

**Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press, Cambridge - MA &
London - England, 2018, 241 str.**

In her groundbreaking book on the origins of totalitarianism Hannah Arendt famously writes that “[t]he ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” (Arendt 1962: 474) Arendt’s claim bears some similarity to how Lee McIntyre’s defines post-truth, the central concept of his book, as being the contention “[...] that feelings are more accurate than facts, for the purpose of the political subordination of reality.” (p. 174) Indeed, McIntyre quotes this exact passage from Arendt in Chapter 5. Granted, the two works are separated by more than half a century of history, yet they are connected by the belief that socio-political trends in which actors attempt to subvert reality, and try to bend it to one’s feelings and unexamined beliefs, can strengthen autocratic tendencies at the expense of democratic progress, security and human lives.

Aside from Hannah Arendt, McIntyre quotes a number of philosophers, political theorists, social psychologists, analysts, journalists, state officials, political commentators and pundits, and others. However, the most notable presence (aside from Donald Trump, of course), not so much within the source materials, but in the chapter introductory quotes, and an almost eerie presence at that, is of George Orwell, whose quotes are taken to stand at the beginning of five out of the book’s seven chapters, with an additional quote at the beginning of the entire book, serving as a motto, or more likely a warning sign: “The very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. Lies will pass into history.” (p. viii) The quote is actually a paraphrase of Orwell’s comments on Fascist propaganda during the Spanish Civil War from his essay *Looking back on the Spanish War* (Orwell, 1943). In any case, Orwell’s strong presence leads the reader to conclude that *Post-Truth* is not simply an analysis of current socio-political trends, but is meant to serve as a warning and call to readers, especially those in academia, to recognize post-truth trends and phenomena as serious threats to political stability and the fabric of a democratic society.

McIntyre's first chapter, *What is Post-Truth?* (pp. 1-15), attempts to define the book's central concept, tracing its roots to reactions to the Trump presidential campaign in 2015/16, and to the false advertising given by Brexiteers in roughly the same time period, but holding that the type of phenomena and claims to which the concepts refers already gain ground during the George W. Bush presidential administration. In the second chapter, *Science Denial as a Road to Understanding Post-Truth* (pp. 17-34), he outlines how science denial projects, from the Tobacco Industry Research Committee as far back as 1953, to the Heartland Institute's efforts since the 1980's, have made vast contributions, financial and otherwise, to obscuring existing scientific consensus on public health (the link between smoking and cancer) and environmental issues (anthropogenic global warming), in order to promote special interests.

In the third chapter, *The Roots of Cognitive Bias* (pp. 36-62), the author turns his attention to the psychological reasons why rational individuals can be influenced by fake news, obscure conspiracy theories and other related phenomena. Within this he explores the imperfections of human rationality, putting special emphasis on the phenomenon of cognitive bias, linking it to a number of related phenomena, such as source amnesia (not being able to remember whether information was received from a reliable source), the repetition effect (which states the likeliness of believing information which was repeated many times). He also explains the connection with various forms of confirmation bias (tendency to believe information which corresponds to our existing beliefs), such as the backfire effect (information which conflicts with individual's mistaken beliefs causes them to hold those beliefs even more strongly) and the Dunning-Kruger effect (when individuals' lack of ability causes them to overestimate their ability), both of which are connected to the idea of motivated reasoning, according to which our hopes and preferences influence our perception of what we actually think is true.

In the fourth chapter, *The Decline of Traditional Media* (pp. 64-87), McIntyre traces the decline of traditional media sources in the United States, linking the ever dwindling readership/viewership of traditional media giants, such as the major US newspapers and broadcasting companies, to ABC's 1979 late show *Nightline*, dedicated to following the Iran hostage crisis. The show became a precedent because it showed that (1) an information show could take viewers away from entertainment shows airing at the same time on other networks, and (2) that viewers would be interested in following the news for extended periods of time. Soon after this CNN came up with the concept of 24/7 news, later followed by Fox News and MSNBC. The first problem which this caused was that the quality of investigative reporting suffered horribly under the pressure to produce non-stop television content. The second problem was that networks such as Fox News and MSNBC committed themselves to a partisan view of news reporting, driven especially by Fox's contention that going to partisan extremes was nec-

essary in order for viewers to get the full stack of available information, or a balanced view of the news. This would, of course, only work if viewers were actually committed to getting their information from multiple and sufficiently diverse sources, with the main problem being that partisan based reporting had to produce controversy even where it didn't actually exist, such as with various issues in the scientific community - most notably, climate change, foreign policy issues, health, and the economy.

In the fifth chapter, *The Rise of Social Media and the Problem of Fake News* (pp. 89-122), the author expands on the phenomenon of the decline of traditional media by describing new trends in the media landscape. Leaning on the already established ideas about our imperfect rationality, he writes: "We could click on "news" stories that told us what we wanted to hear (whether they had been vetted for accuracy or not) as opposed to some of the factual content from mainstream media that may have been less palatable. Without knowing that they were doing so, people could feed their // desire for confirmation bias [...] directly, without bothering to patronize traditional news sources." (pp. 93-94) Within this newly enforced framework of news-silos and information bubbles, the phenomenon of fake news could gain the strength it has today. Most importantly, McIntyre then traces the history of fake news all to the way to the invention of the printing press, showing that the *ethos* of investigative fact-based journalism in the United States only came into its own by the early 20th century. This is crucial because it shows that journalistic standards had to be established and fought for - they do not simply "come with the territory", and they can be lost unless readers/viewers/listeners are ready to commit to the patronage of investigative reporting. The chapter also contains an analysis of fake news strategies and a short proposal for how to fight back against them.

In the sixth chapter, *Did Postmodernism Lead to Post-Truth* (pp. 123-150) we read about the possibility that trends within the academic community have lead to, or at least strengthened, the tendencies towards post-truth. In short, the author claims that various modes of postmodernism and social constructivism, all of which promote a scepticism (warranted or otherwise) about the possibility of obtaining objective truths about the world, going so far as to claim that there are no facts in the traditional sense of the word, but merely social constructs (a very leftist academic tendency), were misappropriated by the extreme political right and special interest groups in order to further the cause of creating controversy regarding otherwise settled issues. For instance, one could now advocate that young-earth-creationism should (or, in fact, must) be taught in public schools alongside the theory of evolution, because in the absence of facts one had to "teach the controversy". He not only describes this phenomenon, but ardently argues it, attributing a fair amount of responsibility to the academic left for providing the "weapons" for the right-wing media's war on facts, and for keeping "the weapon's factory open" (p. 142) in the midst of the war.

Finally, in the seventh chapter, *Fighting Post-Truth* (pp. 151-172), McIntyre suggests methods for fighting against post-truth and the phenomena which enhance (or, in fact, create) it. Within this he stresses the importance of media honesty in the shape of acknowledging when “[...] the balance of evidence in a matter of controversy

weighs heavily on one side [...]” (p. 158), and the importance not only stating, but constantly restating and repeating true facts. Although he goes on about a number of methods and their various aspects and importance, the crux of his recommendations lies in the belief that the battle for truth cannot be won solely by academic means, but through constant and vigilant media campaigns which show that facts and truth are not partisan issues. One of the examples with which he shows the particularly non-partisan nature of important issues where controversy has been fabricated, is the case of two republican officials from Florida, a state particularly threatened by climate change developments, when he quotes them as stating: “As staunch Republicans, we share our party’s suspicion of government overreach and unreasonable regulations. But for us and most other public officials in South Florida, climate change is not a partisan talking point. It’s a looming crisis that we must deal with—and soon.” (p. 161).

After the main part of the book, the author provides us with (pp. 173-216): a glossary containing the definitions of the central concepts explored in the book, notes and bibliography, suggestions for further readings, and an index.

To conclude we might say that in the media landscape and socio-political trends of our time, coupled with the need to understand the still newly framed concept of post-truth, McIntyre’s book recommends itself as an interesting and valuable read, emphasizing the destabilizing and corrupting effects of post-truth on democratic values, political stability and culture, national and international security, and the economy, while engaging readers to think about their own role as information consumers. It is skillfully written and can be recommended both to readers who are interested in how post-truth potentially influences their own academic fields, or simply interested in furthering their understanding current social, media, and political trends.

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References

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- Orwell, G. (1943), *Looking back on the Spanish War*, First published: New Road. — GB, London, available at: https://orwell.ru/library/essays/Spanish_War/english/esw_1