

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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What Do People Trust in This “Post-Truth” Era?

Late in year 2016, the *Oxford Dictionaries* selected “post-truth” as the 2016 international word of the year. The dictionary defined “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” as word of the year is a metaphor for how skeptical the Postmodern, Post-Christian individual actually is when it comes to discerning or even knowing truth. It is an era of “fake news” and “alternative facts” when the national press is now often identified as “an enemy of the people.”

The Barna Research organization recently released a report, “The Trends Shaping a Post-Truth Era,” which succinctly summarizes the utter confusion in this culture when it comes to how people get their information and process what is true and what is not true. Permit me a summary of the salient items from the Barna report:

- When asked what kind of news media people are most likely to share, social media posts tie with traditional reporter-written articles as the top response (25%). The tendency is to share social media posts as news points to a preference for more salacious, opinion-forward headlines reporting. Additionally, a plurality of US adults say that they never correct misinformation they see on social media.
- Reporters still top the list as credible sources of news (39%)—but are closely followed by the self: Nearly a third (32%) says that they trust nobody, only their own instincts, when consuming news.
- Christianity’s influence is waning in American culture. Just about one-third of Americans (36%) strongly believes churches “have their best interest at heart” and one in four does not put stock in pastors’ insights on the issues of the day. More importantly, truth is increasingly regarded as something felt, or relative (44%), rather than something known or absolute (35%). For example, many Millennials (64%) do not feel that any one religious text has a monopoly on truth, but that they are all different expressions of the same spiritual message. Thus, some spiritually inclined Americans seek faith outside the local church context, as is the case with “the spiritual but not religious” or those who “love Jesus but not the church.” For Millennials, spiritual fulfillment has less to do with an abandonment of religion and more to do with a growing focus on what could be

categorized as “self-care.” Examples of this include reflecting on nature (25%), reading books about spiritual topics (21%) or meditating (19%).

How have we gotten to this point where “post-truth” is a legitimate description of western civilization? 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 social media 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, therefore, 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 our 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 . . . 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 21st 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 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 www.barna.com, “The Trend Shaping a Post-Truth Era” (9 January 2018); 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.