

## Blurred Borders between Fact and Fantasy: A Critique of Hannah Arendt's "Defactualization" in a Subtly Self-aggrandizing and Overtly Deceiving "Post-Truth Era"

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### Abstract

The term "post-truth", that is believed to have made its maiden appearance in a 1992 essay, pertaining to the Iran-Contra Scandal and Persian Gulf War, garnered widespread popularity, in the form of "post-truth politics" recently on account of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the U.K. Brexit referendum. In fact, it was a political culture in which public opinions and media narratives have become almost entirely disconnected from the substance and policy of legislation. Interestingly such a relatively recent concept that has been vaulted up in an age of Twitter threads and viral news has its roots in post-modernity, relativism, even in the philosophical notions of Nietzsche, Weber, Leo Strauss, Foucault and Derrida, who were inevitably sceptical of the division between facts and values.

Keywords: Post-Truth, Defactualization, Falsehood, Individual, Society, Social-Media.

This is post-truth era, where borders blur between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and non-fiction as mentioned in *The Post-Truth Era* by Ralph Keyes. The inability to discern fact from fiction which came to be known now as "post-truth" forms the

crux of the German-American philosopher and political theorist, Hannah Arendt's concept of "defactualization". Literary studies, currently is not just about analysing classic texts with age-old questions, or rejecting critical close reading. Instead in a rapidly changing world dominated by cyberspace, literary and cultural studies must hopefully navigate our dizzying epoch of post truth politics and ecological urgency.

This paper is an unbiased and dispassionate exploration through a few books, involving controversies, scandals and assassinations deeply engrossed in our political and social landscape, with renewed passion and indignation. In the Trumpian climate, generally characterised by fabricated truths, misinformation, falsehood and misleading propaganda, "defactualisation" is one of the greatest crisis where facts are either habitually denied or ignored due to an emphasis on subjectivity. At this point, literary study becomes more important than ever as literature invents in order to tell us hard-won and difficult truths. Deception conceals, while literature reveals.

The sixteenth-century British philosopher Francis Bacon quipped, 'What is truth?'<sup>1</sup> said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. "Contrary to this reflection, let us stay for a while, though hesitatingly for an answer.

Truth, being a disputed territory and an ambiguous farrago today, quite many of us are likely to give up on the hunt for truth altogether, articulating a universal truce on truth claims. The English traditionalist philosopher, Roger Scruton argues, "All discourse and dialogue depend upon the concept of truth. "To agree with another is to accept the truth of what he says; to disagree is to reject it."<sup>2</sup>However, is truth nothing more than a conversational convention or do we really mean something relative or absolute when we say that something is true or false?

Apparently, it is worth to take into discussion four distinct perspectives on truth: Firstly, the pragmatic view “Truth is that which works” is a belief that there are certain things which are valid at all times and in all places, we believe in them or not. If a belief aids to live a contented life, there is no harm in believing it. Secondly, a more radical notion pronounces truth as a socially constructed shared imaginative enterprise that enables us to live together peacefully. In fact truth is something what you make it, not what an individual makes it, but what a society makes it. The third common stance is that “truth is what science tells us”, as science promises a firm place to our intellectual stand and scientific methods are verifiable by empirical observation or experience. Finally, as Nietzsche famously puts it “There are no facts, only interpretations”<sup>3</sup>, truth claims to be branded as an instrument of violent coercion, even torture. Thus, “truth is tyranny that must be resisted”, for interpretations struggle tenaciously to dominate, exploit, or oppress other people under the pretext of bringing them in line with “the truth.”

It is never too hard to catechize these takes on truth since it is uncertain as for whom truth works in the first place, whether for an individual or society? If truth is merely a social construct, how do we condone a society that physically mutilates women or sexually abuse children? Science, which identifies physical relationships and principles that explain the world around us, at times go silent when we need to look beyond facts, data and observations. Finally, one can combat tyranny, only if one can recognise it. If nothing is true, how do you criticise power for then it is devoid of basis; submission to tyranny is the consequential of renouncing the difference between what we wish to hear and what it actually is. This culminates in the demise of one’s individuality and the collapse of any political system that depends upon this individualism.

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popularity, in the form of "post-truth politics" recently on account of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the U.K. Brexit referendum. In fact, it was a political culture in which public opinions and media narratives have become almost entirely disconnected from the substance and policy of legislation. Interestingly such a relatively recent concept that has been vaulted up in an age of Twitter threads and viral news has its roots in post-modernity, relativism, even in the philosophical notions of Nietzsche, Weber, Leo Strauss, Foucault and Derrida, who were inevitably sceptical of the division between facts and values.

“This is post-truth era, where borders blur between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and non-fiction”<sup>4</sup> says Ralph Keyes in his phenomenal text *The Post-Truth Era*, a montage of his investigative journalism. The inability to discern fact from fiction which we understand now as “post-truth” forms the crux of the German-American philosopher and political theorist, Hannah Arendt’s concept of “defactualization”. Literary studies, currently is not just about analysing classic texts with age-old questions, or rejecting critical close reading. Instead in a rapidly changing world dominated by cyberspace, literary and cultural studies must hopefully navigate our dizzying epoch of post truth politics and ecological urgency.

The American political theorist, Hannah Arendt, in her essay *Lying in Politics* (1972), posits the concept of defactualization, which is today known to be something very close to ‘post-truth’. The essay explores a diligent and in depth political deception that was unveiled with the leaking of The Pentagon Papers in 1971. This essay which came in Arendt’s *Crisis of the Republic* (1972), a collection of thoughtful and prescient essays on civil disobedience, politics, violence and the pedestal of a sane and stable society is indeed an incisive critique of the professional “problem-solvers” tasked with solving American foreign policy "problems" during the Vietnam War”<sup>5</sup>, and who comprised the group that authored the McNamara report.

Differentiating “defactualization” from “deliberate falsehood” and from “lying” Arendt writes,

“The deliberate falsehood deals with contingent facts; that is, with matters that carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are. Factual truths are never compellingly true.”<sup>6</sup>

Arendt continues emphatically,

Truth or falsehood—it does not matter which anymore, if your life depends on your acting as though you trusted; truth that can be relied on disappears entirely from public life, and with it the chief stabilizing factor in the ever-changing affairs of men.<sup>7</sup>

When the Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich first used the word “post-truth” in his article “A Government of Lies” (1992) in *The Nation*, referring it to “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”<sup>8</sup>, it is never an exaggeration if the Oxford Dictionaries designated “post-truth” its 2016 Word of the Year.

Tesich argues that “American society that has made the conscious decision to live in a post-truth world at the expense of democracy is a testimony of how humans’ desire to protect their self-esteem has allowed government figureheads to shield the public from the truth”<sup>9</sup>. Evidently the author’s dissection of the government’s action and public’s lack of action in this article asserts his argument that the George H. W. Bush Administration’s “felt safe” in deceiving the public about the Persian Gulf War since “it knows that the truth would have little impact on us” because “we, as free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world”.<sup>10</sup> An intention to portray the existing government as having suddenly turned evil is definitely an improbability. In fact, Tesich claimed it is “we who have changed...we have transformed what we have perceived”<sup>11</sup>. The 27-year-old essay tells us that the more we, as society, stray from the truth, the closer we move towards a totalitarian

government. Tesich claimed that we are “becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams”<sup>12</sup>.

Two important global events of 2016, the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election inflamed an aura of insecurities and pitfalls for the media, press and all over the world. “The free circulation of malicious lies, the ineffectiveness of fact-checking, the resilience of populist propaganda, racism and sexism, the indisputable features of the so-called post-truth era challenges the fundamental cornerstone of ethical journalism – that facts matter for democracy and that people want to be well-informed when called upon to make potentially life-changing decisions.”<sup>13</sup> One can conveniently blame the current reigning trio – technology, internet and social media – whose integral priorities besides the media’s own failures culminated in a fallacious and politicked press and broadcast system that again is beguiled in a catch-all Metropolitan elite, with its inadequate and inappropriate strategies to address a frustrated and wronged humanity.

Ken Wilber, the cutting –edge American philosopher, often hailed as the “Einstein of consciousness studies”, the originator of the world’s first truly integrative philosophy, “Integral Theory”, explains how we arrived where we are and why there is cause for hope though in a world of turmoil, in his provocative work *Trump and the Post-truth World*. Wilber blames the failure of a progressive, leading edge of society that is characterised by the desire to be as just and inclusive, to what we owe the thrust toward women’s rights and liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights movement in the United States to end the racial discrimination and segregation, the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the concern for oppression in all its forms. “It is only when members of society’s leading edge can heal themselves that a new, integral evolutionary force can emerge to move us beyond the social and political turmoil of our current time to offer genuine leadership toward greater wholeness.”<sup>14</sup>

The warning signs of a communication crisis have been flashing for some time when there was fierce criticism of Face book by a Norwegian editor over its censorship of one of the most famous images of the Vietnam War that led to a rare moment of global solidarity among outraged writers, journalists, media experts and free-speech campaigners in September 2016.

Studies and surveys by health practitioners around the world posit that climate emergency crisis and fake news pose the prospective threat to human health in the next 25 years. The so-called global study finding shockingly reveals that the bottom-line objectives of majority of healthcare professionals inclined to tackle health challenges created by the climate emergencies which in fact accelerated drug resistance. The climate breakdown was discerned to go conjointly with amplified migration owing to globalisation, and 72 per cent of respondents said that this led to more drug resistance. “The very crux of the ‘post-truth’ digital wildfire era is that it places the onus to verify stories on the reader, who could be a person without the time, energy or resources to do so,”<sup>15</sup> remarked Tamar Ghosh, chief executive, CEO, Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene(RSTMH).

Global warming was termed "a multi-billion-dollar worldwide industry, created by fanatically anti-industrial environmentalists" by Martin Durkin, the British television director and producer. His film “The Great Global Warming Swindle” would radically change history, and predictions say that a span of five years would bear out the idea that ‘greenhouse effect’, the malefactor behind global warming is a convenient claptrap.

When responding to “the greatest scam in history”, John Coleman, the American television weatherman claims, “The polar ice is increasing, not melting away. Polar Bears are increasing in number.”<sup>16</sup> When Trump claimed that the global warming myth was concocted by the Chinese to decelerate the US manufacturing, the British journalist, Matt Ridley describes the "climate change agenda" as a "conspiracy against the poor" in *The Spectator* in

2015. Equivocally, National Geographic and some Australian meteorologists weighed in that Durkin's film was "not scientifically sound and presents a flawed and very misleading interpretation of the science".

It was indeed quite agitating for the global sentiments as 'BeBest' website published an article reporting that President Trump had instructed his acting secretary of state to nullify any oaths of office that were taken on the Quran. This is rather challenging to nullify something which never had taken place at all. Specifically, a 28 January 2018 post on the blog "The Pedogate"— stated that the Pope Francis Bergoglio was among three defendants found guilty "yesterday" of child trafficking and murder, among other grisly crimes, by the "International Common Law Court of Justice". The court itself serves as a one-man blog with the assertion that the Pope 'resigned', thus imputing it as fabricated information. Nobody other than the notorious junk news purveyor "Your News Wire" reports that California Governor Jerry Brown has mandated the use of gay pornography in elementary schools in order to teach children about LGBT sex, which has turned out to be one of the most trending hoax news of the times.

Fake news, the offspring of an unholy marriage between propaganda and advertising money have come to encompass many ends: propaganda tool, self-defence mechanism, or money-making scheme. Out of all the channels through which fake news spreads, false information is being passed around social media platforms, the biggest culprit being the instant messaging app, WhatsApp. In recent years, the peddling fake news via WhatsApp came to be an inevitable factor in inciting violence in India at least a few times. A lynching video, apparently old and taken from another country, was spread through WhatsApp as an event from the area of Muzaffarnagar, where by Hindu-Muslim riots hit the Muzaffarnagar prior to 2014 elections. Fake news on foreigners abducting children led to the beating and lynching of innocent people in the state of Assam in north eastern India in July 2018.



An image of Gandhi, apparently captured the moment he was killed by Nathuram Godse that had been going viral was found to be false and misleading by India Today Anti Fake News War Room (AFWA) as investigating the origin of the image, AFWA found it to be a still from 'Nine Hours to Rama', a 1963 movie by Mark Robinson.

Counter to contemporary definitions of post-truth that emphasize credence on emotion over facts and evidence, the notion of defactualization propounded by Arendt, identify "hyper-rationality as the mechanism that blurs the line between "fact and fantasy".<sup>17</sup>In a defactualized world, she explains that both deception and even self-deception are effected meaningless, for both rely on preserving the distinction between truth and falsehood. Nevertheless, in a defactualized environment, the individual severs all his contact with not only his audience, but also the real world, which definitely would keep up with him since he can always get rid of his mind from it but never his body.

Deception has become a routine part of contemporary life, and with the influence of therapists, entertainers, politicians, academics, and lawyers, with their flexible code of ethics, contribute to the post-truth era. "Post-truthfulness builds a fragile social edifice based on wariness. It erodes the foundation of trust that underlies any healthy civilization. When enough of us peddle fantasy as fact, society loses its grounding in reality. Society would crumble altogether if we assumed others were as likely to dissemble as tell the truth. We are perilously close to that point."<sup>18</sup>

Christopher Schaberg's *The Work of Literature in an Age of Post-Truth* is worth discussion as it is an urgent reappraisal of what it means to read and to teach literature in this post-truth context. "It captures the essence of what it is like to experience the wildness of the 21st century as an observant, thinking human. The banalities of everyday life mix here with the political urgencies and mediatic confusion of our age. "Schaberg has sketched a convincing portrait of this unsettling moment."<sup>19</sup>Schaberg questions about the work of

literature, about specific works of literature, and how liberal arts education and literary studies might help us focus on and navigate through the miasma of this unsettling, unsettled moment.

This paper is an unbiased and dispassionate exploration through a few books, involving controversies, scandals and assassinations deeply engrossed in our political and social landscape, with renewed passion and indignation. In the Trumpian climate, generally characterised by fabricated truths, misinformation, falsehood and misleading propaganda, “defactualization” is one of the greatest crisis where facts are either habitually denied or ignored due to an emphasis on subjectivity. At this point, as the fake news machine whirrs and alternative facts abound, literary study becomes more important than ever as literature invents in order to tell us hard-won and difficult truths. Deception conceals, while literature reveals.

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