

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***“Post-Truth”: The 2016 Word of the Year***

Oxford Dictionaries has selected “post-truth” as 2016’s international word of the year. The dictionary defines “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.” Oxford dictionary’s editors noted a roughly 2,000% increase in the usage of “post-truth” over 2015, especially with far more frequency in news articles and on social media in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The choice of “post-truth” is actually rather astonishing as a word choice, but, in light of the 2016 presidential campaign where “truth” was not a term one would use to describe either candidate’s campaign, it makes sense: Intentional lies and misrepresentation of facts were the norm.

But the selection of “post-truth” also reflects a growing reality worldwide. David Ignatius, renowned *Washington Post* columnist, cites a question posed by Richard Stengel, the State Department’s undersecretary for public diplomacy: “In a global information war, how does truth win?” He cites several important examples:

- In the three years Stengel has served in government, he has seen the rise of what he calls a “post-truth” world where facts are sometimes overwhelmed by propaganda from Russia and the Islamic State. Russia regularly publishes lies and outright false reports in central Europe, Ukraine and the Baltic states, all with the goal of promoting instability and lack of trust in democratic institutions. Russia uses its media outlet, particularly Russia Today (RT), to promote not so much “an information war . . . [but] a war on information.” RT’s goal is to spread doubt and mistrust within these various nations. Russia’s mixture of fact and fantasy is how RT presents the news. Stengel writes: “They’re not trying to say that their version of events is the true one. They’re saying: ‘Everyone’s lying! Nobody’s telling you the truth.’” Another example is Russia’s hacking during the US presidential election. It did so with the aim of polluting the public information stream. Stengel: “[Russia] seeks to undermine faith in democracy, faith in the West.”
- The social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, You-Tube, etc.) give everyone the opportunity to construct “their own narrative of reality.” In the early days of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, for example, IS extremists used brutal imagery to terrorize people and recruit followers. Such brutality, propagated over the social media, was perceived as the path to the Caliphate. This was an effective recruiting tool especially for IS, but now that they are losing territory it is less effective. In today’s “construct-your-own-narrative-world,” agreement on a common framework of factual evidence is becoming

nearly impossible. The real challenge, Richard Stengel observes, is for the global tech giants of the world “to restore the currency of truth.” There is simply no agreed upon protocol to do this!

How have we gotten to this point in our world where “post-truth” is an accepted practice in presidential campaigning and in world diplomacy? How can a reputable publisher of dictionaries choose its word of the year as “post-truth”? Permit me several observations:

1. We live in a Postmodern, Post-Christian world in which truth is validated by self-interpreted personal experience, nothing more. Technology and the larger social media phenomenon have given every human being the capability of creating his/her own reality, which in the end becomes a creative mix of fact and fantasy. “Who are you to tell me my reality is not true,” goes the defense. It is difficult to appeal to any authority that is absolute or binding. Each human has the ability to construct his/her own narrative. There is no meta-narrative that ties everything together or provides a foundation for absolute truth. We are a civilization, as I have said many times, firmly anchored in mid-air!
2. Technology has cultivated what philosopher Michael Patrick Lynch of the University of Connecticut calls “Google-knowing.” He argues that much of what we know “we know via what we might call ‘Google-knowing’—by which I mean getting information not just via search engine but all manner of digital interfaces, such as the apps on our smartphones.” “Google-knowing” can make humanity more intellectually passive and deferential. It also can diminish reflective and critical thinking. Finally, “Google-knowing” can also weaken understanding (to not only know the “what” of something, but also the “why”). Correctly, Lynch observes that “to gain understanding is to comprehend hidden relationships among different pieces of information.” In short, “Google-knowledge” is not synonymous with wisdom, discernment, understanding or prudence. “Google-knowledge” is a pathway to the “post-truth” world.
3. Theologian Albert Mohler makes an astute observation about the culture of moral relativism so pervasive in this Postmodern, Post-Christian world: He connects Einstein’s theory of relativity with the moral relativism of our world. “Einstein’s theory of relativity quickly became a symbol and catalyst for something very different—the development of moral relativism.” Although clearly Einstein’s theory had nothing to do with morality, “Einstein’s theory of relativity entered the popular consciousness as a generalized relativism . . . millions of modern people understood relativity as relativism. And that misunderstanding is one of the toxic developments of the modern age.” Einstein’s biographer, Walter Isaacson, correctly argues that “If his theory of relativity produced ripples that unsettled the realms of morality and culture, this was not caused by what Einstein believed but by how he was popularly interpreted.” Isaacson: “There was a more complex relationship between Einstein’s theories and the whole witch’s brew of ideas and emotions in the early twentieth century that bubbled up from the highly charged cauldron of modernism.” Furthermore, historian Paul Johnson maintains

that “At the beginning of the 1920s the belief began to circulate, for the first time at the popular level, that there were no longer any absolutes: of time and space, of good and evil, of knowledge, above all of value. Mistakenly but perhaps inevitably, relativity became confused with relativism.” The consequence is that now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to reject absolute moral norms and absolute truth is the norm. Moral and cultural relativism are at the center of the Postmodern worldview. Such pervasive relativism, enhanced by the social media and facilitated by the superficial, shallow “Google-knowing,” doubts all pronouncements of authority and believes anything that fits with one’s own personal reality. Given all of this, it is perfectly reasonable that the Oxford dictionary editors chose “post-truth” as the 2016 word of the year! It is the perfect Postmodern term!

See Amy B. Wang, “‘Post-truth’ named 2016 Word of the Year,” in the *Washington Post* (16 November 2016); David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (29 November 2016); Michael Patrick Lynch, “Teaching in the Time of Google,” in *The Chronicle Review* (29 April 2016); and Albert Mohler, Jr., “Relativity, Relativism and the Modern Age” in *Tabletalk* (November 2016), pp. 70-71.