a willfully ignorant person is unaware of the truth and does not even attempt to seek it. However, while a bullshitter does not know the truth value of what they are saying, a willful ignorant knows that there is truth out there but seeks it not, for what they are saying at present fits their agenda.

While lying, bullshitting and willful ignorance, the three ways of deceiving the masses, are enemies of truth, their effect on truth is subtle compared to post-truth as we understand it now. Post-truth does not just hide or deny the facts from the public, it creates alternative facts, certifies them as the truth, and pushes people into believing that the created facts are true. I will seek to explain what post-truth means as we understand it now, and this explanation will certainly show how this concept and its effects have evolved.

Many post-truth definitions have already been provided in the post-truth philosophical literature. For instance, The Oxford Dictionary on Nov. 16, 2016, declared that "post-truth" has been chosen as the term that best captures the year in language and describes post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Some philosophers did not agree with The Oxford Dictionary's definition of post-truth, for they believe there is more to post-truth than the Oxford Dictionary proposes. Conversely, they understand post-truth as an act or tool purposely used to deny facts and create new ones to influence people's decisions and actions.

For example, Lee McIntyre (2018) refers to post-truth as a kind of ideological dominance in which its proponents attempt to persuade someone or some people to accept something despite the facts. He defines post-truth as that which "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" (2018:13). McIntyre further claims that post-truth can be traced as far back as human existence, particularly to our cognitive bias, which is an inherent human attribute. He defines it as an illogical rejection of truth that might emerge from errors in our reasoning (2015:88). So, when we suffer from cognitive bias, we are vulnerable to exploitation by those who think they know what reality is and what people should believe in. Cognitive bias leads us to assume that our conclusions are based on sound logic, whereas there is no evidence to support them. Hence, cognitive bias hinders our ability to think clearly and stops us from recognizing when we are not.

McIntyre, in describing how we understand this phenomenon now, claims that "the real problem is not merely the content of any particular belief, but the overarching idea that, depending on what one wants to be true, some facts matter more than others" (2018:10). This is not to say that individuals do not wish to believe in facts; instead, they only want to accept facts that support their worldview. In his later book (2019), McIntyre alludes that willful ignorance is not new, but what is new is "the extent to which people can find a ready supply of 'evidence' to support their conspiracy-based, pseudoscientific, denialist, or other outright irrational beliefs in a community of like-minded people on the internet" (2019:151-152). This shows a deeper problem with post-truth and how it has evolved, for it confirms that some facts do not matter and expresses the willingness of some people to confuse the audience by digging for, most times, fake or untrue information to justify their claim.

Susan Haack (2019) took a different step in explaining how we understand post-truth today. She focuses on the epistemic nature of this phenomenon. In her explanation of post-truth, Haack concentrates primarily on how information is dispatched and consumed. She describes post-truth as “skepticism about truthfulness” (2019:261). This suggests the widespread dissemination of falsehood and half-truths, making people care less about what they say or believe. In other words, post-truth for Haack is the offhand and rampant spread of misinformation and laziness in accepting such information. Haack seems to concur with McIntyre that our cognitive limitations lead us to post-truth. Since our cognitive limitation leads to post-truth, then understanding post-truth as an act of deceiving the public will not be sufficient to describe post-truth as it plays out today. Therefore for Haack, post-truth is more than just lying to the public, it is also about the massive spread of misinformation and the laziness on the part of information consumers, due to cognitive limitation, to seek factual information.

Micheal Lynch (2017) argues that the evolution of post-truth is so evident, especially in our understanding now of what post-truth means, which is the dispute over the essential criteria of judging facts. For Lynch, post-truth is perpetuated by socially or politically powerful people aiming to distort the truth. He defines post-truth as a “despondent complaint (especially from media) about the widespread, blatant, unapologetic, and often-successful deceptiveness promoted by powerful agents” (2017:594). Although Lynch recognizes how individuals seem to agree with things that fit their arrogant ideologies, he holds that the fight over who determines what is true and the criteria for determining what is true is currently new regarding this phenomenon. He states, “Indeed, a striking feature of our current political landscape is that we disagree not just over values (which is healthy in a democracy), and not just over facts (which is inevitable), but over our very standards for determining what the facts are” (2021:3). Such disagreements over ideals and facts are healthy and unavoidable in a democratic society. However, the dispute over the essential criteria of judging facts is one of the primary reasons the post-truth phenomenon is problematic to our democracy. When the requirements for judging facts are compromised, every opinion becomes a fact, and the knowledge system of society suffers.

Steve Fuller explains that post-truth has evolved from questioning facts to questioning the epistemic capacity of the receiver. He understands post-truth as a condition or, better still, as a state of affairs. Fuller argues that the post-truth condition is “playing by the rules but also by controlling what the rules are” (2018:3) or, better still, “a social order whose members are always and everywhere thinking both in terms of what game to play and what moves to make in whatever game might be in play” (2018:189). In other words, the post-truth condition is more like ascertaining the criteria for determining truth and who participates in deciding such measures.

Steve Fuller argues that post-truth started long before the emergence of post-modern philosophers. He thinks that Plato recognized the impact of something similar to what we call post-truth today during his time. For instance, in *The Republic*, Plato argues that the philosopher-kings, experts in various fields, are the group that possesses knowledge and truth, determines what facts are and the criteria for identifying them, and issues them to the public to adhere to. Plato understands that this method, the philosopher-kings controlling the flow of facts, is the prescription for a stable society, any other way of managing a country would be anarchy. What this implies is that “artists would know in advance that their productions would not be tolerated if they crossed a certain line of political correctness, as determined by the philosopher-king” (2018:3). As a result, Plato thought that a well-ordered society must

limit the discovery or creation of truth to its ruling elite, determining the parameters of a shared reality that apply to everyone else (2018:189). Hence, in that kind of society, all members do not participate in determining what truth is and in establishing the criteria for attaining truth, but all follow the dictates of the philosopher-king. Thus, the implication and relevance of Plato's contribution are that the philosopher-king, judges, scientists, academic researchers, and journalists are the main characters in determining what truth is; they agree on the truth standards and determine what is true and untrue (2018:187). We could gather from Fuller's argument that post-truth is not a new phenomenon, for it has been around for a long time, and that a functional or well-ordered society is where post-truth thrives, a group of elites determines truth or the criteria for attaining truth.

Fuller further contends that this wave of post-truth, the fight over what is true, is what Plato feared would happen. However, it could have been better if the battle was of the first order: the fight over what is true and what is false. Instead, the struggle in the contemporary post-truth era is of the second order: what criteria determine truth and who determines such criteria (Fuller, 2018). According to Fuller, the political struggle over truth standards and game rules is also a battle over who can participate, which he calls the post-truth condition. He defined it as "a social order whose members are always and everywhere thinking both in terms of what game to play and what moves to make in whatever game might be in play" (Fuller, 2018:189). Here, Fuller argues that our understanding of post-truth has evolved from the idea that truth is no longer important to the idea of what can be true, and who determines what can be true. Notice something here, the attack is no longer on the objective facts but on the receivers of the objective facts. So this evolved understanding of post-truth is no longer questioning facts but questioning the epistemic capacity of the receivers of what they are providing, that is, questioning whether the receivers can know truth or seek it.

From the definitions examined above, it is apparent that post-truth has evolved and could be understood either as a political tool, as McIntyre (2018) and Lynch (2017) argued, as a political condition or state of affairs, as held by Fuller (2018), or an epistemic phenomenon as proposed by Haack (2019). Further inquiries could be made on which one of the ways of understanding post-truth best captures the facets of this phenomenon. It is not in the scope of this paper to make such inquiries; however, I must say that either way we look at post-truth, what it aims to achieve seems to be the same. For instance, post-truth used either way, aims to achieve these particular goals; to leverage truth-telling mechanisms, share what does not have verifiable evidence, create discourses that fit one's agenda, and push people to a specific direction. This implies that maybe there is no best way of understanding post-truth, as the three-perspective highlighted above capture this phenomenon's multi-faceted nature.

To sum it up, post-truth has evolved, and its evolution has a more profound meaning and a massive negative effect. Post-truth no longer means organized lying, as Arendt explains, or bullshitting, as Frankfurt suggested, or even what the Oxford dictionary suggested: objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. This is because post-truth, as its effects play out now, does not just question objective facts, it questions the individual's epistemic capabilities. It challenges whether individuals are capable of knowing facts, whether they are capable of seeking out for it, and, more importantly, whether verifiable facts are strong enough to oppose manipulated facts that have been disseminated to the public which are not verifiable. Understanding that post-truth has evolved begs the question of what powered this evolution. In the next section, I will seek to uncover the factors that motivated this evolution.

3. Rapid Rise of Social Media and Decline of Traditional Truth-Teller Institutions – The Factors that Powered this Evolution

Although Arendt was sure that organized lie is not new to the political domain, she was surprised at how effectively it is used as a weapon against truth. She states, “no one, apparently, ever believed that organized lying, as we know it today, could be an adequate weapon against truth” (1967:297). Two reasons could be provided on why post-truth is used as a weapon against the truth and what necessitated such use. These reasons could be traced to McIntyre, Haack, Lynch, and Fuller’s understanding of the post-truth phenomenon and what powered its evolution. This section holds that the decline of the truth-teller institutions and the rapid rise of social media are the two factors that precipitated post-truth evolution.

3.1. The Decline of Traditional Truth-Teller Institutions

Michael Lynch traces the decline of truth-teller institutions to what he calls “politicized knowledge polarization” (2021:14). The idea of knowledge polarization is the fight over who knows and what expert to trust. But when it is politicized, political convictions determine which expert to trust. He calls it “epistemic spillover” (2021:14). This “occurs when political convictions influence how much we are willing to trust someone’s expertise at a task unrelated to politics” (2021:4). This means when an individual decides not to believe an expert’s information or skill on issues that do not have anything to do with politics due to one’s biased political beliefs or not being from the same political group with the expert, even when evidence suggests so. This mistrust can keep individuals from drawing life-saving judgments, like taking a vaccine or allowing a doctor to operate on one. Lynch alludes that epistemic spillover can also jeopardize a society’s commitment to safeguarding and honestly disseminating correct information in two possible ways; a) when individuals distrust knowledge from experts for political reasons, they are less likely to respect the information or ideas proposed by such experts. As a result, the freedom to pursue knowledge and the openness to accepting legitimate knowledge or truth are undermined (2021:4), and b) mistrust may, oddly, lead to individuals’ selfish self-belief, for knowledge polarization appears to increase rather than decrease people’s confidence in their beliefs (2021:5). Because when our psychological flaws like confirmation and cognitive bias are entangled into our beliefs, Lynch argues that we get the psychological hubris that we have nothing to learn from anybody else (*ibid*). Hence, people lose trust in the truth-teller institution when such a scenario occurs. When this persists, the struggle to control the flow of information persists, resulting in the dwindling of faith in traditional media, and post-truth thrives.

Furthermore, McIntyre (2018) believes that the need to provide equal coverage to any story, even if it is not true, has led to the downfall of traditional media. According to McIntyre, equal coverage means giving equal time to the other side of any particular story or the desire to tell both sides, even if there is evidence that one side is untrue. He argues that the media merely succeeded in establishing “false equivalence” amongst two sides of the discussion, even when there were no genuinely credible sides (2018:77). As a result, while this may have been a reasonable or even commendable goal for opinion-based problems, which require individual contributions, it proved devastating for factual and truth-based reporting, issues with factual backup.

Another factor that powered the decline of the truth-tellers industry could be traced to the public’s primary concern or the increasing perception that the powerful

clique or group in charge of these truth-tellers organizations works only for their own objectives. Yeal Brahms stated that “these institutions serves its own interests without any substantive checks”, and that “when Donald Trump promised during his presidential election campaign in 2016 ‘to drain the swamp’ in Washington D.C, this is exactly what he intended” (2020:10). One could also argue that the decline of the truth-teller institution could be traced to a deliberate attack by powerful people to discredit the truth-teller institution in order to influence the public to disregard the truth-tellers information and upholds theirs. For example, Donald Trump tweeted on Dec. 29, 2017, from his Twitter account @realDonaldTrump that “While the Fake News loves to talk about my so-called low approval rating, @foxandfriends just showed that my rating on Dec. 28, 2017, was approximately the same as President Obama on Dec. 28, 2009, which was 47%”. This is a follow up to what he tweeted earlier that “The Fake News refuses to talk about how Big and how Strong our BASE is. They show Fake Polls just like they report Fake News. Despite only negative reporting, we are doing well - nobody is going to beat us. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” (@RealDonalTrump, 24th Decmeber, 2017). From these two instances, it is apparent that the speaker deliberately refers to a true-teller institution as fake news. Such an act influences people’s opinion of such an institution, consequently leading to its decline. In addition, Brahms also recognized that exposes of instances where corruption occurs, and the abuse of authority can also lead to the decline of truth-teller organizations. He states that the “exposes of incidents of corruption and the exploitation of power, such as those revealed in the Edward Snowden leaks, during the ‘Panama Papers’ affair, and the ‘Dieselgate scandal’” (2020:10) can lead to a lack of trust on the truth-teller media. Brahms point is that there have always been these kinds of exposes, but in the digital era, technology has made it possible for the general population to access vast amounts of knowledge regarding them. If the truth-teller institution is no longer trusted or even regarded, they decline; post-truth does not just thrives, it takes up any form. It then evolves from just manipulating facts to creating alternative facts, thereby disregarding individuals’ epistemic capacity, that is, the capacity to comprehend what truth is and what it is not.

3.2. The Rapid Rise of Social Media

The other reason that powered the evolution post-truth phenomenon can be traced to the rapid rise of information technology, especially social media, which changes how people receive and consume information.

Susan Haack recognized social media as an avenue where the “unscrupulous and careless may spread misinformation” (2019:265), and this has made it easier for these politicians to spread their ideologies to a bigger audience as fast as possible. This claim from Haack captures why this phenomenon is prevalent now; it shows the need by those propagators of post-truth to control the narrative and the use of social media to achieve such an aim. They (propagators of post-truth) accomplish this aim by overloading (sharing too much information, especially unverifiable information) the internet. Hence, by overloading facts and fake news on the internet, these ideological supremacists aiming to push their agendas have made people quit trying to sort out the truth from lies because there is too much unverifiable information. And the profound and heated political conflicts we hear about every day on this social media have made some people worry more about whether an idea benefits their side than if it is accurate (2019:265). This is because these debates trigger an emotional response, and whenever there is an emotional response to facts, people tend to worry less about the accuracy of the information and worry more about who is presenting them. If the

person raising the debate has the same political ideology as the audience, then what they are saying is fine, and if the person does not subscribe to the same political conviction, then what they are saying will not hold.

Like Haack, Fuller (2020) points to the rise of social media as the cause of the current renaissance of this phenomenon. Interestingly, he points to the government's lax decision to allow the spread of information to anybody and from any means as the main reason for the rise of social media. By the government's lax decision, I mean the freedom for anybody to share information with the public. Fuller argues that news channels have been the traditional means for getting information, for they vet their information, checking its trustworthiness before broadcasting it (Fuller, 2022:2). However, in the last 50 years, there has been a change in how information is being dispersed. An example of the lax decision from the government can be traced to the USA cable television revolution in the 1970s. As a result of this lenient ruling, it has become increasingly difficult for any government, whether governmental body or mass media, to regulate who attempts to get access to an audience (Fuller, 2020:3). This shows one of the powers of social media and how easily it can access the audience and spread information, either accurate or fake. Fuller (2020) then points to the US government officials for the breakthrough of social media in sharing information. He argued that since the introduction of the printing press, state officials had been tempted to adopt a lax licensing policy to raise tax revenues through media-related profits, despite the risk of causing social upheaval. "The difference today is that social media has shrunk the distance between platform and content providers. In principle, anyone can start their own newsfeed or video channel and simply let the market determine its fate" (Fuller 2020:3). By so doing, social media, which claim to be only platform providers rather than content suppliers, are now carriers of information. This aids in the fast spread of information and can be dangerous if the news is fake and unverifiable, for it reaches a larger audience faster.

McIntyre also concurs that the development of social media has created ideal circumstances for post-truth to flourish. The rise of social media has assisted in the decline of truth-teller institutions (traditional media and academics) and the neglect of facts. With the emergence of social media, he states, "There are so many news sources these days that it is nearly impossible to tell which of them are reliable and which are not without some careful vetting" (2018:97). Hence for the masses, with facts and opinions available side by side on the internet, there is no clarity on what or whom to believe for perhaps, now every citizen and every organization can claim/pretend/aspire to be spreaders of "news" and "information". This results from a lack of filters or verification on the internet. So, readers and viewers are now easily exposed to a constant stream of untainted material, especially by those who value their opinion and agendas higher than others.

When opinion is mixed with facts, it becomes difficult to track down and hold on to facts. This then gives rise to an easy replacement of truth with opinion and allows post-truth to take whatever form or shape it wants. Hannah Arendt (1967) states that this is the most surprising thing about modern lies in the political domain (post-truth), that "the modern political lies deal efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody" (Arendt, 1967: 308), for there seems to be confusion on which one is true and which is an opinion as both are displayed side by side. This is clear when rewriting recent history in front of individuals who were there, but it also applies to all other forms of image-making, where any known and accepted truth can be ignored or rejected if doing so is likely to damage the picture. Unlike a traditional portrait, this is because an image is meant to replace reality rather than flatter it fully. Furthermore, Arendt argues that this is possible because of modern

techniques (social media) for disseminating information (Arendt, 1967:308). How exactly does social media precipitate post-truth evolution?

Anthony Mayfield (2008) explains that with its involvement, openness, dialogue, community, and connection features, social media offers a great environment for individuals to participate. Importantly, social media is not merely a communication medium, but it incorporates a whole new communication system. The difference is that communication media has a generalized understanding of certain terms, but there is no such thing as social media. For example, meanings are very ambiguous on social media. This is because social media is a virtual space allowing users to define their meanings. Eileen Coulloty and Jane Suiter (2021) capture it well when they argue that journalists must learn to contend with the obstacle of reaffirming facts because of the coercive impact of powerful political personnel over the media system,

While individuals defining their meaning to terms seems to be the direction social media takes, it also brings together people who share such understanding and beliefs. D.E. Wittikower (2010) argues that although social media brings together widely dispersed groups of people, it also allows these people to form intentional communities. An intentional community is a community that is intentionally or purposely formed by people choosing whom they engage with and whom they avoid. Choosing is based on people who share the same ideas and beliefs. This group operates within a closed community, choosing between accepting information that supports their own opinions and attitudes or avoiding coming into contact with the material that does not, which has the unintended consequence of aggravating their situation. According to Wittikower (2010), this community is different from an authentic community where social contact happens due to events beyond the individuals' control. This authentic community is open to changing its beliefs when verifiable facts support any information. And since such a community is authentic, they are open to receiving such information from anybody. Considering the communities social media help create, how does post-truth emerge from social media?

When such communities are created, social media gives a vast space for individuals to articulate their own meaning, and because of social media's worldwide reach, it also transcends communication constraints. By transcending communication constraints, I mean that social media is not regulated like other means of passing information like TV and newspapers, and its information is not vetted like TV and newspapers. And it can reach millions of people instantly and faster than TV and newspapers. When these two qualities (the vast space to articulate one's point and how it transcends communication constraints) combine, social media and their users gain an unparalleled ability to create, establish, and redefine discourse. As a result of these two properties of social media, it presents the perfect opportunity for facts to be denied and narratives changed, consequently giving rise to the post-truth phenomenon (see Lupton 2017). As mentioned earlier, the chances of post-truth emerging are high when these properties come together. It is also possible that such properties can come together, and post-truth will not arise. Hence, it depends on the verifiability of the content being shared. So, what the ideological supremacists do is that they, aided by the virtuality of social media, put forward their opinions constructed as facts, which are picked up and circulated on social media. This information becomes what people believe or challenges the existing facts, questioning its truth-worthiness.

Furthermore, Yan Su (2022) suggests that introducing social platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems also contributed to how social media has influenced post-truth evolution. Su claims that on their social media mediums, many Internet corporations have implemented algorithmic recommendation systems to increase what information user access, but the method itself is under growing scrutiny. This

confirms Chen Ying's (2021) argument that based on the selection of the criteria and value judgements, the artificial intelligence system pushes the so-called news (a kind of news that fits the particular individual's interest) to the individual (Ying, 2021). However, the public is unaware of the procedure, and these systems' interior workings are not transparent.

These internet corporations have maintained that this algorithmic technique is unbiased and fair. However, they have consistently declined to reveal how it. This is because, Su claims, that the news that consumers may access via the social media platform is simply a portion of the 'truth' that specific interest groups desire people to see, making it impossible for the public to determine for certain whether these corporations are associated with particular groups of people (Su, 2022:557). This AI algorithm constantly reinforces the audience's existing cognition as it continuously satisfies their specific demands as the algorithm mechanism recommends. This may alienate some people from what is happening in society while improving communication within their intentional community and escaping from numerous social contradictions. When these conditions become available, post-truth does not just thrive, it evolves into a more powerful and dangerous concept.

4. What Can Be Done? Solutions

Due to the understanding that post-truth threatens our democracy, there is a strong reason for us to find a way to combat this phenomenon. The knowledge that post-truth has been around since the dawn of civilization due to its attachment to politics raises the question of whether there has not been an effort to fight this phenomenon and whether we can even eradicate the effect of this phenomenon.

Significant ways to address the post-truth effect have been suggested. For instance, Arendt would suggest that upholding facts is the best way to counter organized lying (post-truth). Arendt claims that despite the detrimental effects of post-truth, facts are still stubbornly resistant to its effects. Arendt understands that while facts are not secure in the hands of the powerful or those in authority, they are secure in the hands of those who genuinely have all the power, which are the truth-teller institution and the academics. She quotes, "Facts assert themselves by being stubborn, and their fragility is oddly combined with great resiliency – the same irreversibility that is the hallmark of all human activities" (Arendt, 1967:310). Arendt argued that due to facts' resilience, they could not succumb to the powerful exploits. She states, "In their stubbornness, facts are superior to power; they are less transitory than power formations, which arise when men get together for a purpose but disappear as soon as the purpose is either achieved or lost" (Arendt, 1967:310). This claim makes the case that power, by its very nature, can never replace the dependable steadiness of factual reality, which, since it is the past, has expanded into a realm that exceeds our comprehension or even manipulation. As a result, upholding facts will aid in fighting the dangerous effect of this phenomenon. Can we say that a post-truth world is not possible because facts are stubborn? Is fact as stubborn as Arendt's claim?

Two possible problems relate to Arendt's suggestion that I must explore. First, upholding facts seems a bit unattainable since it is the truth-teller institution's job to uphold facts, and they are currently in decline due to the rise of social media and the direct attack of politicians. Therefore, it seems that the only way to uphold facts will be to re-establish and reform the truth-teller institution, which could take time and might not even be completely achieved. Alternatively, the job of the truth-teller institution could be extended to everyone. This would suggest that everyone has the duty to hold facts and circulate them, and with the availability of social media, such a

task would be easy. This arrangement's downside will be that facts will eventually be easily manipulated. This is because everyone will have their understanding of the facts and circulates them as it fits them, and with the introduction of the social media algorithmic system, it will be difficult for one to come across facts or even believe them when they eventually do. This leads to the second problem with Arendt's suggestion that facts might not be as stubborn as she thinks. Facts are stubborn in that they cannot be changed, but they can be manipulated or misrepresented. The post-truth phenomenon prides itself on the ability to easily manipulate facts to fit the political authorities' needs and agenda. Therefore, as difficult as it is to change facts, the possibility of manipulating them and the availability of social media to aid in circulating manipulated facts suggest that facts are not as stubborn as Arendt perceived.

To reiterate, that facts can be manipulated does not mean that they are not stubborn, for their stubbornness depends on how they represent reality, and reality is unchangeable. However, while facts are unchangeable, they can be manipulated. Therefore, my argument that facts are not as stubborn as Arendt claims does not depend on facts but on how they are used. Hence upholding facts might not be sufficient to counter the effects of post-truth. To uphold facts better, Michael Lynch suggested how we can fight off the manipulation of facts.

Lynch recognized that we are flooded with data on social media nowadays, making it exceedingly difficult to determine facts and manipulate them. However, it is only by intervening intentionally and purposefully will social media be prevented from becoming a breeding ground for populist disinformation. We cannot ban the use of social media or limit the spreading of information on social media platforms on verified users, and verifying all users seems not feasible. Hence, as a solution to the post-truth problem, Lynch suggests that because of the rise of social media, a reinvention of epistemic rules is necessary (Lynch, 2021). He argues that "for one thing, technological changes in how we receive information require changes in how we evaluate evidence" (Lynch, 2021:n.p). This means that instead of just following our already existing epistemic rules, we should try to create additional rules. I have to mention that Lynch is not talking about the reinvention of epistemic rules, like how we arrive at knowledge, for that has its deeper concerns. Instead, Lynch is referring to figuring out how to use social media better, which website or platform we should trust, and how to differentiate facts from fake news.

Is Arendt correct about the stubbornness of facts? The obvious answer to the question is that facts are stubborn. Facts are stubborn if we understand that they are representations of reality that are unchangeable. However, that facts are stubborn does not mean that they cannot be manipulated. The rapid rise of social media provided powerful political authorities with means to manipulate facts to fits their agenda. While the rise of social media precipitated the evolution of post-truth and caused a mass manipulation of facts, a reinvention of our epistemic rules, that is, establishing a robust way of vetting information on social media, seems to be a way to combat post-truth effects.

Concerns exist about the potential implications of this reinvention of our epistemic principles for our knowing system, as well as whether it is necessary, practical, or even a post-truth manoeuvre. Lynch does not, in my opinion, propose altering the standards for defining knowledge. Michael Lynch made the valid points that we should learn how to utilise social media more effectively, which websites or platforms to trust, and how to distinguish real news from phoney. This is due to the fact that altering our epistemic guidelines will essentially alter what knowledge is if it is regarded as justified true belief. Furthermore, our attempts to redefine knowledge

ultimately result in the replacement of information with subjective views and opinions. In the event that Lynch proposes that we should learn how to utilise social media more effectively, then my solution fits in well with his.

I propose that people take responsibility for their own epistemic well-being. I will provide a path that, in my opinion, provides us with a hint as to how we may take responsibility for our own epistemic health.

I believe Nathan King (2021) provides us with a hint in his book *The Excellent Mind* on how we should manage our epistemic wellbeing. However, he first realised that in order to effectively communicate with a small group of individuals or a larger audience, critical thinking and effective communication skills are essential additions (2021:11). However, King (2021) contends that manipulation results if abilities such as critical thinking and effective communication are not associated with intellectual virtue. This is due to the fact that intellectual qualities impede our ability to effectively interact with others. King's (2021) explanation elucidates the nature of the post-truth phenomena, since its proponents are informed individuals who possess a clear understanding of their objectives and a strong drive to attain them. King goes on to say that people should develop intellectual qualities like caution and independent thought in order to preserve the integrity of the truth notion in our society (2021:254). As a way of thinking, doing, and motivating oneself, he describes intellectual virtue. Intellectual virtue therefore motivates a person to seek knowledge and shun deception since it is believed that truth and knowledge are desirable and that irrationality and lying should be avoided. This drive prompts the person to take action, such as looking for and disseminating verified information.

King teaches us that in order to be in control of our epistemic welfare, we must develop the intellectual virtues of being a) careful thinkers and b) autonomous thinkers. Careful thinking is defined as putting forth a concerted effort to avoid falsehood by supporting one's beliefs with verifiable evidence (2021:254), and autonomous thinking is defined as thinking boldly and independently without relying on the opinion of others (2021:254).

What particular elements support this post-truth situation, and how may King's proposal assist us combat them? First of all, King contends that intellectual virtue is a disposition that provokes our thinking and inspires us to take action. Developing intellectual virtue, therefore, primarily discredits the tendency for people to be lazy in their pursuit of truth, increasing people's eagerness and interest in independently evaluating any knowledge before ingesting it. Furthermore, we will be strengthened against believing something just because it aligns with our political beliefs or fits neatly with our agenda because most of us have a tendency to accept information without question or analysis and to cultivate the intellectual virtue of careful thinking. As a result, we will be able to identify false information regardless of the speaker's affiliation with a certain political party or even family. Additionally, one might avoid being persuaded or intimidated to accept anything without solid proof by developing the intellectual virtue of autonomy. Hence, one is self-assured enough to decide when there is solid evidence, brave enough to confront pretenders, and bold enough to hold their stance.

How do we cultivate and use these intellectual characteristics, one would wonder? First of all, it is clear that the intellectual virtues that King emphasised should be taught to people. Accordingly, in order to put these virtues into practice, people must consciously or unconsciously strive to be cognitively in contact with reality, which entails being curious to double-check any information before consuming it and refusing to base one's knowledge and information of reality on the opinion of another.

Conclusion

This paper mainly explores whether the post-truth phenomenon is a new or an existing phenomenon. It bases its understanding of Arendt's view that lying has been part of politics since the dawn of civilization to argue that post-truth has always been around. It concludes that post-truth is not a new phenomenon but an already existing one which has evolved into a more robust and dangerous concept that threatens our democracy. This paper recognized that factors like the decline of truth-teller institutions and the rapid rise of social media are the two dominant factors that powered post-truth evolution.

Although facts can be manipulated, due to the understanding that reality is unchangeable, this paper suggests a way to deal with fact manipulation. Social media corporations should play a significant role in tackling the idea of manipulating facts and creating alternative ones. But their introduction of social media algorithm systems meant that they were escalating the problem and deepening the effects of post-truth. This paper holds that reinventing our epistemic rules, which includes providing how to evaluate and differentiate facts from fake news on social media, will be a good solution to address post-truth effects. However, individuals taking charge of their epistemic welfare will be a better solution.

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