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## **WHERE DO WE GO IN A POST-TRUTH AGE?**

Alternative titles:

A post-truth age – how do we speak truth to power in a post-truth age?

From the age of truth to the era of truthiness

Thomas Morley, "Now is the month of maying/When merry lads are playing...Each with his bonny lass/Upon the greeny grass..." Also, May 1 is International Workers Day . . .

This is a brief talk about truth, an idea that is central to the mission of the Princeton University Library, and to all libraries. We are here this evening to celebrate a great library.

Libraries are the repositories of truth and the memory of truth. In principle, libraries are the repositories of all the ideas that humans have created, ideas expressed in words, images and objects (including, these days, digital objects). No library can contain all the ideas, and the most challenging task of librarians is to select what must and can be preserved – the twin responsibilities of libraries and librarians is to determine what to save in a context of limited resources

Not everything preserved is true, of course, but the responsibility of the library is to preserve falsehood as well as truth. *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are part of the human record, and deserve a place here. It is the responsibility of the users of the library, not librarians, to assess the truthfulness of what the collections contain – in a sense the only responsibility of the custodians of the collections is to vouch for the fact that the collections are what they purport to be. So libraries are palaces of truth, but not guarantors of truth. Truth can only be understood in the context of falsehood, its historical and universal enemy.

What concerns me this evening is the social meaning of truth. What is the role of truth in a democratic society? Or as the title of this talk suggests, what is the role of truth now, in what has been called a post-truth age? I would like to ask you to consider whether the modern commitments to truth and democracy can survive and surmount their current political and epistemological enemies?

Let's start with the fact (a concept I will return to) that our last President, who mostly abandoned the nearly century old tradition of presidential news conferences, consistently referred to "fake news" and "alternative facts," a phrase used by U.S. Counselor to the President, Kellyanne Conway, during a *Meet the Press* interview on January 22, 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States. When pressed during the interview with Chuck Todd to explain why Spicer would "utter a provable falsehood", Conway stated that Spicer was giving "alternative facts". Todd responded, "Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods." . . . Conway later defended her choice of words, defining "alternative facts" as "additional facts and alternative information".

The phrase "alternative facts" was claimed to be similar to a phrase used in Trump's 1987 book, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*. In that book, "truthful hyperbole" was described as "an innocent form of exaggeration—and ... a very effective form of promotion". The book claimed that "people want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular." The ghostwriter of the book, Tony Schwartz, said he coined that phrase and claimed that Trump "loved it". Conway later defended her remarks in an interview published in March 2017: "Two plus two is four. Three plus one is four. Partly cloudy, partly sunny. Glass half full, glass half empty. Those are alternative facts." In a radio interview with Mark Simone that was described by Salon in February 2018, she claimed that professional fact-checkers tend to be political liberals and are "selecting what [they] think should be fact-checked...Americans are their own fact checkers. People know, they have their own facts and figures, in terms of meaning which facts and figures are important to them."

On January 16, 2018, German linguists declared the phrase "alternative facts" the non-word of the year 2017. It was also chosen by Austrian linguists as the non-word of the year in December 2017. The Washington Post (25 Jan 2021) reported that its Fact Checker team recorded 492 suspect claims in the first hundred days of Trump's presidency and by the end of his term he had "accumulated 30,573 untruths . . . averaging about 21 erroneous claims a day." Much of this was facilitated by President Trump (and others) use of Twitter which, along with Facebook, has transformed the concept of news by taking control of the media away from professional news organizations and empowered all of us to create and mediate "news". This is not the moment to expand upon this idea, but I would ask you to remember what news and politics were like before the advent of social media, and to ask yourself whether you think the situation can be improved by new Facebook/Meta policies developed by Mark Zuckerberg or new Twitter protections created by Elon Musk?

And, again apologizing for not having time to expand on the thought, let me argue that the fragility of historical conceptions of truth threaten not just democratic practices in the United States, but around the world. There has been a frightening global decline of both democracy and truth telling. Think Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orban, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Kim Jung-On. To give just one example, on 21 March 2022 the *New York Times* reported that "Using a barrage of increasingly outlandish falsehoods, President Putin has created an alternative reality, one in which Russia is at war not with Ukraine but with a larger, more pernicious enemy in the West. Even since the war began, the lies have gotten more and more bizarre, transforming from claims that "true sovereignty" for Ukraine was possible only under Russia . . ."

A post-truth era?

In September, 2016, *The Economist* commented that "the world has entered an era of post-truth politics" in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion. Scholars have commented that (McKinzie thesis) "driven by declining trust in traditional institutions, members of society in a post-truth world no longer adhere to conventional principles of factual reasoning and instead begin to seek new ways of viewing the world."

Chris Wallace, interviewed as to why he left Fox News after 18 years as a TV anchor: “I just no longer felt comfortable with the programming at Fox. . . I’m fine with opinion: conservative opinion, liberal opinion. But when people start to question the truth – Who won the 2020 election? Was Jan. 6 an insurrection? I found that unsustainable.” (NYT 3-27-2022)

It has been suggested that in a post-truth age the most meaningful question in public discourse is “who can tell the best story?” One of my current thesis-writing seniors has commented that in a post-truth world, many people “no longer adhere to the conventional principles of factual reasoning” instead, “these people seek to adopt a different form of viewing the world. This opens up a manipulative space for originators of disinformation, like Trump, to attempt to influence public opinion by offering a new version of reality specifically targeted at those people already mistrustful or dissatisfied with the present social order.” (McKinzie, thesis conclusion)

I suppose the best example of how this process has worked is the framing of the 6 January 2020 events in Washington, DC by Republican Party National Committee officials. On Feb. 4, 2022 the NYT reported that the attack on the Capitol was an exercise of what these officials called “legitimate political discourse” that had “nothing to do with violence at the Capitol”. Or, to take another version of violence and speech, a week ago the *Times* reported that “A California man was arrested this week on charges that he sent messages to Merriam-Webster in which he threatened to shoot and bomb its offices because he didn’t like the company’s dictionary definitions relating to gender identity . . .” (4-22-2022 NYT) Or to put the matter in hopelessly judicial language, last month a federal judge reviewing charges against former President Trump for falsely claiming that there had been fraud in the 2020 election, said that Mr. Trump had “justified the plan with allegations of election fraud” which he “likely knew . . . was baseless,” thereby demonstrating “such conscious dishonesty [as] would point toward a corrupt state of mind”.

Alas, owned by Jeff Bezos) posted an article entitled “How a billionaires boys’ club came to dominate the public square: The information that courses through legacy publications and social media networks is increasingly shaped by billionaires and other wealthy dynasties:”

The world’s richest man, Elon Musk, attacked a publication owned by the world’s third richest man, Jeff Bezos, last month for reprinting a column published by the world’s 13th richest man, Mike Bloomberg.

The Bloomberg opinion article, posted by The Washington Post, asked whether Musk’s recent investment in Twitter would endanger freedom of speech. “WaPo always good for a laugh,” Musk [wrote](#) in a tweet, with smiling and crying emoji.

The jab underscored an unusual and consequential feature of the nation’s new digital public square: Technological change and the fortunes it created have given a vanishingly small club of massively wealthy individuals the ability to play arbiter, moderator and bankroller of not only the information that feeds the nation’s discourse but also the architecture that undergirds it.

[How a billionaires boys’ club came to dominate the public square - The Washington Post](#)

The social state of mind is the problem that has interested me ever since I attended college. I majored in a field called History and Literature, and specialized in the study of Stuart (that is, seventeenth century) England. I chose that place and time because it seemed to me then that it was the moment at which modernity emerged or to use a phrase no longer historically respectable, it was when the Middle Ages gave way to modern thought and society. It was also the era in which capitalism was becoming the dominant form of social economy, the Reformation was reaching its fulfillment and the first scientific revolution was transforming the study and understanding of nature. I was then, as now, particularly interested in the development of political ideas and institutions, and I was drawn to the transition from Hobbes to Locke – and wrote my senior thesis on the great republican thinker James Harrington.

A potent combination of factors, but mostly the scientific revolution and the influence of Francis Bacon, made this the era of experimental inquiry, which stressed empiricism rather than revelation, and led to the triumph of positivism in thinking. Politically, this was the era of the English Civil War and the Commonwealth, and the triumph of the common law over assertions of Divine Right. It seemed to me in 1953, when I became an upperclassman and discovered the

rare books library on campus, that I was studying the origins of social and political truth, and that has never ceased to be my primary concern as a student. I shifted my scholarly focus to the British colonies in America, and later studied American politics and law, especially constitutional law, but my continuing concern has always been how a (small “r”) republican nation could effectuate the common good – since the truth that I had learned from classical republicanism was that the highest good was what was good for the community as a whole. I have tried not to deviate from that understanding and commitment. Which is why existing in a post-truth age has been so difficult for me.

Although I am certainly not a philosopher, I suppose I must step back at this point and talk about truth, which *Wikipedia* tells us “is the property of being in accord with fact or reality. . . . Most commonly, truth is viewed as the correspondence of language or thought to a mind-independent world.” An online dictionary tells us that truth is “the real facts about something” or “the quality or state of being true”. These seem too tautological to be of much help to us, but they drive us back to some relationship between truth and fact. Again, *Wikipedia* asserts that “Fact is basically something that exists, or is present in reality. Hence, these are things that can be seen visually, and these are the things that can actually be verified. Facts are objective matters rather than subjective ones. It is not just something that you believe, but rather these are more or less the things that can be observed empirically, or by the senses. So, facts can be seen and heard, as well as proven by the other senses.” Or maybe we are better off with a neologism: “truthiness,” which can be defined as a truthful or seemingly truthful quality that is claimed for something not because of supporting facts or evidence but because of a feeling that it is true or a desire for it to be true.

Part of the problem here, of course, is the transformation of what counts as “news” in contemporary society. In a speech at Stanford University last week, former President Barack Obama noted that: “Solving the disinformation problem won’t cure all that ails our democracies or tears at the fabric of our world, but it can help tamp down divisions and let us

rebuild the trust and solidarity needed to make our democracy stronger.” He noted that the American public used to have just three networks to provide news:

Moreover, these media institutions, with established journalistic best practices for accuracy and accountability, also provided people with similar information: “When it came to the news, at least, citizens across the political spectrum tended to operate using a shared set of facts – what they saw or what they heard from Walter Cronkite or David Brinkley.”

But no more:

Fast forward to today, where everyone has access to individualized news feeds that are fed by algorithms that reward the loudest and angriest voices (and which technology companies profit from). “You have the sheer proliferation of content, and the splintering of information and audiences,” Obama observed. “That’s made democracy more complicated.”

Facts are competing with opinions, conspiracy theories, and fiction. “For more and more of us, search and social media platforms aren’t just our window into the internet. They serve as our primary source of news and information,” Obama said. “No one tells us that the window is blurred, subject to unseen distortions, and subtle manipulations.”

<https://news.stanford.edu/2022/04/21/disinformation-weakening-democracy-barack-obama-said/>

Or, as Obama said last month in Chicago, the challenge of contemporary American politics is to learn “how can we create better information for people? How can we give people the capacity to sort out truth from falsehood?” [https://news.yahoo.com/obama-tackles-disinformation-failing-fully-](https://news.yahoo.com/obama-tackles-disinformation-failing-fully-095149336.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9kdWNrZHVja2dvLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAEeYv87e0GKM7cWMNJV60kgS-u54yy-DYcWbAAp7vTcDquTZmB6a8jBC8gj54OH1yenD_y1PhsQEcRUJ2aPEWjDRp6DYS9N-mtJu-T2sJ-iSRMkaTQjuWkl8vum1RBL3Lf93Gd_OtCgVMPj1Ygt_1FQALD0oT4LccDElwKMB9oKl)

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Alas, President Obama here avoids the more difficult question: what is the relationship of information to truth?

The current technique most accurately foretold by Orwell is “disinformation,” which is currently normally defined as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.” (Merriam-Webster) The term apparently came into English usage during the Cold War as a translation of the Russian word, *dezinformatsiya* and certainly for several decades we in the United States associated it with Soviet bad behavior. Until Donald Trump and others made it clear that *dezinformatsiya* is (now) as American as apple pie. What to do? As he so often does, Jonathan Swift has some advice: “Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect: like a man, who hath thought of a good repartee when the discourse is changed, or the company parted; or like a physician, who hath found out an infallible medicine, after the patient is dead.” Alas, Swift despairs. So does the historian Mort Sahl, whose name will be familiar only to the older members of this audience: Washington couldn't tell a lie, Nixon couldn't tell the truth, and Reagan couldn't tell the difference. The important question is how to tell the difference? The social scientists at the RAND tell us that the disinformation revolution has been driven by: (1) disagreement about what constitutes facts, (2) blurring of opinion and facts, (3) an increasing volume and influence of opinion versus facts, and (4) declining trust in previously respected sources of information. This report concludes with a reflection on truth decay's major consequences, citing “erosion of civil discourse” and “alienation and disengagement of individuals from political and civic institutions,” as being the causes of our current political information problems. (Quoted in McKinzie thesis, pp. 3-4) The problem, then, is not Trump or Steve Bannon or the commentators on Fox. It derives from fundamental political and social failures.

And this lands us back with “post-truth,” the Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2016: The term was named Word of the Year in 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary where it 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". And in a post-truth age we are confronted with the neo-Orwellian phenomenon of "disinformation: false information deliberately and often covertly spread in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth. As we approach the election of 2024 in this country, we seem to have reentered the world of *1984*, in which George Orwell asked "How do we know that two and two make four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable – what then?" Indeed!

So we come back to the question with which we started: where do we go in a post-truth age? Alas, "back to the age of truth" does not appear to be a practical course of action. We seem to have outrun the accumulated wisdom and experience of the past three hundred years, and it does not seem helpful to wish we could go back in time. What does it mean to the American public when Donald Trump, having been expelled from the media platform that made him electable as President, creates his personal replacement for Twitter and calls it "Truth Social", presumably truth as Trump sees it in society as Trump imagines it.

Our current dilemma is social, political, intellectual and epistemological. Modernity turns out to have been a sham and a delusion. Our nation began in an era of classical republican aspirations, but those aspirations were based upon social conditions that did not last beyond the early nineteenth century. The era of truth was based upon very different social and political conditions – especially, based upon the health and primacy of civil society. The conditions that permitted quite broad consensus on the parameters of truth no longer obtain in the United States. That is the underlying reason that we now live in an era of truthiness, not an era of truth. My belief, and my fear, is that our most important challenge is to reconstitute the sort of civil society upon which a twenty-first century republic can be built and maintained. That is, alas, too much to ask of my generation, but not to ask of the next generation in this country.

